



Broke Down

SINGLE MOM

OVER THE TOP POSSESSIVE ALPHA HAREM

KAI LESY

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BROKE DOWN SINGLE MOM

A MILITARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

KAI LESY

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DESCRIPTION

***"You shouldn't be here in the middle of a storm."
"I had no choice, Officer. My husband is a dangerous man."
His jaw clenches in anger. "Did he hurt you?"***

In the middle of a winter storm - I'm stranded and desperate.
I have no food or money to feed my two little girls.
If I've ever needed a miracle it's NOW.

A Sheriff's car pulls up.
This man is a giant *by no exaggeration*.
Sheriff Kieran makes a phone call to his twin brother, Fallon.

The two of them waste no time getting my girls and I out of the harsh cold
and into their car to meet their best friend, Luke.
Just like the brothers, Luke is a war veteran and as mesmerizing to look at as
a Greek statue.

I'm shocked when Luke says we can stay 'for as long as desired' in this
breathtaking lodge - where he runs his million dollar business.

I should be grateful but my husband is a dangerous man with connections.
Could this all be a ticking time bomb?
Or do decent men *actually* exist in this harsh world??

**Considering the rush of emotions I feel when these three ex-military
alphas melt like puppies for my little girls...
And the way they look at me with such admiration and a yearning...
I can't help but wonder: Do happily ever after's exist outside of cheesy
romance novels?**

PROLOGUE

“Undress for us,” Kellan whispers, then takes a step back.

We lose our layers at the same time, watching one another as our clothes hit the floor. The shoes and boots go first. Then the pants and shirts. My lingerie is the last to fall as I stand naked and ready before them. Their eyes darken with desire as they move closer, lips parted as shadows dance across their faces.

Their dominant presence overwhelms me in a way I can't even describe.

Kellan stands tall and strong, muscular and gorgeously fit. I admire the tattoos and the narrow dip of his hips while my hands gradually work their way up my own body. I feel the need to touch and squeeze my breasts as I shift my focus onto Fallon, this mountain of a man with a gargantuan cock and a hungry look in his eyes. He could crush me in the palm of his hand if he wanted to, yet his touch is so soft and delicate, I practically melt when his fingers find my nipple and pinch it, ever so lightly.

My breath hitches as I gaze up at Luke, my whole body quivering as he smiles and trails kisses down the side of my neck. He's a beautiful soul, a handsome man, a provider through and through. His prosthetic and his scars only serve to amplify him in the best possible way. If anything, I want him even more because of it, not less.

I touch his chest, letting my palm splay across the blonde curls covering his rippling pecs, trailing my nails back and forth.

Fallon takes my other hand and guides it down to his cock. I grab hold and welcome the firmness, the enormous girth. I lick my lips, dying to feel him inside me once again. Kellan cups my pussy gently, getting a feel for

what awaits him.

“I love how you’re always ready for us,” he says, his fingers sliding between my wet folds.

My swollen nub instantly reacts to his touch, my core tightening as he teases me.

“Your skin is so soft,” Luke adds, then kisses my shoulder. He bites into it, gently at first, until my nipples perk up under Fallon’s hungry eyes.

“Are you a good girl, Avery?” Kellan asks me.

I nod once. “I’m a very good girl.”

“Then get on your knees,” he commands me.

Without hesitation, I kneel as they close ranks in front of me, cocks twitching with anticipation. I know what they want, and I do it gladly, willingly, hungrily. I take each of them in my mouth, never breaking eye contact as I relax the back of my throat and loosen my jaw to get as much in as possible. Slowly but surely, Kellan fills my mouth and I feel the veins swelling along his shaft.

I taste the precum on his tip, licking it off, eager for more.

“Fucking hell,” Luke curses under his breath as he shoves both hands in my hair to hold my head in place. “Take it, baby, all of it.”

And I do. He fucks my mouth with decisive thrusts, and I take him in, deeper and deeper until I can barely breathe. Tears trickle down my cheeks, but they’re nothing compared to what drips down the insides of my thighs as Fallon takes his turn. He’s the biggest and the thickest. My lips stretch as I feed on him, as I suck and lick him into a frenzy, holding the base of his cock with one hand while I massage his hardened balls with the other.

“You’re a fucking natural,” Kellan whispers when he retakes control.

Deep-throating me, he smiles like the devil as he claims my mouth, deeper and faster and harder. I’m so wet, I’m dripping, hoping that they don’t intend to let me suffer for much longer. Before I can register the shift in our positions, I find myself back on my feet and bent over the bed.

Luke’s hands run up and down my back as he fucks me from behind, with Fallon and Kellan kneeling on the bed in front of me. With their engorged cocks in each of my hands, I moan and whimper as I blow them, ravenous in my exploits and licking every glorious inch. Luke thrusts himself deeper and harder inside me, stretching and filling me to the brim.

“Oh, God, don’t stop!” I cry out when his hand slips around my hip and finds my clit screaming for attention. The orgasm rocks me to the very core

of my existence as he pounds into me, harder and harder until I unravel, feeling as if I just broke apart into a billion little pieces.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” he growls as he fucks me senseless. I melt against him while Kellan and Fallon keep my mouth busy.

They take turns, giving me everything they’ve got. When Fallon spears me with his full length, I come again, arching my spine as he grabs a handful of my hair and gently pulls my head back. He gives it to me with perfection, each thrust intensifying my orgasm, my pussy overflowing with sweet juices.

Kellan gets on his back and I climb on, riding him, as Fallon massages my breasts, pinching my nipples until a third climax washes over me. My flesh is like melted butter, my skin hypersensitive, my core unraveling as I fill myself with Kellan. It’s delicious and mindless madness as I surrender to them.

“I want you in my mouth,” I tell Luke at one point, dazed and hungry for more.

I’m standing now, bent over as I suck him hard and fast. Fallon takes me from behind again, while Kellan is beside us with one hand between my legs, stroking himself and my tender clit at the same time. Fallon grunts harshly as I feel him come, feel him spilling his seed with deep thrusts. My knees are weak, but I don’t want this to end.

“Take me, Kellan,” I whimper, then look up at Luke. “I want you, too. Inside me. Fill me up.”

Luke smiles and bites his lower lip, one hand caressing my face as Kellan claims me yet again. I’m shivering and crying tears of joy as I suck Luke while Kellan comes with a hefty burst. I revel in the slapping sound of skin on skin, my heart singing as I clench myself tightly around him, squeezing him dry. By the time Luke finishes inside me, I’m somewhere up in the heavens, held firmly by Fallon and Kellan.

I need them to keep me upright while Luke takes what I gladly and gleefully offer.

I need them to consume me, to turn me over, to squeeze my ass and fondle my breasts, to run their fingers through my hair, to kiss me relentlessly as Luke explodes into a fucking frenzy and pounds me into oblivion.

I don’t ever want this night to end.

It was only just beginning.

Two Weeks Earlier

“M omma?” my daughter calls out from the backseat of my car, now deceased Citroën, to be specific. “We’re cold!”

“I know, honey,” I reply, trying to make myself heard over the howling of a raging winter storm. “Keep your sister close and stay under the blanket!”

Miley is only five years old but smart enough to know when to listen to me. Annie is three and doesn’t understand what’s going on. Hell, I’m even baffled as to how we got to this point, but I had no other choice. This is what I get for trying to work things out with a narcissistic psychopath. I never should’ve married Daniel. I never should’ve stuck around for as long as I did. That’s all part of the past, though and that’s where it will stay. Besides, there is nothing I can do to change it. All I can do now is look forward and make a better life for my kids.

We’re a few feet away from Johnson Lake, stuck on the side of the road with too many miles between us and the next town. My car died, and I am nowhere near capable or equipped to fix it myself. To top it all, this snowstorm has me stranded and unable to walk all the way to Lexington with my daughters to an overnight shelter. The snow is too heavy, the wind is biting cold, and I can barely see ten feet ahead of me.

It’s the middle of winter in Nebraska. What did I expect?

“Mommy is trying to find a way to get us somewhere nice and warm,” I tell my daughters, hoping they can hold on for at least a couple more hours.

We only have what little heat the engine delivered before the car died, so I told Miley to keep the windows up so we can preserve that for as long as

possible. I keep looking around, praying for a pair of headlights to appear from either direction but even that could end up being a double-edged sword. What if it's Daniel?

I smacked him over the head pretty good with that lamp. I would've bashed it all the way in, but Miley and Annie were screaming, terrified of their own father. He wasn't supposed to be able to find us and I don't understand how he did. The restraining order didn't faze him in the least. He just wanted to hurt me, to make me suffer for having had the audacity to divorce him.

Shuddering, I check my phone again. The battery is drained, and the screen is black. We're stuck out here on the side of the road in a Nebraska snowstorm, and I don't know whether I can rely on the kindness of strangers. With this low visibility, it could be Daniel who finds us. And then it'll be over. I've not doubt he will kill me. I hit him with the lamp, I grabbed my daughters, and then I drove off as fast as I could, not caring about the thickening snowstorm at that point. I had to survive. I had to put some distance between us and him.

My girls are huddled together, shivering under the blanket. I reckon most of the warmth has faded by now and they are relying on one another's body heat. We've been out here for maybe half an hour, and I haven't seen a single car or truck drive by. Who would be nuts enough to drive in this weather? Well, me, obviously. I would've tolerated Daniel hitting me. I would've tried to talk some sense into him, at least until I could call the cops, but when he laid his hands on Miley, I just snapped.

"I didn't have a choice," I mutter through gritted teeth, my jaw clenched as my whole body involuntarily bucks against the freezing cold.

All I have to keep me relatively warm is this hooded winter parka of mine and the boots I managed to slip into before I ran out the door. The three of us were in our jammies when the bastard broke in. Everything happened so fast. My arm still hurts from where he grabbed me and my cheek stings from where he slapped me so hard I saw stars. I'll take the cold of winter over being anywhere near Daniel ever again. But my babies... we won't last much longer if we aren't rescued soon.

Eventually, I'll have to get in the back with Miley and Annie so I can give them what's left of my own dwindling body heat. It'll drop dramatically below zero later in the night, and I doubt we'll survive until morning if the weather reports turn out to be accurate. But I will do whatever I can to give

my daughters a chance to make it, even if I don't.

Less than four hours ago, we were eating mac and cheese and watching a Tom & Jerry marathon on TV. We'd only just moved to Campbell. I liked that town. It was small, quiet, and far enough away from Daniel to allow me to sit comfortably in the evenings while planning for the weeks ahead of my already frazzled life. Damn Daniel for ruining things again.

My breath gets stuck in my throat as I see a pair of headlights approaching. For a moment, my heart stops beating altogether. Terror grips me until I realize the car is coming from Hershey, not Campbell. Daniel would be coming from Campbell, where I left him bleeding on the floor.

I start honking my horn, my muscles heating up with every frantic motion. I hope the driver can see me through this dense snowfall and hear the horn blaring over the wind. The lights get brighter, and the car starts coming to a slow halt. A heavy sigh leaves my body as I recognize the Sheriff's red and blue lights glowing overhead. I can hear the tires sliding on the snow as the car gets closer. "Thank God," I mumble as I cautiously open my door.

I freeze again when I see this mountain of a man getting out from the driver's seat. Holy hell, he's massive. Tall and broad-shouldered, made even bigger by a thick winter jacket with a brown fur collar. I see the badge on his leather belt. The woolen cap with the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department logo just above his forehead. Then the piercing green eyes that seem to be able to look right into my soul.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" the man asks as I open my door a little more to talk to him.

"No, I am anything but alright," I reply with a trembling voice. "My car died."

He looks inside the car and spots my girls in the backseat. "Are they your children?"

"Yes. We've been stuck here for a while. Not a car in sight," I say.

"Where were you coming from?"

I have the sudden fear that Daniel has woken up and called the police to say I've kidnapped my own children.

"Ma'am where were you coming from?" he asks me again, this time more sternly.

"Does it matter?" I shoot back, my shoulders squared. I have no idea what I'm trying to do here other than protect my children. "Officer, we just need some help, please. Maybe a jump start."

The man looks at me with the kind of intensity that has my skin tingling all over. He's handsome and then some. Olive skin, soft lips, just enough stubble to make my fingertips feel ticklish. I can imagine layers of rippling muscles underneath that uniform. *Snap out of it, Avery.* "Where were you coming from?" he insists, speaking more slowly this time, enunciating each word.

"Does it matter?" Two can play this game.

"Momma, we're cold!" Miley cries out from the backseat.

"Dammit," I curse under my breath. "Campbell. We were coming from Campbell."

"Alright," the man replies. "And where are you headed?"

My shoulders drop. I'm exhausted from constantly being afraid all the time, so wary of danger because of Daniel. This truly could be just an officer of the law doing his job. He's supposed to ask questions. He's supposed to get as many details out of me as possible in order to make an informed decision. I'm seeing Daniel's flying monkeys everywhere these days, and it's hindering my efforts to keep my own daughters safe. My eyes sting as tears threaten to make everything worse.

"As far away from my ex-husband as possible," I say, a knot tightening in the back of my throat.

The man stills and narrows his eyes at me. "Did he hurt you?"

"My daughter, too," I nod slowly. "Listen, if you can't help me out with the car, could you at least give us a ride into the next town? My phone's dead, but I've got some cash, just enough to keep us in a motel or something until the morning."

"There are no motels anywhere nearby. The closest one would be in North Platte," the man says.

"Could you take us there?"

"I need to know your name, first."

I scoff. "Do I have to get arrested in order to put a roof over my daughters' heads tonight?"

"That's not necessary," he says. "I just need a name."

"I could try and punch you. That'll get us an overnight stay in jail, right?" I'm willing to do whatever it takes at this point. Either the snowstorm caused my brain to short-circuit, or I really am that desperate.

"A name."

"What's yours?" I reply instead. "How do I know Daniel didn't send you?"

He's probably looking for me right now."

"Ma'am, I'm Kellan Cassidy, Sheriff of Lincoln County. No one sent me," he says firmly, sounding somewhat offended. Not that I can blame him. "I knew there might be trouble on the roads tonight on account of this weather, so I decided to do a slow and steady tour of the main roads before I head back home for the night. It seems as though my instincts served me well since I found you. Chances are you won't get another car driving by at least until the morning. Entire sections of this road have already been closed, blocked off by snow."

I look around, and all I see is a sea of white underneath a gray sky. Somewhere beyond, I know there's Lake Johnson. It's close enough, but the constant snowfall makes me feel cut off from anything and everything. I'm alone out here, alone with two babies who depend on me for their safety.

"Can I see your badge, Sheriff?" I ask politely. "I just need to be sure."

The sheriff nods and takes the badge off his belt, then brings it forward with cautious steps. I notice his other hand is resting on his weapon. I inspect it quickly and allow myself a sigh of pure relief. "I would like to help you," he says. "The temperatures are set to drop well below zero before dawn."

"Thank you, Sheriff. Can you take us to the police station at least? Or a motel in North Platte?"

He comes closer as he replaces his badge, his gaze softening as it settles on my face. I must look like crap.

"Is Daniel your husband?" the sheriff asks.

"Ex-husband. I have a restraining order against him. But he came after us anyway."

"Did that happen tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

Miley pipes up from behind me. "Momma! Are we going home?"

"Oh, God, I need to get them out of this cold," I burst into tears. This is it. My breaking point coming at the worst possible time. I can't control my body from shuddering as I drop my head on the steering wheel and start crying my heart out. "I had to get away from him but the car... I knew I'd need to get a mechanic to check it before I took it out on the road again but Daniel... my girls... we need help." And then it hits me. "Oh, no, no. NO!" I cry out as I frantically pat my coat's pockets.

"Ma'am, you need to calm down," the sheriff says, crouching down beside my car door.

“I left my wallet in Campbell. Daniel has my wallet! My ID, my driver’s license... oh, no, no, this can’t be happening. My bank cards. Whatever cash I had left. Oh, God, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

The sheriff opens the door a bit wider and takes me by the shoulders. “What’s your name?”

“Avery, Avery Madison,” I manage between sobs.

“Okay, Avery. Can I call you Avery?”

“Yes.”

“Avery, I need you to listen to me very carefully now,” the sheriff says. “You need help, you need a place to stay, and it is more than an overnight stay at the police station could provide.” I look up, barely able to see him through the rivers of tears constantly flowing from my eyes. “I’d like to help you, if you’ll let me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t have any cash or cards. You said it yourself. You left your wallet behind when you were understandably fleeing for your safety,” he says. “You need a warm place to stay, at least for a few nights until you sort out a new driver’s license, new bank card, and anything else you’ll need. Shelter and food for yourself and for your daughters is first and foremost. Do you agree?”

I nod slowly. “Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Kellan,” he replies, a warm smile sketched across his lips. “I can help you. There’s a place I know where you would be the safest. Will you let me take you and the girls there?”

Blinking the tears away, I try to process every word coming out of his mouth. “Where is that, exactly?”

“It’s just outside North Platte,” Kellan says. “It’s a big house, top notch security. It’s the HQ of a security firm, but one whole wing doubles as a private residence. There’s a room available for you and your girls. And once we get you settled in, we can work on getting your life back, one step at a time.”

All I can do is stare at him in sheer disbelief. My mind draws a repetitive blank as I try to think of something to say but nothing comes. What’s the angle? Maybe there isn’t one. Maybe the sheriff of Lincoln County is honestly offering me much needed help. I can hear Miley weeping behind me, Annie crying next to her. I can’t falter. I can’t hesitate.

My babies depend on me.

EVERY

“Okay,” I finally say. “But I’ll pay you back for everything.”
“You don’t have to worry about that right now,” Kellan replies as he lets go of my shoulders and stands back up.

“You’re too kind.”

“Come on, let’s get your girls in the backseat of my car where it’s warm, the heat is on.”

Shaking like a leaf, I get out of my car and open the back door, bending down to help the girls out. Miley is the first to move, quickly wrapping her arms around my neck. She’s shivering, poor thing, mumbling something about it being so cold that her teeth keep clattering. Kellan joins us with a pair of blankets he fished out from the trunk of his vehicle, wrapping one over Miley.

“Go with the sheriff, honey,” I tell her. “He’ll get us warm in no time. I have to get your sister.”

“Okay, Momma,” she replies, her head already resting on his shoulder as I hand her to him.

For a split-second I watch my daughter as she so eagerly relaxes in his arms, and a peculiar kind of warmth fills my heart. We might actually be okay. Maybe it’s just fickle and treacherous hope toying with my senses, but at least my girls will be warm tonight.

“I’ll call my brother to come and tow your car,” Kellan says as he carries Miley over to his vehicle.

I get Annie from the backseat. She’s awake and cranky, but as soon as I wrap her in the second blanket and shower her cold, pink face with kisses, she calms down long enough for me to move her safely and smoothly to the

warmth of the sheriff's vehicle. Miley holds her close, constantly whispering words of comfort like the wonderful big sister that she is, and it's all I can do to stop myself from breaking down again. They both deserve better than this.

I walk back toward my car where Kellan is just ending a call. "Thank you so much," I tell him as he puts his phone away.

The wind is blowing harder now, each flake smacking my face like a tiny blade. I pull the hood of my parka over my head, having completely forgotten about how cold I am. My toes hurt. Kellan frowns as he sees me wrap my arms around myself in a tight hug.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "My brother will be here in twenty minutes. He was on his way back to North Platte after an emergency job with his pickup truck. Lucky for us."

"I'm not sure what qualifies as luck anymore," I reply.

The intensity of his gaze makes my body light up from the inside. How am I even able to register these reactions when I've been in fight-or-flight mode for so long? Kellan comes closer, his green eyes searching my face, while I can't help but admire the soft line of his lower lip.

"I have an extra blanket in the trunk," he says. "That is, if you want to stay out here. The passenger seat is heated. Up to you, Avery."

"A blanket would be great," I tell him. "If I get in the warm car now, I'm pretty sure I'll pass out."

He nods, smiles subtly, then goes back to his car. I watch him tread carefully across the snow, each step echoing determination and strength. Kellan returns with a third blanket which he gingerly drapes over my shoulders pulling me closer as he brings the corners together for me to hold.

"Thank you."

He makes sure I'm sufficiently bundled, then takes his phone out again. "Give me your ex-husband's name and description. I can put a BOLO out on him and make sure he's apprehended sooner rather than later."

"Daniel Madison," I say, wondering if a BOLO would be enough to stop that bastard from coming after us again. "Once I get my phone charged, I can send you more details," I add. "Like social security number, pictures, that kind of stuff."

"License plate number, last known address, any official court documents will all be helpful," Kellan says. "We'll sort the rest out tomorrow at the station. But the name and a description should do for the time being."

"Six feet tall. Medium brown hair. Brown eyes. Medium build. Works for

a finance firm. Or did. I don't know anymore. I don't keep up."

"I suppose the divorce was messy," he says.

I nod once. "It was, but I didn't have enough evidence to keep him away from the girls. So, the court granted him visitation rights once every two weeks. Until he hit me. That's when I got the restraining order."

"When was the divorce finalized?"

"Five months ago."

"And when did you get the restraining order?"

I need a moment to remember the exact date. "December first. Last week. We moved to Campbell as soon as I got it."

"Does he still have visitation rights for the girls?"

"No. Temporarily suspended, pending a court hearing. I'll need to file some papers for that. Damn, I need a lawyer. I need a lot of things." And I'm about to hyperventilate as the prospect of going through the court system again fills me with anxiety. "I thought I'd put him behind us."

Kellan looks at me with kindness, not pity. "Listen, forget about him for now. At least for tonight. Give yourself some peace. You and your daughters have been through enough."

I look again at my surroundings. We're still in the middle of nowhere during a terrible snowstorm, yet there is a sense of safety wrapping itself around me, and I can feel my whole body gradually relaxing. Granted, this blanket is definitely helping, but so is Kellan's overwhelmingly masculine presence. I wonder if the universe saw me in desperation and decided to give me a break this time.

"How old are the girls?" he asks as we wait for his brother to reach us.

"Miley is five. Annie is three. Although Miley is way more mature for a kid her age. Or mellower. Whatever it is, I'm thankful, because I doubt I would've been able to handle two wound up girls in these circumstances."

"And what do you do? For a living, I mean."

"I'm an interior designer, though I didn't start my career until after I got divorced," I say with a heavy exhale. "I've been taking on clients here and there, mostly remodeling projects. I handle everything from top to bottom—carpentry, plastering, painting. I do it all."

Kellan gives me a long and curious look, a glimmer of fascination in his eyes. "You do the hard labor too?"

"I can't afford to pay additional contractors. But I'm really good at it. I used to help my dad out a lot on his remodeling jobs when I was a kid so I'm

familiar with the work.

“What about you?” I ask Kellan. “Did you always plan on becoming the sheriff of Lincoln County?”

“Not really. My parents figured I’d take over the family business, but I decided to join the Navy instead.”

“Oh. Quite the twist,” I chuckle softly.

He smiles, but there is a tinge of sadness shadowing his expression. “Yeah. It was an intense and eye-opening experience, to say the least. But then I got my honorable discharge and came back here. I joined the Police Academy and saw how poorly the whole county was doing in terms of law and order. I wanted to do something; it was almost like a calling.” He pauses upon seeing a pickup truck approaching us from the north end of the snowy road. “There he is.”

“Your brother?” I ask, immediately aware of the tension in my voice.

“You’re safe with us, I promise,” Kellan replies gently. I reckon he can tell I’m still on edge.

It’s only when his brother pulls over and gets out of the car that I realize this could very well be the spiciest visual Christmas present I never imagined I’d get. Kellan’s brother is almost identical, albeit significantly larger, taller. An even greater mountain of a man with equally striking green eyes and dark hair. He’s dressed in charcoal gray overalls and a thick black turtleneck.

“This is Fallon,” Kellan says.

Fallon definitely lives at the gym or deadlifts a dozen tractor tires every morning just for kicks. I feel so tiny by comparison. Then again, at five-foot-five I’m practically minuscule compared to these two. I can’t help but lick my lips as I gaze at them, unable to look away.

“Hi, Fallon,” I mumble.

He grunts something that sounds like ‘Hi’ before he glances over at my old Citroën. “That it?”

“Yeah. We’re not sure what’s wrong with it,” Kellan tells him.

Fallon walks over to my car and opens the driver’s door. The keys are still in the ignition, so he tries to get the engine started, checking the dashboard with each turn. “I think it’s the electrical system,” I blurt out when Fallon gets out of the car and decides to look under the hood next. “There’s no power whatsoever. It’s done this before.”

“Possibly,” he replies, giving me a steady, dark look.

I imagine this is what a deer caught in the headlights feels just before the

inevitable impact.

“You’ll have plenty of time tomorrow to look at it,” Kellan tells him. “I’m gonna take the girls back to the house for the night.”

“That’s sensible,” Fallon replies, then glances my way again. “I’ll give you a diagnostic tomorrow after I check everything.”

“Thank you so much,” I reply.

Kellan gently nudges me with his shoulder. “Come on, time to go. Your girls need warm food and a decent bed to sleep in.”

All I can do is follow him back to his car as the snowfall thickens and the winds howl even harsher against the white night. Once I’m in the passenger seat, seatbelt fastened, I find myself depleted and sinking into an unexpected dream state. I catch one last glimpse of Fallon pulling his pickup truck closer to my car so he can anchor it to his pulley before my eyes surrender and darkness beckons me.

I’m not sure how long I was out, but I awaken just as we are pulling up outside a ginormous mansion—a magnificent colonial-style construction set within a sprawling beautiful garden. The hedges are all covered in snow, much like the rest of the property, but I can imagine this place on a hot summer’s day, greenery everywhere beneath a clear, blue sky. The building itself is U-shaped, with a dark-red brick façade and French windows, wrought iron terraces on the first and second floors, and white stone columns adorning the porte-cochere.

“Are you doing okay?” Kellan asks as he takes the keys out of the ignition.

“Yeah. I must’ve dozed off.”

“You did and that’s a good thing. It means you felt safe enough.”

I lose myself in his eyes for the better part of a minute until I remember my girls are in the backseat. One quick glance as I catch my breath and smile, seeing both of them fast asleep and wrapped up in their blankets, their plump cheeks pink with warmth. “I think I can put them straight to bed,” I whisper. “We did manage to eat something earlier before...” My voice trails off as the horror of what happened returns to haunt me.

Kellan takes my hand in his and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “That’s alright,” he says. “Their room is ready, and so is yours.”

“Hold on, two rooms? That’s too much, Kellan. We can just use a single room for the night.”

“Nonsense. There’s plenty of space for the three of you. Just relax tonight

and tomorrow we will deal with your ID, bank cards, and your car, along with whatever else you need.”

I don't like this feeling of helplessness. “I... I don't know.”

“Accept the kindness of strangers,” he says. “It won't cost you anything, Avery. It's literally the least I can do.”

“What about your brother?” I ask. “I don't expect him to fix my car for free.”

“He owes me a favor.”

I scoff and nod toward the mansion. “And what about this other guy who lives here? Does he owe you a favor, too?”

“As a matter of fact, he does,” Kellan shoots back with a confident smirk that has me hot and slick between my legs.

“Oh, great. So, what, you're just going to cash in on all your favors for me, a total stranger? That's too much.”

“It's my decision,” he says. “All you have to do is let others take care of you and your girls for once. What have you got to lose?”

Not much at this point. He's right, I need help. I need to keep my babies safe and fed while I rebuild my life. And if Kellan is willing to help me, why the hell not? I will need to find out what the conditions are, the details. I'm hoping there isn't a catch, but even if there is, it can't possibly be worse than freezing to death on the side of the road or having to deal with Daniel ever again. I shudder at the mere thought. And to think I was ready to give that man my whole life. For better and for... gah. Lies. All lies. I married a monster, and this is the price I have to pay.

Kellan takes Annie while I handle Miley as we make our way across the driveway and up the stairs leading to the front door of the mansion. We're greeted by a tall man with dazzling blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail.

“Avery, this is Luke,” Kellan says.

Luke gives me a polite nod, his gaze softening at the sight of my daughters sleeping soundly in our arms. “Welcome, Avery. Consider this your home for as long as you need it,” he says.

He's in his mid-thirties, I'm guessing, much like Kellan and Fallon, and he is just as well-built. His jeans hug his muscular thighs, while his sweater is taut across his chest and shoulders. The term eye-candy comes to mind.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I reply humbly. “We'll be out of your hair in no time, I promise.”

“There’s absolutely no rush,” Luke says, a smile testing his lips. “Come on, let’s get the little ones to bed first, and then we can talk about what you need.”

Kellan gives me a quick wink. “I know where he keeps the good scotch.”

I smile as I follow the two men inside, although I struggle to breathe once I take in the enormity of this place. The foyer is huge, with an elegant marble floor and modern wood planks on the walls. There’s plenty of nineteenth century art hanging everywhere, the gilded frames carrying subtle marks of the passage of time. Every side table features mother-of-pearl inlays, and there are Chinese-style vases everywhere, each loaded with an assortment of surprisingly beautiful and finely crafted faux flowers. As an interior decorator, I can’t help but register all these marvelous details.

We go up the stairs and down a dimly lit corridor in the west wing of the mansion. The girls’ room is decorated in a classic western style, with oak and walnut furniture, plaid patterns in shades of brown and green, and soft linen curtains hung over tall windows. There’s a bed big enough for both girls to comfortably sleep in, and as we settle them in together, I kiss each of my daughters on the forehead, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I have friends who come to visit occasionally,” Luke says as I carefully close the door behind me and join him and Kellan in the hallway. “Some of them have small children, so I’ve made sure I could provide them with all the comforts of home. As soon as Kellan called, I knew I’d be able to accommodate the three of you.”

“Again, I cannot thank you enough for this,” I reply.

“And again, please, don’t worry about it. We’ve got service staff coming in on a daily basis to clean and cook, so your girls will be well-looked after,” he says.

My heart is growing to the point where it feels as if it might explode. This really is too much, but I am too overwhelmed and exhausted to argue. Besides, I shouldn’t. I need to accept the kindness of strangers, just like Kellan said. So I offer a nod of appreciation and a soft smile. “They’ll be hungry when they wake up.” “We should call Helen,” Kellan tells Luke.

“Who’s Helen?” I ask as we make our way back down the stairs and into a lounge area on the ground floor.

“My aunt,” Kellan says. “She’d be happy to help and she’s an excellent babysitter.”

“Oh, I can’t afford a babysitter. I can look after my girls.”

The sheriff takes a seat in one of the massive leather armchairs by the window, pointing at the other one next to him. "Make yourself comfortable."

"I'll cover the babysitting expenses," Luke says, walking over to a beautiful ebony cabinet with hand-painted doors. I notice a subtle limp as he moves, but he doesn't seem to be in any kind of pain. It must be an old injury.

"Why on earth would you do that?" I ask, my breath faltering.

Luke gives me a sideways glance as he takes out three tumblers and a bottle of Laphroaig whiskey, bringing everything over to the coffee table in front of us. "Because you need some time for yourself," he says. "Come on, Avery. I know enough about what you've been through to understand that you could use the respite. It doesn't cost me much, and Kellan's aunt could also use some paid work."

"I'll pay you back," I insist.

"I'm not worried about that," he says and pours a generous amount of whiskey in each glass. I'm immediately enthralled by the smokey fragrance that accompanies the dark amber liquid as it settles.

I shake my head. "I insist. I pay my own way," I say stubbornly.

He nods and gives me a soft smile. "Alright, but until then, rest assured that all of your needs will be taken care of."

I can't help but question their generosity, though. I look over at Kellan. "Why are you all doing this?" I ask. "I mean, your brother is fixing my car. Your friend here is giving me a place to stay and food, not to mention a stiff and delicious glass of whiskey which, by the way, I'm probably gonna finish that bottle tonight. And you made all these calls on our behalf... why? I understand kindness and generosity, but it still feels like it's over the top."

"Avery, let me tell you a little story about us," Kellan says, his gaze bouncing between Luke and me. His friend takes a seat on the couch, quietly sipping his whiskey as he watches us with curiosity. "Luke, Fallon, and I were Navy SEALs. Far from home, always in combat mode, always fighting and watching each other's backs in the most hostile places on Earth. The three of us have been through unimaginable moments together and have come close to death more than once. Hell, we damn near lost Luke during our last mission." He pauses and finishes his whiskey in one gulp, then pours himself another. "We've seen what violence does to innocent people. And we've seen what happens when those innocent people don't get the help they need. So we made an oath upon returning to the states."

“We swore to help those in need, no matter what,” Luke continues. “It costs us little to nothing to do it. It’s pennies, Avery, I promise. Barely a blip in the bank account.”

“Judging by the size of this manor, I believe you,” I mutter, then give Kellan a frown. “You don’t have to go out in this blizzard again, do you?”

“I live here,” Kellan says.

That has me stumbling for a reply. “What?”

“We all live here. Luke, me, Fallon. The west wing is ours. The rest of the place is dedicated to our security business.”

“Hold on, I thought you were the sheriff of Lincoln County.”

“I am. But I’m also a partner in Wolfhound Security, which is Luke’s company.”

“*Our* company,” Luke corrects him with a half-smile before he looks at me again. “When we came back from the service, I had enough money saved to invest in this property. It was being auctioned after the bank repossessed it from a defaulting former owner. Kellan and Fallon pitched in with money of their own, and we decided to invest in a private security business. The Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office pays for our services once in a while, but the bulk of our clients are corporate giants from both the states and overseas. I’ll give you a tour of the place tomorrow, though my point is you’re safe here, Avery. You’re safe and taken care of until you’re able to get back on your feet.”

“Our honor demands it,” Kellan says, never taking his eyes off me.

I feel tiny, sinking into this chair, unable to say anything. They’re being genuine, and I have to accept that there are still good people in this world. Decent people who are willing to help me without wanting anything in return. It just so happens that these guys are also hot as a midday in August, and my body is responding in ways I’d forgotten it could to the presence of a man.

A couple of hours go by as we talk about my situation and how I got to this point. I figured that if I’m to be protected, they need to know more about Daniel and our relationship. Both Luke and Kellan listen quietly as I tell them about my troubled adolescence, both making sure my glass is never empty. I’ll give the whiskey credit—it has loosened up plenty inside of me, and not just my tongue.

“After Dad died, my mom remarried soon after. I’m sure they already knew each other, ” I pause to take another sip. “Point is, after that, things went downhill quickly. My mother stopped listening to me, paying attention

to me. It was all about Greg and his big plans, his feelings. That we should be thankful for Greg, that we'd be poor and miserable without him. It didn't matter that he had a drinking habit or that he liked coming into my room without being invited."

"Did Greg ever touch you?" Kellan asks, his voice low and his eyes as dark as the night outside.

It has stopped snowing, but there is no moon in sight. Only a black sky over a sea of sparkling white. It's eerily beautiful and comforting to admire from the warmth of this armchair. "No. He never had a chance. I was about seventeen when he first tried anything," I reply. "But whenever he came into my room, I made sure to ask him loudly what he wanted so my mom could hear. She was crazy jealous, even of her own daughter. Like I would actually try and steal her new husband away. I have no idea what made her change so drastically, but I reckon Dad's death sort of broke her beyond repair."

"And you said you moved out of the house as soon as you turned eighteen?" Luke confirms.

"Yes. I met Daniel through a friend. He was an instant charmer. He was quick to woo me, to make plans, to plant ideas of a future together." I sigh deeply. "I was scared and desperate to get away from Greg. Mom wasn't really there anymore, physically or mentally, and she'd started drinking as well. I had to get out of there, and Daniel made me believe that I would be safer with him."

"What happened after you moved in with Daniel?" Kellan asks.

"Oh, it was good for a while. He love bombed me in all the right ways. Made sure I was hooked. He even helped pay for design school. Once I got my degree, I was eager to get my career going, to pay him back for what I'd thought was kindness, love, and much needed support. But then I got pregnant with Miley, and Daniel insisted that I become a stay-at-home mom, that I could do interior design once Miley got bigger."

"I'm guessing you became pregnant the second time around just as you were preparing to focus on your design career again," Kellan concludes, slowly shaking his head.

"Bingo."

"Was he abusive the whole time?" Luke asks.

"No, not right away. Well, not physically anyway. I know now that abuse comes in many forms. Whenever I resisted him, whenever I went against his word, he'd find ways to punish or to sabotage me. I was raising Miley and

Annie on my own. We couldn't get a babysitter because Daniel wouldn't pay for one. I didn't have any friends because he wouldn't let me."

"Why would you need friends when you had Daniel?" Kellan exhales sharply.

"Precisely. But like you said earlier tonight, none of that matters anymore. I managed to get away from him. And I found myself in the company of good people tonight. So, here's to you, Kellan. Here's to you, Luke. And here's to Fallon, too. I just hope he can do something about that old car of mine." The three of us clink our glasses together before taking another sip of whiskey.

Luke checks his watch, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Well, I'm off to get some shuteye. Early start in the morning. Avery, please, we mean it when we say stay as long as you'd like. There's no rush. You've got the time and space and resources here to do anything. Just make sure you allow yourself to rest."

"Thank you, Luke."

He gives Kellan one last nod, then slowly gets up and walks out. I listen to the sound of his receding footsteps, registering the slight difference in his rhythm. There's definitely something off with his right leg, though I dare not ask what. Given that they were in the Navy together and based on the few details that Kellan let slip during our earlier conversation, I can only assume that Luke is living with a service-related injury that left him with that subtle limp.

Silence falls over the room for a short while as my gaze wanders around.

An entire wall is covered with bookshelves—all precious or first editions, judging solely by the intricate engravings on the spines and the high-quality leather binding. There are plenty of sculptural bookends sprinkled in between, likely collected from their overseas travels. I see East Asian motifs, African totems, and Polynesian patterns here and there, along with various vintage weapons mounted in glass cases.

"It's been a long day," Kellan says, pulling me out of my brief reverie. "You must be exhausted."

"I am, but that catnap I had on the way here pulled the dial back a bit," I giggle, noticing that my glass is empty. "You're right, though. I should get some sleep. I'll get out of your hair."

"Oh, I wasn't implying that at all," Kellan replies. "I'm just surprised you're still able to walk and talk after what you've been through tonight and

being out in the freezing cold for so long. The Nebraskan winters aren't known for being gentle on the human body."

I get up and find myself wobbling. "I guess I'm not that good at the walking part anymore."

In the blink of an eye, Kellan bolts from his seat and catches me before I fall. I remain soft and gooey in his arms as he holds me, my body burning hot against his. Our lips are dangerously close. Our eyes shadowed and hooded. The alcohol must be working some kind of voodoo on the both of us, because neither can pull away.

I can feel his heart thudding against mine.

"I think I'm still stiff from the cold earlier," I whisper.

"I won't let you fall," he says softly. His rock-hard body has me anchored safely, each muscle twitching nervously beneath his sheriff's uniform.

"Thank you," I reply.

"You're welcome," he says, his gaze dropping to my lips.

I should go upstairs. My room is next to my girls' room and I know I should sleep. But I cannot pull myself away from this sizzling man, and I don't think he's ready to let go of me yet, either. Time slows down as we look into each other's eyes, flames burning within. The fire consumes me from the inside to the point where I can no longer take it. Whatever is about to happen, I'm going with it. I deserve to allow myself this moment, to feel good and forget, even if just for a moment.

"I might kiss you," Kellan says.

"I'm hoping you will." *Where did that come from?* Never mind. Can't take it back.

He captures my mouth in a kiss. It's sweet and tender at first, breathing one another in. Eyes close as our tongues slip through, tasting, discovering. But then a ravenous hunger strikes, and we're devouring one another. My God, he is delicious. His tongue swirls and wrestles mine. My pulse starts racing as his hands move up and down my back, fingers digging into my hips. He pulls me closer, and I feel him hard against my core, ready to consume me.

"Oh, wow..." I manage as he trails wet kisses down the side of my neck.

I'm still wearing my velvety pink jammies from our Campbell place, which is actually a good thing, because all Kellan has to do is tug and... there goes his hand, right under my panties. He lets out a hiss of a sigh as he peers deep into my eyes while his fingers slide between my slick folds. "Fucking

hell, Avery. You're so wet."

I gasp as his fingers explore me while his other arm wraps tightly around my waist, holding me firmly in place. "Oh... Oh, right there."

It's been so long since I've felt a man's touch. The last man to touch me turned out to be a despicable monster. Every intimate moment I've ever had with Daniel has been soiled by the ugly truth of his nature, and so I am compelled to create a new and sweeter memory with this man standing in front of me. Kellan kisses me once more, deeper this time. It's intoxicating.

My hands rest on his shoulders, my mind ablaze as I try to get them to move. I'd love to get under his shirt, to feel his skin against mine, but I'm grounded where I stand. He's got me paralyzed, my legs parting gradually as his fingers continue working me closer to the edge. I'm panting, my breasts pressing against his rippling muscles as one finger slips inside.

"Ah," I whimper against his lips, my eyes wide open as I look at him.

He's loving every second of this. A devilish smile slits his handsome face as a second finger goes in. I'm gushing like a river as he licks his lips, his breath ragged as I feel his cock twitching against my belly.

"I think you need this," Kellan says. "I want to see you come."

"Oh, Kellan."

He's got the base of his palm pressing my clit while a third finger penetrates me. I hold on to him tight as the pressure builds up inside my core, every nerve ending alight while I try to remain standing. He is right about one thing—I desperately need this release, and he's determined to make that happen. "Deeper," I whisper. "Harder, please..."

"Gladly," he grunts and starts finger-fucking me mercilessly.

I hear the wet sounds of my pussy as he works me into a blinding frenzy. The orgasm rocks me to the core and I cry out in agony and ecstasy, the waves rippling through me until my knees give out. And just like that, all the turmoil I've endured up to this point dissipates in a colorful cloud of blinding sparkles, my heart exploding as he teases my pussy and squeezes every last drop of pleasure out of me before pulling his hand back and licking his glistening fingers. He stares into my eyes as he does so and it's so hot, I nearly come again.

He gives me a moment to recover but he never lets go. He simply holds me close, watching, analyzing every feature of my face as I try to take all of him in. I didn't expect tonight to end this way, but I knew from the moment I met Kellan that I wanted him. Badly. All of him. To my shame, I'm craving

his brother, too. And Luke is a morsel on his own. *Good grief, Avery, the snowstorm must've burned your brain circuits.*

“I think it’s time you get some sleep.,” he says gently.

I nod, suddenly exhausted beyond reason. I’m confident that I’ll be having sweet dreams.

AVERY

I *'m safe here.*

It's the very first thought that comes to mind as my eyes peel open in the late morning. I'm sure I fell asleep last night something akin to the speed of light. The bed looks as though I never even slept in it, clearly there wasn't any tossing or turning. All I needed was a blinding orgasm and a hot shower to completely disconnect myself from reality long enough for my dreams to carry me through the rest of the night.

Not that I remember any of them.

I only remember Kellan's lips. His fingers inside of me, stretching, probing, ensuring my pleasure. God, that was insane. But I loved every second of it. And I absolutely want more.

Stretching my arms and legs out like the laziest cat, I take a moment to breathe in deeply as daylight pours into my room. I was so tired last night that I didn't even register how lovely my temporary nest is. The four-poster bed is adorned with a dainty white lace canopy, while the furniture is cherrywood with brass knobs and handles. The walls are painted in a warm off-white, while the hardwood floor is covered with a plush carpet the color of champagne. As soon as my feet touch it, I feel as though I'm walking on clouds.

It's a good thing I left a bag of emergency clothes in the trunk of my Citroën even after I moved us to Campbell. It came in handy last night when we ran away from Daniel. I fish a pair of jeans and a bulky sweater from it, along with a matching set of cotton undergarments. Once I've got my blonde hair combed and styled into a loose bun, I give myself one last glance in the mirror and check my phone—Kellan left me a charger for it last night.

Dozens of missed calls from an unknown number, my voicemail is full. My stomach churns because I know it's all from Daniel. I can't even bring myself to listen to any of the messages, but I know I have to. It'll be evidence against him in court.

Giving myself a few minutes, I breathe in deeply and gaze outside the window. The world is covered in pristine snow. There are several cars parked in front of the mansion this morning, ones I didn't see yesterday. Then again, Luke and Kellan said this is the HQ for their private security business, so I'm guessing the vehicles belong to company employees. Kellan told me not to worry about my girls in the morning, that Helen would be with them until I was ready for the day. He's so thoughtful and kind, so attentive and generous. I'm honestly shocked and infinitely thankful for our paths to have crossed the way they did.

Finally, I find the strength I need to listen to Daniel's voicemails. He must be fuming.

With trembling fingers, I tap the phone and switch to speaker mode as I listen to the first message with bated breath.

"Avery, you fucking bitch!" he snarls, heaving and cursing like a rabid sailor. *"I'll find you, you hear me? I will find you, and I will bring you back home. You're not getting away from me again. You're not taking my girls away from me! YOU HEAR ME?"*

I shake my head slowly, then listen to the next message.

"Where are you, you whore? Where'd you take my girls to? I only wanted to talk to you. Why did you have to make me so angry? Where are you?"

"Hopefully somewhere you will never find me," I mutter and move to the third message.

He sounds calmer this time. He's probably had a few minutes to realize that I'm out of his reach for the time being. *"We need to talk, Avery. This isn't right. Our daughters deserve a family. You left before I could explain everything. I only wanted you to listen to me for once. You're being irrational, baby."*

That's the theater play. He forgot the voicemails were recorded. He's trying to make me out to be the crazy one, even though he's the one with a restraining order against him. I wonder if he actually thinks that this is going to work. Or maybe he's truly delusional. My dad would've put him down like a dog for everything he's done to me.

Daniel shoved Miley. I will never forgive nor forget that, and I will make

sure that he never sees us again. Until then, however, I need to know what I'm up against, so I play the fourth message.

"I'm not sure how far you'll get in that shitty car of yours," he says in the next message, then laughs harshly. *"But I will find you, Avery. I will find you, no matter where you go. You can't hide from me. I have friends everywhere. I have eyes everywhere. And I know people who will make sure justice finds you. You took my daughters away from me, Avery. We can still fix this, if you'd just agree to meet with me."*

"Oh, yeah, sure, that's the first thing I'm gonna do after I put some concealer on this bruise," I say to myself, looking in the mirror. It's starting to show. It'll be purple by nightfall. My face was so red from the cold last night that I didn't notice the mark he left when he hit me. The adrenaline rush, the fear, my survival instincts... everything kicked in at the same time, and I forgot all about my own injuries, focusing solely on getting my daughters to safety. *That son of a bitch.*

"Come on, Avery, pick up the phone, where are you?" his fifth message starts off on a pleading tone. But he's mad and unhinged, and he can't hold back while he's raging. *"Answer the fucking phone! I'll find you. I know every single town in this county, you little bitch! I swear I'll find you!"*

I can't take it anymore, so I put the phone in my pocket and head out, determined to start the day on a better and lighter note. My first stop is my girls' room. I stand by the door and listen first. I can hear them giggling in the company of a woman. Smiling, I go in and find Miley and Annie playing with a woman in her early sixties, with long, flowing ginger hair and warm brown eyes. She looks up from a sea of colorful toys on the floor and lights up like the sun when she sees me.

"Good morning, Avery!" she exclaims, genuinely thrilled.

"Good morning, you must be Helen," I say.

"That I am!" Helen gets up, carefully straightening her peach-colored pants and matching blouse. Both look beautiful on her plump figure, though a tad ritzy given the task at hand. She lowers her voice then says, "I'm so sorry you were brought to us by such an awful tragedy," and gives me a sympathetic smile. "Kellan didn't give me too many details, but a woman doesn't need to know much when a mother runs from her children's father the way you did."

"Thank you," I mutter, lowering my gaze for a moment.

Helen comes closer, while Annie and Miley continue to play on the floor,

occasionally giving me a pair of big and bright toothy smiles. They look well rested and happy, and that's all that matters right now. "There's no shame in being a victim of abuse," Helen says. "Unfortunately, too many women in this world has a story to share. You're not alone, Avery."

"I know. It's still a hard pill to swallow," I reply. "Have they been a handful?"

"Who, these two little princesses?" Helen laughs lightly. "Oh, Avery, they're the sweetest. You've done a marvelous job of raising them. They're gentle and playful, curious and polite. I've had my share of kids to look after over the years, including the trouble twins. Your girls are a breeze."

"The trouble twins?" I ask.

She wiggles her eyebrows, and it makes me smile. Helen doesn't seem to take herself too seriously, but the sadness in her eyes tells me she's using humor to mask deep injuries to her soul. I know that look. I'd recognize it anywhere. "Kellan and Fallon."

"They're twins," I voice a conclusion I came to last night as well, for some reason. "They're not exactly identical."

"No, they're fraternal even though they do look quite a bit alike. Their personalities, however, are vastly different."

We take a seat on the small sofa by the window. It's nice and warm in here, with tartan-style wallpaper and sturdy teak furniture, a Tiffany light pendant hanging overhead. The girls are happy playing with their toys and talking. Miley is doing most of the talking, actually, while Annie learns by imitating her older sister and consistently butchering each word a few times before she starts getting it right. I love watching them grow up together.

"So, you raised Kellan and Fallon," I say, surprised by how quick I am to relax in Helen's presence.

"Elizabeth, my older sister, is their mother," she replies. "Granted, we had better relations at the time. I no longer speak to my family through no fault of my own. But the boys and I stayed close. I helped raise them, and they helped take care of me when my sister damn near destroyed me." Helen takes a deep breath and forces herself to smile, yet the bitterness persists in her tone. "It's a long and ugly story. I still get carried away whenever I think about it." She pauses. "I'm sorry. You've got enough to deal with already."

"No, by all means, I'm listening if you need somebody to talk to," I reply. "If anyone understands the dirt and the grit of family, believe me, I'm your gal. Besides, I wouldn't mind knowing more about the guys. They've been so

unbelievably kind and gracious to my girls and me. We're complete strangers, yet they took us into their home as if they've known us for years."

Helen smiles softly. "They are good men, wonderful men. Loyal and strong. Nothing like their parents, I'll say that much."

I'm about to ask Helen what she means by that, but my daughters draw my attention.

"Momma, look!" Miley cuts in, waving a couple of letter cubes at me. "It says baby!"

"It sure does. Great job kiddo!"

Content with my reaction, Miley then goes on to try and teach Annie how to spell the word. Fortunately, my second-born is just as eager to learn, so soon enough, Annie's spelling it out on her own. Helen can't help but giggle with delight.

"They really are something else," she says. "I love how Miley looks after Annie."

"Miley's a wonderful big sister," I reply. "To be honest, I didn't have to do much in order to teach her about protecting and caring for Annie. I think it just comes naturally to her. Though I wish she didn't have to know anything about protecting her little sister at this age."

She gives me a long, warm look. "You're safe here, Avery. I know it's strange to come upon the kindness of strangers when you're literally fighting for your life, but maybe fate sent you here. Maybe this is the beginning of something better for you."

"Maybe," I reply. It's not doubt that's keeping me on my toes, though. It's the fear of having to walk away from what little peace I have found in this place. "Your nephews think very highly of you. I could tell by the way they talked about you last night."

"Like I said, they're good boys. Kellan and Fallon take care of me, make sure I'm never out of a job. A babysitting gig here, an administrative position there... I lost my husband Maurice to a terrible illness. We never got to have children of our own, and for the past twenty years, I've been a jolly and hopeful widow, I suppose. The boys made sure I have a good pension fund waiting when I'm ready to retire, but until then, I intend to keep earning every paycheck."

"Life is what you make of it, right?"

She nods slowly. "You have all the options. You can let it destroy you, or you can move on, you can grow and do better for yourself. That's pretty

much all there is to it. We're only given a set number of years on this earth, Avery, and it's up to us to make the most of every single day. I'm grateful for the time I had with my Maurice, and frankly, I've met other men since, but none have touched my heart the way my Maurice did. Love is rare, so rare, but I've experienced it. And that made my life worth living."

"I'm starting to think I've never truly experienced it myself," I reply, a knot settling in my chest. "I think I just really needed to get away from my parents, and Daniel made me believe I'd be safe and happy with him. I held on to him for dear life; terrified of the idea of having to go back if our marriage failed. I held on so tight, and that just made everything worse."

"It's all behind you now, though, isn't it?"

"I hope so. He's still out there. He left me a bunch of voicemails. Granted, I did hit him over the head with a lamp, but I had to protect myself and my daughters. I had to get away from him."

We both look at Miley, observing the blue and purple bruise on her left arm. Miley hasn't mentioned the incident or her arm at all, she keeps busy with her sister, but I see the sadness in her eyes. How awful she must feel, still wondering why Daddy hurt her in the first place.

"You'll talk to her about it," Helen says, as if reading my mind. "Give her some time to settle down, first. Last night must have been horrible for her. Annie's young, she probably won't remember it later down the line, but you'll definitely need to keep an eye on Miley going forward."

"They'll never have to go through any of that ever again."

Helen takes a deep breath, lovingly gazing at my girls. "These two will thaw any man's heart. Chances are the boys downstairs will never let anything happen to them, whether you have a say in it or not."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Kellan practically melts when he talks about Miley and Annie. I've got a feeling that Fallon and Luke will bend over backwards to keep them safe as well. They're good men, Avery. Strong and dangerous men when they have to be."

I guess I'm in good hands. Or so I'm hoping. Daniel can be an excellent manipulator, a skilled deceiver. He lied to me from the moment we met. I fell for a mask he aptly wore over the first year of our marriage before it started to crack. And now, I know him for the monster that he truly is. I'm not sure how or when I will ever truly get away from him. Daniel seems intent on haunting and hounding me for the rest of my life, simply because I dared to

leave him.

Simply because I refused to put up with any more of his abuse.

AVERY

Kellan had already left by the time I got up, but Helen was kind enough to show me around. I spend the next couple of days resting and spending time with my girls. There are moments when I feel guilty for simply sitting around, but my body certainly welcomes the respite. I take naps with Miley and Avery, spending plenty of time outside as well. There is so much to see around here, though I do my best to stay out of everyone's way.

We have food and warm beds. We have TV, toys, and books on almost every shelf in this place. The service staff are all wonderful and kind folks who live in North Platte and drive up here every morning and evening to make sure everything is well taken care of. Marcus O'Neill, the Director of Operations for Wolfhound Security, was kind enough to give me a full tour of their security wing, which is basically half the mansion, sprawling across three levels and a considerable portion of the back garden. The latter has been leveled and designed for outside training—obstacle courses, running tracks, and several sports fields for tennis and athletics. It is imperative that their agents perform to the best of their abilities in any physical endeavor, especially since they provide their services to high-ranking officials and diplomats who are often in the crosshairs of various hitmen.

The indoor gym is bigger than anything I've ever seen, and it's often packed with agents training. There are two shooting ranges—one on the ground floor of the mansion, and one outside, far enough away from the building to prevent any rogue bullets from accidentally hurting someone. There are several offices and lounges where they meet with their clients, and they even have a few rooms with additional security features for those who need an overnight stay in between their travels. They are safer and easier to

monitor than if the client was staying in a hotel.

“We had a nephew of the Jordanian Royal Family stay here just last month,” Marcus says as he continues walking me through the building. “There are so many foreign agents currently on our soil at all times, it’s hard to keep track of all of them, so we prefer bringing our clients here. The mansion is virtually impenetrable and almost impossible to fully scan with outside equipment. We took plenty of pages from the CIA and the DoD’s handbooks when building this.”

“So, it sounds like your military service really comes in handy too,” I say.

“It was a fundamental experience,” Marcus replies in his soft Caribbean accent. “For me, it was interesting, to say the least. Serving in the Dominican military was something altogether different compared to Kellan, Fallon, and Luke’s Navy years.”

“How so?”

“Our military doesn’t have the gear or the equipment that Americans have. We had to make do with very little. It did give me an advantage, though, which is why the guys wanted me to join Wolfhound Security in the first place. I can handle myself without any weapon on hand. That’s very helpful when you lack resources but you still have to save somebody’s life, including your own.”

“Your life sounds oddly exciting,” I reply.

Marcus laughs, the sound booming across the hallway. He’s over six feet tall and massive, with broad shoulders and a muscular build. Dark-skinned and imposing, Marcus can easily come across as intimidating. I reckon he is also deadly, and I would never want to get on his bad side. He’s kind and sweet to me, though, so there are moments when I simply forget who he is and what he’s capable of.

“Our paths in life don’t always go the way we expect them to,” he says with a half-smile. “I would’ve preferred something simpler and more peaceful, but poverty pushed me into the service because it paid well compared to everything else that was available at the time. It made me a better man, however, and I will always be grateful for that.” He pauses as we reach the ground floor again. “Like I said before, Avery, you are free to go wherever you wish. Whatever we have that qualifies as sensitive or classified material is safely locked away. You can tell which rooms are accessible and which are not based on the electronic locks and the color of the lights.”

“Right. Red for locked, green for open. Got it,” I reply. “Well, thank you

for the tour. Luke was going to do that, but I guess he's a busy man, too."

"They travel together for business once in a while," Marcus says as he escorts me into the lounge area. "It doesn't happen often, especially since Kellan still has his full-time sheriff's duties, but he and Luke partner up when it comes to bagging a bigger client."

"I see. So they're bringing in a bigger client now?"

"Hopefully, the biggest we've had yet. It would be a fixed-term gig for the next few years. I really can't say anything else about it though."

"I understand. It's more than I need to know," I chuckle nervously. Honestly, my intention is to keep my head down for as long as I can, to rest and look after my girls, and to get my paperwork and finances back in order, making enough money to be able to move us somewhere else. "I think I'll just settle down with a book here until Kellan returns. He did text to tell me he's coming back today, and that he wanted to talk to me about my ex."

Marcus nods slowly. "If you need anything, I'll be in my office. You have my number, as well."

"Thank you."

Once he's out of the study, I linger around the bookshelves for a while, trying to figure out which book to read. Helen has my girls for the rest of the day and I'm grateful for the break. The time alone helps me get my thoughts in order. I need to start looking for work while I'm here, and I've asked one of the staff members to save me a copy of the newspaper when the press materials are delivered tomorrow morning. I don't have access to a computer just yet, but Helen said I might have more luck finding remodeling jobs in the local classified ads, anyway.

I find a book that entices me enough to get me flipping through its pages, but my mind soon wanders back to the events of the past few days. Eventually, I feel my eyes closing, intrusive thoughts dissolving as I let my body shut down for a bit. My girls are safe, so I can relax.

"Avery," Kellan's voice has me bouncing back into the real world with a startled gasp. "It's okay, you're okay. It's just me."

"Oh, hey," I mumble and blink a few times as I remember where I am.

I look around and notice the skies outside darkening. "You fell asleep," Kellan says, still kneeling by my armchair, one hand politely resting on my knee.

Helen was kind enough to bring me some of her more casual clothes, though her jeans are a tad oversized for me. I can still wear them with a belt,

though, at least until I have access to my bank account again so I can buy some new stuff for myself and the girls. The sweater conceals most of my curves, but I still feel naked under Kellan's piercing green eyes as he looks at me.

"I think the adrenaline of the past couple days is finally wearing off," I say, smiling sheepishly.

"It's okay. I just got back and I wanted to stop by and see how you were doing."

"I'm fine, really. Eager to start getting my life back together, first and foremost. Do you think we could go to the bank tomorrow? Or the police station? What do I need to do first in order to access my funds again?"

Kellan smiles. "I know a guy who can help you with everything. We'll meet with him tomorrow and he'll get you started."

"That sounds shady, that you 'know a guy,'" I can't help but laugh nervously.

"I promise you it's not. I'm a law man. I have friends in all kinds of places, including government agencies and state institutions," he says. "They'll gladly help if I ask. And they'll make it easier for you to get another passport and driver's license. You'll need both for the bank before they can issue you another card."

"Thank you, so much," I say, straightening my back as I sit up.

Kellan gently takes the unread book from my lap and sets it on the side table, then shifts his focus back to me. "I've started reaching out across law enforcement entities in the state, not just Lincoln County," he says. "There hasn't been a sighting of Daniel Madison anywhere just yet. He's probably laying low, fully aware that the cops might be looking for him. I listened to the voicemails you sent me, as well, and I have forwarded them to the county prosecutor. It's enough to start building a case against him."

"I thought you were away on business."

"I was, but it didn't stop me from making a few calls."

All I can do is stare at Kellan with a mixture of awe and disbelief. "How are you real?"

He chuckles softly, and it's as though the sun rises in his eyes whenever he laughs. His lips stretch into a delicious smile, reminding me of the other night and the orgasm he so generously provided me. This man is fire incarnate, and my skin is once again tingling all over in his presence. "Where are the girls?"

“Oh, Helen has them for the rest of the evening. She offered, and I wanted some time alone.”

“Perfect.”

“Perfect?”

Kellan takes me by the hand and helps me out of my seat. “Yeah, perfect.”

“Why perfect?” I play along, holding back a giggle, though my heart is already thumping.

He doesn’t answer, but I don’t insist, either. Instead, I let him guide me out of the study and up the stairs. We go through the darkened hallway in silence as my pulse starts racing. He doesn’t let go of my hand, and his touch is enough to send thousands of tiny electrical currents through my whole body. The anticipation builds as I begin to understand what’s going on. I can almost smell it—the intensity of his arousal, the fragrance of his desire building up. I recognize it in me as well. I’m burning with intense desire. I was burning up from the moment I woke up and saw him, dammit.

“What are we doing here?” I ask as he takes me into a private bedroom and cautiously locks the door behind us. I glance around and notice the massive blackwood furniture, the giant bed with a nautical-themed cotton spread in shades of dark blue and cool white, and some of Kellan’s clothes thrown across an armchair by the window. “This is your room, isn’t it?”

He turns around, embers burning in his green eyes. “We started something, and I think we need to see it through,” he says. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

My core is ignited. My fingertips tingle. Yet he doesn’t touch me. Kellan is waiting for my consent, and my reaction is almost immediate as I bring a hand up to touch his face. The words slip past my lips before I even realize it.

“I agree.”

As if suddenly activated, Kellan takes me in his arms, holding me tight as we kiss. It’s a deep and lazy kiss at first, as if we’ve been apart for eons. He inhales deeply, as if breathing me in before the kiss turns into a dark and ravenous experience. We consume one another, lips crushing and tongues wrestling as we delve deeper.

I hear myself moaning as his hands slide down my back. Mine rest on his shoulders, and I revel in touching him, in feeling his muscles hard and twitching under my touch.

“I’ve been thinking about this moment for the past couple of days,”

Kellan says as he trails kisses down the side of my neck. Shivers trickle down my spine as he pulls my sweater off, revealing my breasts. My nipples perk up against the coolness of the room, and he immediately lowers his head to take one in his mouth. “You taste like fucking Christmas, Avery.”

His lips close around the nipple while I gasp and run my fingers through his short black hair. He’s got one arm locked on my waist while he uses his right hand to massage my breast, suckling and licking like it’s a feast for the ages. Heat pools between my legs. I can’t stand these oversized jeans on me anymore.

“Oh, God,” I manage as his teeth graze my soft, pale skin before he moves to my other breast and delivers the same decadent treatment. My head falls back. It’s hard to stay upright when he’s turning me on like this, relentlessly licking and sucking each nipple until my core is rocked and ready.

“Undress me,” Kellan says.

He stills and straightens up, lifting his arms as I take his shirt off first. My fingers tremble when I try to unbuckle his belt, a generous bulge catching my eye below. I look up and find him smiling. “Sorry, I’m a little rusty.” I whisper.

“Not at all. I love watching you squirm,” he replies, the corner of his mouth twitching with hot amusement. Finally, I manage to get him out of his jeans just as he firmly and quickly pulls mine down along with my panties. There is a violent hunger swelling between us, the kind of hunger that only our bodies can fulfill.

“Spread your legs for me.”

I do as I’m told, breathless as I take all of him in. His massive, muscular figure. The handful of tattoos on his forearms and his left thigh. The short, curly black hairs covering his chest and hardened nipples. The splendid dip of his hips. The monstrous cock bulging, thick veins twitching and begging for me. I am dying to feel all of that inside of me. My pussy fucking aches for him as I look up just in time to watch him lower his head yet again.

“Keep your hands behind your back,” Kellan says.

Once more, I obey, struggling not to melt as he kisses my nipples, devouring each breast before his tongue starts trailing wet lines down my belly, igniting all kinds of tiny wildfires along the way. I watch him get down on his knees, one hand gripping my thigh while the other slips between my legs. I’ve never felt these sensations before. I’ve never abandoned myself so

freely to a man like this, yet I am unable to stop. Kellan makes me feel safe in every sense of the word, and my very soul needs him to take me, to take all of me and do with me as he pleases.

He glances up as he slides his tongue between my slick folds. I whimper and shudder as I gaze into his darkened eyes. He licks my pussy over and over, as he slips a finger in. Testing. Probing. The second finger joins in. Stretching. Exploring.

“Oh, God...” I breathe harshly as he closes his lips around my swollen clit and suckles shamelessly, building up the devastating pressure that will soon make me explode. I hold on to his shoulders for dear life, my knees bucking as his mouth makes love to my pussy in ways I never imagined it could be done.

He adds a third finger inside me and curls all three with each deeper stroke. I feel myself clenching and tightening around him as he eats me out, as he slurps and nibbles playfully until I’m pushed over the edge. I love the sound of his growl as I come against his lips, my juices flowing as he consumes me, as he finger-fucks me into the sweetest abandonment of my own senses.

I shudder and twitch, riding the wave of ecstasy, but it doesn’t stop here. I’m not given a single moment to recover, and I’m still trembling as Kellan gets up and pushes me back until we reach the bed. I lay on my back and he climbs on top, desire burning in his emerald gaze. I lift my knees and spread my legs wide to let him in.

He takes a moment to scan me from head to toe, lips curling into a devious smile as he admires my throbbing pussy. “Do you want me inside you?”

“Take me, Kellan. Fuck me. Please.” I moan as I feel the tip of his cock probing my entrance.

He spears me with his full length, and for a moment, I’m breathless. He’s fucking huge, stretching and filling me to the brim, and I love every sensation. Every nerve ending is activated, my very core humming as he slowly starts to move. He brings one arm around my waist to keep me locked in place while he plants his knees into the mattress and uses his spare hand to tease my clit some more.

“Touch yourself,” Kellan says.

I take hold of my full breasts and squeeze them softly as he continues to move, slowly and surely, deeper with each thrust. Moans escape my throat as

I revel in each sensation, our eyes locked on one another as he brings his hand up to touch my left breast.

“Make yourself come for me, Avery,” he says.

While he fondles my flesh and fucks me harder, deeper, faster, I stroke my swollen nub into another frenzy. The pressure builds up as the night falls darker outside, as my mind unravels and my hips bounce upward to receive the magnificence of the moment. We establish a smooth rhythm that gradually intensifies until Kellan is so deep inside me that it’s as if our very souls have become entangled.

“Yes, just like that!” I cry out, applying more pressure to my clit. Harder, I flick.

Harder, he thrusts.

I’m out of my mind and coming apart at the seams as Kellan claims me, as he savagely possesses me and fills me, spinning me into a splendiferous madness. His grunts of pleasure amplify and turn me on even more. I tighten my pussy around his engorged cock, feeling it twitch as he goes deeper, harder.

“I can feel you squeezing me, baby,” Kellan growls, tightening his grip on my breast and pinching my nipple until it stings and I scream my bliss into the night.

He rams into me, over and over, beads of sweat dripping from his temples and splashing my face as I come yet again, as I ripple outward and explode all over him, as he fucks me into oblivion and spills his seed inside of me. It goes on for what feels like forever—this aggressive orgasm, reckless abandonment, loss of reason and logic as our bodies are intertwined. I lock my legs around his waist to keep him inside me for as long as possible, feeling his cock trembling and my pussy pulsating with bliss.

We kiss, and he collapses on top of me, holding me close.

I purr like a kitten in his arms.

The night is young, though, and we both know it.

“I’m just getting started,” I tell him.

“Good. ‘Cause I’m nowhere near done with you, Avery.”

I don’t have to leave this place anytime soon. No one is rushing me out of here. I’m not going to rush myself out of here, either. How could I, when this man has so easily and selflessly taken me into his life and into his bed. I’ve never felt this way before. Kellan has given me full control over myself and my decisions. I’m free to do as I wish. And right now, I would very much

like to stick around and enjoy more unexpected and unquenchable passion.
Whatever happens next barely matters in the darkness of the night.

KELLAN

All night. We went at it all night. I still can't believe it. I didn't think Avery had that kind of energy in her. Yet she continues to surprise me. From the moment I stumbled upon her down that snowy road, I knew she was special. It was as if my very soul had beckoned me to find this woman when she needed me the most. I thought she just needed help towing her car. To learn that she had been through hell just to survive activated parts of me that had been dormant for quite a while. And then to discover how warm and passionate, how tender and sweet she truly is... this wisp of a woman, this small yet vibrant mother of two equally vibrant girls... damn, I did not see any of it coming.

My muscles ache, but it's a sweet kind of ache. My flesh feels tender and hypersensitive, still tingling from her kisses. Memories of last night continuously flood my mind, causing my cock to twitch anxiously. It's making my pants feel tighter than usual though I welcome the soreness. That woman sucked me dry in more ways than one. Her intensity in the bedroom is otherworldly, to say the least. We resonated on so many levels, I'm genuinely in awe.

She's having coffee somewhere outside with Helen while the girls play in the snow. My aunt stopped by a kids' store and came over with proper winter clothes for the little ones—ever the thoughtful lady. Someday, I will avenge her. I will pay my parents back in kind for all the harm they did to people who didn't deserve it. I've devoted my life to the law and to justice. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't hold my own accountable for their crimes.

Until then, however, I will gladly focus on a piece of shit named Daniel Madison. I can't consider him a man. Not after everything he did to Avery

and shoving little Miley. That's not a man. That's a lesser creature who deserves to be crushed and wiped off the face of the earth. I've only known Avery for a few days, but I can tell she's honestly terrified of that fucker. The bruises on her daughter's arm and on her face are a constant reminder that he's a fucking monster, because only a monster would hurt his own child like that, only a monster would strike a woman in anger.

"We'll need to go through the proper channels first," Luke says as he pours more coffee into my mug. We're in his office, having a private meeting about Avery's ex-husband. "I'll have our guys investigate him officially and see how much information they are able to get before we switch to our lesser-known channels."

"As much as I want to disagree with that strategy because of the precious time we'll be wasting chasing down half-hearted social workers, I have no choice but to go with it," I grumble, adding some cream to my coffee.

"We need to figure out how well-connected this guy really is," Luke says.

I know he's right. We've dealt with seemingly unpopular characters who happened to have the right friends in high places, and it almost got us in legal trouble at a time when our security company couldn't exactly afford that kind of scandal. We almost lost Wolfhound Security because we didn't stir the waters first, just to see what kind of snakes would come out before setting our sights on the main target. We learned the hard way. It will be much better if we're more careful this time around, if we cover our tracks as much as possible in the process. It might take more time to find Daniel, but at least then we'll know precisely who we're up against.

"The BOLO is out, but no one has seen him yet," I say, going over a file in front of me.

I turn it over for Luke to study. He frowns as his gaze wanders across the printed lines, settling on a couple of traffic cam photos from a year ago—the most recent images we have of the guy since he deactivated all of his social media accounts. "What about online?" he asks.

"Nothing. But I've got Marcus working with one of our digital forensics experts. We should be able to dig something up."

"Just make sure the IPs are covered," Luke says. "Remember what happened to our competition."

"We still operate under the radar with our tracking software, we're cool," I assure him.

He leans back into his chair, arms crossed as he exhales deeply. "She's

interesting.”

“And then some,” I sigh. “Way more responsive than I’d anticipated.”

“You were together last night.”

I nod slowly. “Couldn’t really help myself. And it was completely mutual.”

“Do you like her?”

I nod again. “Avery is different, Luke. Completely different from any other woman we’ve ever met.”

“That I can agree with. You know, there are some people who just exude this inextinguishable kind of energy, no matter how bad things get for them. I’m willing to bet Avery is one of them. She strikes me as incredibly resilient. Of course, one needs to be resilient to live with an abusive narcissist for so long.”

“But she’s got her priorities straight. She made sure her kids were safe.”

“I think we can both agree that she deserves better,” Luke says. He likes her too and I can’t blame him. What’s not to like about this woman? She’s fucking gorgeous—a petite blonde with soft, blue eyes and creamy skin, generous curves and enough character to stand out in any room with absolutely no effort. She’s smart and devoted to her children. Granted, she’s been a victim of abuse for far too long, but I think she’s finally finding herself. And I also think I want to be there when she truly comes into her own. It’s only a matter of time. “What’s the plan with Daniel, assuming we can’t nail him down via the legal methods?”

“How far are you willing to go?” I ask with a raised eyebrow. “You know I can’t cross certain lines with my badge.”

“Technically speaking, neither can I,” Luke replies with a subtle shake of his head. “But I had to ask, if only to make sure that we’re all on the same page.”

“Given the evidence and court records alone, the legal way should be valid.”

“I sure hope so. You know how iffy the suits are on domestic violence, in general.”

“Yeah, I know but this guy is dangerous.”

“Then make sure you’ve got your weapon on you at all times, Sheriff, even off duty,” Luke says. “If he tries anything, you may be justified.”

I don’t like the prospect. It’s making my stomach churn. “Listen, Luke, I haven’t killed anyone since the Navy, and that was government sanctioned.”

“This could also be sanctioned if Daniel gets close enough to pose a threat to Avery and the girls.”

“We’re skating a thin and dangerous line here.”

I really don’t want to go down that road. The law is the law. There’s a reason why the entire code is in place, why we have a police force and a justice system. I believe in it with my very heart and soul, and I don’t want to end up in a situation where I’m forced to make a decision that could end with me sacrificing such an important part of myself. Avery is a special woman, and we will do what we can to keep Daniel away from her without risking our lives or our careers.

“Tell you what, Luke,” I add after thinking about it further. “Let’s reach out to the feds, just in case, and advise them of the situation. They might at least be able to share some of their state and local resources with us, if only to help us track the fucker down sooner rather than later. All we have to do is point the authorities in the right direction. I’ll make the arrest myself. I’ll make sure he’s locked up before he can even think about coming after Avery again.”

“What does Fallon think?” Luke asks. “I suppose you’ve discussed it with him.”

The three of us are the founding partners of Wolfhound Security, and we’ve made a habit of consulting one another whenever we’re about to use company resources for personal matters. Avery’s situation qualifies as such, considering that she’s technically not a client. She’s a woman I picked up from the side of a snowy road. I’m still amazed by the lengths that each of us is already willing to go to in order to keep her and her daughters safe.

My brother, however, is usually the last one to soften in such matters. He is the strict partner, the one with an iron fist who doesn’t want any kind of legal trouble. It has more to do with preserving our wild cards for a future all-out war against our parents—we swore to one another that one day, we would take the Cassidy’s down and rid this county of their wretched influence. The decades of financial trickery and abuse will end with us. Until then, we must tread carefully.

“Fallon is busy fixing Avery’s car,” I say. “He does agree that we should stick to the legal channels, but he’s the one with the better ties to the FBI. I’m sure he’ll make a few calls to help us get to Daniel faster. All we need is access to certain security video feeds that Quantico manages across the state, video feeds that we can’t access without a warrant.”

“Couldn’t we try to get a warrant, first?” Luke asks.

I shake my head. “If we make it official this fast, it might alert Daniel to our position. Let’s gather as much information as we can first.”

“Yeah, the last thing we need is that fucker lurking around, looking for an opening. Not that he’d actually get one, but his presence here would force us to put security detail on Avery and the girls whenever they go out. That will draw some attention and North Platte is a small town. People talk. They can tell who’s a Wolfhound agent, who’s a ranger, etc., and the minute folks notice Wolfhound staff following a woman and her two kids around—”

“Daniel will be drawn to them. Especially if he is as connected as Avery thinks.”

Which means that we have to calculate every single move we make from now on. We have to keep a low profile, even in our endeavors across legal channels, and we should probably create fake identities for Avery and the girls, at least until we locate Daniel. It’s a good thing I have my friend coming over this evening to discuss Avery’s passport and driver’s license issues. She won’t like my offer to give her a temporary fake identity and cover all of her financial needs until she can get her own life back, but it’s not like she has a better choice at this point.

I’m compelled to do everything I can in order to keep Avery and her daughters safe. And while I would like to delve deeper into the reason why, I can’t. It’s a time sensitive issue, and the sooner we put Daniel behind bars, the better.

A couple of hours later, I’m still thinking about last night as I pull up outside Fallon’s garage in town. I can’t wait to get back home and take Avery in my arms again. She is a dangerously addictive woman—not that I mind getting hooked on her. I can’t remember the last time I felt so intensely about someone so quickly.

I find my brother working on her car. This Citroën model used to be a reliable vehicle back in its heyday. But that was almost two decades ago. The hood is up, and Fallon is rummaging through the electrical system with a pair of black latex gloves as he follows the circuit with pinchers and a small clipper. He gives me a tired look as I walk in.

“I can replace all the wiring,” he says. “It’s easier than fixing the existing layout. It’ll cost a bit, but I don’t want to charge her for any of it. Consider it pro bono.”

“Look at you, being so generous to a stranger,” I chuckle.

“You’re one to talk,” Fallon grumbles. “You’ve got all of North Platte PD out there looking for that scumbag ex-husband of hers on some of the worst snow days that this county has seen in a decade.”

When Fallon and I were younger, we were virtually indistinguishable from one another. Our mother loved dressing us in the same clothes and styling our hair in a way that made it difficult for people to tell us apart. I’d look at my brother and it would feel as though I was looking in the mirror. In many ways, he and I are still a lot alike. But when we got to high school, Fallon and I worked hard to become our own individual person—at least on the outside.

He got bigger, working twice as hard at the gym and out on the football field for his gains. I devoted more time to scholarly activities, though we always spent plenty of hours working out together. He grew a beard, I kept my face clean-shaven. Today our bodies and our tattoos make it easy for folks to tell who’s who, but there are moments when I look at my brother and still see that reflection I saw as a kid. A piece of me, an extension of me, much like I am an extension of him. Few understand how deep our shared bond goes.

“She’s worth it,” I tell him.

He nods once. “What’s she like?”

“You’ll like her. Provided you come out of your hard shell for once. Avery is one of the sweetest women I’ve ever met.”

“And the ex? Where’s he at?”

I shrug and lean into one of the thick steel support beams inside the garage. Fallon’s business occupies the entire ground floor of an industrial building on the north side of North Platte. It’s across the street from a slew of cafes and local shops, so there’s always plenty of foot traffic, but they usually keep to the other sidewalk since Fallon has a habit of revving his clients’ car engines whenever they come around to pick them up. He likes to make sure they know he did an excellent job.

“It’s why I’m here,” I tell him. “You still have your FBI links, right?”

“Depends.”

My brother has never been a man of many words and it does irk me sometimes. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“Depends on what it is you need me to talk to them about, specifically. It has to be something worth making the call. You know the feds; you know what they’re like. Just because I have connections doesn’t mean they will

automatically agree to anything.”

“It’s not just anything. We need access to their security feeds. I know they’re affiliated with several networks across law enforcement agencies throughout Nebraska, and they have access to CCTV systems that I can’t touch without a warrant,” I say. “A temporary username and access code would be more than enough, just until we’re able to find Daniel. He has to have popped up somewhere by now, and our local feeds either haven’t yielded anything clear enough or, if they did, the footage is too low-quality and grainy for me to properly ascertain whether it’s him or not.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Fallon concludes, stepping away from the car for a few moments.

I glance inside and notice some of the girls’ toys—plush bears and a couple of Barbie dolls that have seen their share of sloppy makeovers. A smile creeps across my face as I decide to bring them back to the house, certain that both Miley and Annie will be happy to have them. It’s the comfort of familiarity that I’m sure they miss the most.

“Here,” Fallon says and hands me a clean paper bag from inside a cabinet. “I keep some around just in case.”

“Ever the kind soul,” I chuckle and stuff the toys in the bag. “So, can you talk to your FBI boys for me? The faster we get that fucker off the streets, the safer the girls are.”

My brother gives me a stern nod. “Yeah, I’ll make a call.”

“Thanks. What about the car? How long before you think it’s ready?” I ask.

“I don’t know, a couple of days, tops. I might even finish tomorrow since I’m pretty sure I already have all the materials I need in stock. It’s mostly cables and wiring, so it’s nothing too fancy. The battery might be harder to replace, but I think I can get a newer Citroën model replacement for it.”

“Good. Avery will have more freedom of movement with her own car. She doesn’t seem comfortable having to rely on me or anyone else.”

“An independent woman,” Fallon smiles.

“Or just too scared to trust anyone,” I let a heavy sigh roll off my chest.

His humor fades as he looks at me, brows furrowed into a deep frown. “He hurt her, didn’t he?”

I nod. “Miley, too. The girl has a visible bruise on her arm.”

I see the muscle ticking in his jaw despite the growing black beard. I can almost hear the wheels turning in his head as he imagines ways to rip

Daniel's guts out with his bare hands. If there is one thing my brother is horrifyingly quick to respond to, it's violence against women and children. He even scares me, sometimes, with his emotional intensity.

Though I can't blame him. I'd break Daniel's face if given the chance but I'd stop there. I'm not sure Fallon would.

"They're not leaving the grounds unaccompanied until he's arrested, right?" I give him a reassuring nod. "The three of us are all on the same page. And Avery doesn't seem to be in any rush, either. Then again, given what she's been through, I reckon she welcomes the reprieve. The girls are being well taken care of, Helen loves them."

"Good." The shadow of a smile crosses his face.

A man suddenly comes into the garage, politely clearing his throat and prompting the both of us to turn around. He's tall and lanky, in his late twenties or early thirties, clad in jeans and a plaid shirt. His Timberland boots have seen better days, and he's got oil stains all over his hands. I take a moment to register his features, something feels a little off. Brown eyes that are meant to be warm and friendly, but his gaze feels sharp and apprehensive. There's a cut healing above his right eyebrow, surrounded by a nasty-looking bruise. His eyebrows are dark brown, but his hair is bleached blond and cut short. He wears black-rimmed glasses, he's clean-shaven, and slightly tanned.

Not the kind of man I typically see in the middle of a Nebraskan winter.

"Can I help you?" Fallon asks, his tone flat.

"Hey, there," the man replies with an awkward smile. "Um, my car broke down. I was hoping I could get it fixed."

There's a southern twang in his speech. It's not over the top, but the drawl is strong enough to help me identify him as a Louisiana native. My job frequently requires me to quickly scan and analyze everyone I meet—especially complete strangers. And with an abusive ex-husband on the loose, I find myself paying more attention to such details.

"Where's the car?" Fallon asks.

"It's at the corner of Mash and Fifth, sir. I think it needs to be towed," the man says. "I'm Randy. Randy Johnson. I just moved to Hershey. I was driving around, lookin' for a job, and that ol' Beetle gave up on me."

"That's alright," Fallon replies. "I'll come down with my truck and pick it up for you. We'll have a look and see what's what, and then I can tell you whether it's worth saving or not."

"Oh, I sure hope she's worth saving. I've had her since college, and she

ain't been nothin' but faithful to me, I swear," Randy says, sounding rather disappointed. "I can't afford a new one, either. Not until I get a job."

"Let's see what's wrong with it first," Fallon says, then looks at me. "I'll see you later, then."

"Thanks again," I tell him.

I give Randy a slight nod. He smiles, his gaze briefly dropping on my sheriff's badge and uniform before he shifts his focus back to Fallon. My brother tends to overwhelm anyone he approaches with his sheer bulk and size. It's kind of funny, and I hold back a smile as I walk past Randy and head back outside. It's supposed to snow again tonight, though I'm hoping it won't be as bad as the blizzard that brought me Avery and the girls. Until we catch Daniel, undrivable roads on account of snow and ice are a big issue. I only hope we track the fucker down soon.

AVERY

I watch the girls as they play outside in the snow with Helen. They're running around in the front garden, hiding behind snowy hedges and throwing snowballs, while I sit in the study and go over the newspaper classified ads, looking for remodeling jobs. I've circled a few that sound good enough for a rookie like me, though it does infuriate me that I put my design career on hold because of Daniel. I would've been so much farther ahead if only I'd listened to my instincts more.

Then again, that was always his purpose, to keep me down and anchored to him, depending on him for everything. My freedom has come with a price, and it's a steep one, but I am willing to pay it thrice over if that's what it takes for me to retain my dignity and be able to take care of my children. Miley and Annie deserve a good mother, and I intend to be just that.

The sound of incoming, uneven footsteps has me looking up from the classifieds just in time to see Luke walk into the study with a bag of takeout food. It smells amazing—I catch a hefty whiff of chicken and onion rings, among other savory flavors. “I figured you could use a break,” he says, smiling softly.

He looks dashing in his dark grey suit, his surfer blonde hair combed into a tight bun. I guess this is his business look, and I like it. I really don't know that much about him. Luke doesn't talk that often, although he's been smiling more. I hope he's warming up to me. There's something about him that fills me with a strange sense of peace and comfort. I feel safe when he's around, much like I feel with Kellan.

“You brought me food,” I reply, genuinely surprised. “You shouldn't have.”

“Should I have let you starve instead?” he chuckles, then proceeds to sit on the sofa as he removes each box of still-steaming-hot food from the bag, placing each on the coffee table. I join him with a bright smile as he steals glances at me with each movement of his hands. “I needed to eat, too, so I thought we could share. It’s from Macy’s, in North Platte. They make the best chicken in the county.”

“The best chicken?” I ask with playful skepticism.

“Second best to Popeye’s,” Luke concedes.

It’s quite the feast that he’s laid out before me. Two boxes of fried chicken and an assortment of seasoned dips. Egg-fried rice. Onion rings. And two boxes of sweet potato fries drizzled with cheese sauce and sprinkled with chili flakes. Mouthwatering. My stomach growls, a reminder that I did, in fact, need a proper meal.

“It looks fantastic,” I reply.

“Please, help yourself,” he says.

That isn’t hard to do. Once I dig in, it’s game over. I practically inhale half a box of fried chicken and some of the rice before slowing down and taking my sweet time enjoying the cheesy potatoes. There’s plenty of ice-cold soda as well. We eat in relative silence for a while. Whenever I look at him, he looks away. Whenever I feel his eyes on me and glance his way, he’s quick to shift his focus elsewhere. My heart is beating a little too fast, and I can’t help but gaze at him for a while—his strong profile, his sharp jaw hidden beneath that sandy blonde beard, his aquiline nose and curious eyes. His lips.

Blinking that last thought away, I devour the rest of my fries and wash them down with cold soda before I decide to have a conversation with the man who just bought me lunch. “So, tell me, Luke, how long have you had this security company for?” I ask.

“About four years. It’ll be five in the spring,” he says, giving me a sideways glance.

“Did you always want to do this? I mean, was it planned before you joined the Navy?”

He shakes his head. “Not really. I thought I’d be a Navy officer until I’d retire, but fate decided otherwise.” I sense the drop in his voice. Something happened. Something he’s not that willing to talk about. I glance down at his knees and notice a bump that I hadn’t noticed before. Luke follows my gaze and exhales sharply. “I lost my leg.”

“Oh.” My stomach sinks. I feel awful, all of a sudden. It certainly explains the slight limp. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. These things happen on active duty,” Luke says. “It was an explosion. It almost killed me, but Kellan and Fallon got me out before the boat sank with me in it. I got pinned under a steel beam, the flames were eating me alive.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah, not a pretty sight,” Luke sighs deeply. “But they got me out. I survived, my leg didn’t. That’s pretty much all there is to it.”

I think we both know there’s way more to it, though he doesn’t seem willing to talk about the entire incident. I’ve learned from my own experiences that it’s best not to press people on matters that are still sensitive to their hearts. In Luke’s case, we’re talking about the loss of a limb. I can’t imagine the adjustment process of dealing with not having a part of himself anymore. “I had no idea, Luke. But no matter what, you’re still you. You’ll always still be you and I happen to think you’re pretty amazing.”

“Thank you,” Luke says. He seems a bit surprised and I have a feeling he doesn’t hear such words that often. “It means a lot.”

“I see a good man, a really good man, in front of me. You took me and my two children under your roof without even knowing us. You’re actively helping to bring my ex-husband to justice. You brought me lunch. A few words of truth coming out of my mouth are nothing compared to everything you’ve done for my daughters and me, Luke. Technically, we’re complete strangers.”

“I dare say we’re not strangers. Not anymore,” he smiles softly. “How’s your food, by the way?”

“Considering the fact that I’ve practically devoured it, what do you think?”

He laughs, and I love the sound of it. It’s as if the sky opened up in his eyes and rays of sunshine burst from his throat. It’s a beautiful sight and sound and makes me want to make it my mission to never see this man frown ever again. He is handsome, sure, a delicious morsel of a man, but what truly makes him stand out is his kindness, his energy. It’s rare.

“How long has it been since the divorce?” Luke asks as we work our way through what’s left of the sweet potato fries.

“Less than a year. But to be fair, I was already falling out of love with Daniel years ago. Shortly after Annie was born, actually, when it became

clear that he would never change. And that a lot of what I based our entire relationship on had been a lie. Once I understood that, it got easier for me to emotionally detach myself from him. Once I got it into my head that I did, in fact, deserve better, something just clicked.”

“Have you ever considered going back to him?”

I shake my head so hard and fast I almost snap my own spine. “Never in a thousand years. Daniel could be the last man on earth, and I would gladly throw myself off a cliff before ever going back to him. My dad had this saying about people, that we’re like rivers—”

“We only flow forward. We can’t flow back,” he finishes for me.

“Precisely.”

“Your dad was a wise man. I’m sorry you lost him at such a young age.”

All I can do is shrug. It’s been a long time since I’ve sat with my feelings regarding my father, and I’m not ready to delve into that department anytime soon. There’s enough on my plate right now, I doubt I have enough of an emotional bandwidth to deal with his loss, too. I never allowed myself to grieve growing up, and I didn’t have the opportunity to grieve while I lived with Daniel. Maybe someday, I’ll be able to just sit down and process everything in peace. But for right now, I need to figure out my next move for what’s best for me and my daughters.

“I realize my daughters will grow up without a father,” I say, my voice trembling slightly. “It won’t be easy, but at least they will be safe and happy.”

“You never know where the river will take you, though,” Luke replies, half-smiling. “You might come across someone who sees you precisely as you are. Someone who wants you, who wants to be with you, all of you, Avery, and that includes your daughters.”

We gaze into each other’s eyes for what feels like forever. I don’t know what to say. I wish I could read his mind and figure out if there’s a deeper meaning to his words. I do know that there is something going on between us, the kind of energy that has my body responding with a soul-swelling vibe filled with hope that I will find love again. The kind of love that pushes me to want to be a better version of myself. The kind of woman that a man like Luke would be proud to have by his side. Or a man like Kellan. Holy hell, my mind is racing out of control right now.

Luke reaches out and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. His touch makes my skin tingle, my nerve endings humming everywhere as I take a deep

breath and allow myself to smile.

“I suppose that’s possible,” I mumble. “I’m not an easy woman to love, though. And raising two kids on my own, it’s not something that any man would want to deal with.”

“Do you really think you’re not easy to love?” Luke says, slightly puzzled. “There’s so much about you to love, Avery. No man in his right mind would pass up the opportunity.”

“You’re being kind,” I giggle.

“I’m being serious. Just because you’ve had a rough life, just because you’re raising two beautiful, brilliant little girls on your own, doesn’t make you—”

“Damaged goods?”

“Damaged goods.” He sighs deeply upon hearing the words and repeating them. “You’re not damaged goods, Avery. If anything, I think what you’ve been through up to this point has only served to make you stronger and smarter.”

“Well I definitely know what I don’t want.”

Luke chuckles dryly. “And that’s a much better starting point than what you had when you were eighteen, don’t you think?”

“Ah, yes. Progress.”

“The healing process from any kind of trauma is never linear. There will be days when you will feel virtually unstoppable, like a queen on top of the world. But there will also be days when you won’t even want to leave the house. Our souls are fickle and fragile things, but our bodies, our minds... they go the distance. I speak from experience here. It does get better. It always gets better.”

I like the sound of that. I only hope it’ll get better before I find myself exhausted and unable to love anyone ever again. All the love I have in me right now is being poured into my daughters. Miley and Annie need me wholly, and I don’t mind devoting myself to their safety and their nurturing. But Luke is right—someday I will want to look out into the world again and find a man who is willing and even eager to take me precisely as I am.

Part of me secretly steals glances at the likes of Kellan, Fallon, and Luke. My body yearns for more of Kellan. And my mind is already having naughty fantasies about Fallon. The look in Luke’s eyes isn’t making things easy, either. The temptation is gnawing away at me, and I don’t know what to do about it.

EVERY

To my surprise, Kellan takes me out in the evening. I didn't think I'd be seeing him again for a couple of days, considering his workload. Yet he made time for me, and I don't know how to feel about that. I'm happy, of course. Thrilled, to be specific. But I don't know where we're going with this. The magnetism between us is undeniable, and I definitely wouldn't mind exploring it further. I only fear that I might end up catching feelings. I'm not sure this is the right time. Yet I cannot bring myself to pull away. It feels too good to be with him.

We're at a local pub in North Platte. It's a nice place with dim lighting and 80s rock music playing out of a retro-style jukebox with a built-in CD player. I sink into my seat as Kellan comes back from the bar with a bottle of red wine and two glasses.

"I thought we'd start off slow," he says, settling in.

"You remembered I like red wine," I reply, smiling as I watch him open the bottle with a classic corkscrew. Every movement of his hands is swift and precise. Once the cork is out, he gives the wine a minute to breathe before he pours it into the glasses.

"I hope you like this particular vintage," he says. "It's from Napa Valley."

"Honestly, I'm not fussy about wine in general. It's the company I enjoy the most."

Kellan gives me a broad smile, his green eyes twinkling with a fascinating mixture of desire and affection. Something has definitely changed between us since the other night. My core still burns with arousal whenever I find myself remembering his touch, his lips and his tongue working me into

one frenzy after another. I've never felt so sated and so eager for more.

"You look beautiful in blue," he says.

I feel myself blush. "Thank you. Helen took me and the girls to a store earlier today and we got a few things. Thank you so much for the money too. I'll pay you back when I recover my bank accounts and all that."

"Don't worry about it," Kellan replies. "By the way, my friend says he'll have your passport and driver's license ready before the end of the week. We'll use those to open up a new bank account for you, something temporary that you can use while we sort out the whole Daniel issue."

At first, I wasn't sure about getting fake ID's or whether or not I should let Kellan do all this, but he convinced me that it's a safer option until I get my life back. Given that I'll be applying for remodeling jobs in the North Platte area, I will need some form of identification and a bank account for clients to pay into, and since I can't use my real identity until Daniel is arrested it only makes sense to go along with this plan. I don't want to rely on Kellan's financial aid for too long, I will definitely be paying him back.

"It makes sense," I tell him. "Doesn't make me feel any better, but you're right. I do need some financial freedom of movement, so to speak."

"You'll be okay, Avery." He pauses and takes a long sip of his wine. "Has he left you any new voicemails?"

"No. Radio silence, actually. Not even a text. Do you think that's a good thing?"

Kellan gives it a moment's thought. "I don't. A man like him won't give up that easily. I'm still waiting for some contacts of my brother's to give us access to certain CCTV systems in the county, but if Daniel is so intent on staying off the radar, it means he's probably building up to something."

"He'll need to find me, first," I mutter.

"He won't," he says firmly. "You are safe while you're with us, Avery. Do not forget that."

"I do believe that I am safe with you," I reply, allowing myself to smile. "But we both know it's only a matter of time before he resurfaces."

"And when he does, we'll be waiting for him."

"You don't have to do all this, Kellan. I just need to make enough money to get myself and the girls out of the state, and that'll be it."

Kellan shakes his head, his brow furrowed. "Absolutely not. You need more than that, and we've already talked about this. We've got you, Avery. To the end."

I can't help but wonder what 'the end' means exactly. I don't want to overstay my welcome in the mansion, no matter what he says. How long before that warm welcome expires? I'll need to start working soon. Maybe I'll have more clarity then, once there's money going into my bank account.

"I'll be applying to some remodeling gigs tomorrow," I tell Kellan after a few moments. "There were a couple of ads that sounded interesting, so I'll be making some calls to find out more."

"Good. There have been a lot of new folks moving to North Platte over the past couple of years, so it's probably why you're finding more opportunities in your line of work," he says. "If you want, I could always vet the client before you get started, just to make sure they're legit."

I can't help but laugh. "My God, Kellan, you are positively determined to become my knight in shining armor, huh?"

"You don't exactly strike me as a damsel in distress."

"You picked me up off the side of the road. Literally."

"I think I rescued a warrior who was in need of a place to rest," he replies, leaning back into his seat. His knees find mine under the table, and he gently nudges them as a playful grin stretches across his handsome face. He's still in his sheriff's uniform, but the top of his shirt is unbuttoned, giving him a more casual allure. Of course, I'm already wet and aching for him. "You're a strong woman, Avery. It's what drew me to you in the first place."

I lean forward, pressing my knee against his. "You sure know how to charm the pants off a lady, don't you?"

"I don't charm just any lady, though."

"Ah, so I'm special."

His gaze softens, dark shadows swallowing the green pools of his eyes. "More than you know."

My focus shifts as his hand travels under the table. I feel his fingers brushing against the fabric of my jeans. I'm sure he wants to do more but this isn't the place to get frisky. There are plenty of people enjoying a Friday night out, most of them clustered in rowdy groups along the bar or in the pool table area, with a few couples in the corner booths. Life seems tranquil and normal here, so why do I feel so out of place?

Probably because I've never truly experienced a tranquil and normal life.

"I'd like to see you again," Kellan says.

I give him a curious look. "Aren't you seeing me now?"

"I'd like to see you again like I saw you the other night," he replies.

“Naked and wet, crying out my name while I fuck you senseless.”

“Oh.”

My legs turn to jelly. My stomach tightens as I remember that precise moment when we both exploded at the same time, my pussy throbbing as he stretched and filled me beyond my wildest dreams. Kellan won't take his eyes off me, and it's that kind of look that ignites fires deep within my core.

“I can't be the only one thinking it,” he says, his voice low and sensual.

“You're not,” I manage, my throat downright parched.

I catch a glimpse of a peculiar man walking past our table. For the briefest of moments, my heart stops, and I hold my breath—there's a feeling in my gut giving me the kind of goosebumps that scream danger, yet I don't see an obvious threat anywhere. The man has blonde hair, glasses, and is wearing a plaid shirt. He doesn't look like anyone I know, though deep down he reminds me of my demon. My nightmare. Daniel.

Quietly, I watch the man head over to the other side of the bar, turn left, and walk out. I get a glance at his profile, and I am stricken with a blend of fear and doubt as I fail to recognize him despite him seeming so familiar. It's such an odd feeling and I know I'm still in my fight-or-flight mode. I'm still terrified of Daniel tracking me down, of hurting me worse than the last time. I see Daniel in practically every man that passes me by.

He didn't even look my way. I would recognize Daniel, I'm sure of it. I can't forget his face, nor the hatred in his eyes. I saw that hatred even when he was declaring his love for me, even as we said our vows in that small Vegas drive-in chapel. Did he ever truly love me, or was it all just a long game for him? It doesn't matter anymore. He's not here.

“Are you okay?” Kellan asks.

“Take me home,” I tell him.

I need to be in his bed again, with him deep inside of me.

By the time we get to the mansion, the lights are out and the night guards are busy doing their rounds. Kellan takes me to his private office first. He keeps a bottle of scotch there for the occasional night cap, and we share a glass as we talk some more. I enjoy his company, and he can't seem to get enough of mine, which is wonderful because we're both increasingly becoming more comfortable and eager to be with one another. I can't remember the last time I felt this way about someone.

“How do you like it here?” Kellan asks at one point.

We're both sitting on the sofa opposite his desk, crystal tumblers in hand

and almost empty. I'm still burning up on the inside, but I keep it together and to myself. My loins are tightly wound, and I keep biting my lower lip whenever I look at him. He seems to love it from his expression each time I do it.

"Here, in the house, you mean?" I clarify, watching the amber liquid swirling in my glass.

"Yes."

"I love it. I feel safe here, and so do the girls. There's so much to do. It's a beautiful place, and absolutely everybody is just so nice, so kind to us," I tell him. "I have to admit, Kellan, I've never been on the receiving end of so much before."

"This world isn't all darkness and violence, though I see my share of it every day," he says. "But the guys and I have tried to make this place a safe haven. Not just for ourselves and our clients, though. It's meant to be a safe haven for anyone who needs it. It was only a matter of time before someone like you walked through our doors in genuine need of protection, and we knew it," he adds. "I'm glad you're safe, I'm glad you *feel* safe."

"I feel safe with you, Kellan."

He gives me a long and arduous look, a smile testing his lips. Setting his empty glass on the coffee table next to us, Kellan moves closer. He takes my glass from my hand and leans in for a kiss. I welcome him with a heavy sigh. I can taste the whiskey on his tongue, his lips and I want more.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer, surrendering to his tight embrace. We tease one another, licking and tasting without a care in the world. The study is dimly lit by a desk lamp, and shadows dance across his face as I give myself a minute to just look at him.

"You look ravishing tonight," he says. "Well, you look ravishing all the time, but tonight, you're something else."

"There's nothing different about me tonight," I reply with a smile. "I'm still the same."

"You're more mine than you were yesterday. Maybe that's what it is."

He kisses me again. This time, it's the hunger that conquers me, the ravenous desire spilling out of him and pouring into me that has my pussy dripping wet and aching to be filled again. Kellan's tongue slides down the side of my neck, igniting fires in my core that soon engulf my whole body and my entire consciousness. I unravel under his touch, his fingers eager to explore, to touch and squeeze every single part of me.

Before long, our clothes are on the floor, and we're standing in front of each other, breathing heavily with our eyes locked on one another. His cock twitches anxiously as he measures me from head to toe, bringing a hand up to fondle my breast through the delicate lace of my bra. The nipple reacts, perking up to greet him. His other hand slips around my waist as he pulls me close, his gargantuan erection nestled against my love triangle.

"You are phenomenal," Kellan says, his mouth capturing mine once more.

I barely register the moment when his hand moves from greedily massaging my ass cheeks to the front, fingers slipping underneath my panties and in between my wet folds. I hiss when he finds my clit swollen and ready for him.

"Oh, Kellan..."

"Fucking hell, woman, you're killing me."

I move my hands up his muscular arms, my fingertips registering every line and curve as they reach his shoulders. He strokes my pussy slowly but deliberately in a circular motion that has my hips swaying against him, my core tightening as the pressure builds up. I can't help myself and he gasps as I drop to my knees. Kellan stills as I look up at him and take him in my mouth.

My lips stretch around the tip first. I taste him and lick the precum before I relax the back of my throat and welcome all of him in. "Dammit, Avery," he grunts and holds my head in place as he starts to move.

"That's right, take it like a good girl," he says, grinning like the devil when our eyes meet.

"You taste like heaven," I whisper when he pulls back for a moment, the veins swelling along his gigantic cock. "I need more."

"I'll give you more, baby. It'll be my pleasure."

Suddenly the door opens, and in walks Fallon. Everything comes to a sudden halt. I freeze, remembering that I'm half-naked and kneeling as Kellan's cock lingers over my lips. Kellan doesn't seem as shocked, though. Surprised, yes, but not shocked nor appalled and in no way willing to stop what we started. I stare at Fallon for the better part of a minute while he takes us both in with dark green eyes and a curious half-smile stretching over his lips.

"I brought your car back," Fallon says calmly. "Replaced the entire electrical system. It's got a couple more years on it at least."

I blink at him several times trying to think of something to say. Holy hell,

I'm so stunned I can't even react. Kellan, on the other hand, smiles down at me and I find an odd sense of comfort in his eyes.

"Would you like him to join us?" he asks.

"Wh-what?" I manage.

Fallon clears his throat. "It's completely up to you Avery."

"You're serious," I whisper, glancing back at him. My gaze wanders downward and I notice the bulge in his jeans. "I've never—"

"We don't have to," Kellan says, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. His touch alone is enough to get my engine running again at full speed, my inhibitions melting away like snowflakes falling into an active volcano. "You have full control, Avery. But I see it in your eyes. I see it in the way you're licking your lips right now. You want us both, and we'd very much like to share you."

The word comes out before I can acknowledge its strength. "Yes."

I watch in eerie silence as Fallon smiles and lets his clothes drop on the floor. He's bigger in size than his brother, but his cock is just as appealing. A split-second later, they're both standing in front of me, fully erect, and I am grabbing each by the base and servicing them one at a time.

It's something I didn't even know I wanted, and I'm loving every fucking second.

"Your lips are perfect," Fallon says, watching me closely, his eyes smiling.

It's odd to see them both towering over me like this, but I don't want it to stop. I devote myself to sucking them both, harder and faster until I feel them throbbing in my mouth and against the back of my throat, until they gasp and stand back, stroking themselves as they look at me.

"Stand up," Fallon says.

I stand.

"Take everything off." Kellan smiles as he watches me peel my panties and bra off. I stand naked and insanely aroused in front of them, desire trickling down the insides of my thighs as I touch myself and squeeze my breasts. "Turn around and bend over," he says.

I turn around just as he reaches me, then sits down on the couch in the perfect position—his cock ready for another taste. I bend over, spreading wide for Fallon, then take Kellan in my mouth again. Fallon groans harshly as he grabs me by the hips and kneels, eager to eat my pussy. I moan and tremble as his tongue works me into a frenzy while I suck Kellan with

enough force to swallow the whole damned thing.

My legs are shaking, but I can't stop. I won't stop.

Fallon's tongue flicks over my clit. His lips close around it, and he suckles it hard until I feel my core exploding. I cry out with a mouthful of Kellan as I come, juices gushing freely out of me. Fallon consumes me whole before he gets up and thrusts into me, my hand wrapped around the base of Kellan's cock as Fallon plunges deep into me.

I'm determined to drown in their pleasure and ecstasy as I unravel, rippling outward and tightening around Fallon's cock while I suck Kellan's with unstoppable thirst. I stroke him hard as Fallon stretches me wide. Every thrust amplifies a second coming of sorts, another orgasm quickly building as I feel his hand move around my hip, fingers teasing an already hypersensitive clit.

"Give it to me," Fallon growls. "All of it, Avery. I need all of it."

"You're fucking fantastic," Kellan says, watching me and biting his lower lip as he runs his fingers through my long blonde hair.

"Fuck me harder, Fallon" I whisper when I catch my breath.

Fallon's fingers apply rough pressure against my clit, and I tighten and clench around him as he pounds into me, harder and deeper and faster until the pressure leads to the sweetest release.

Kellan shoots his load down my throat, gasping and groaning as I drink and swallow every salty drop. Fallon comes deep inside me, and I feel his cock throbbing with every thrust. His fingers keep working until I finally break down and explode all over him. I'm taken and dismantled, then put back together. I'm sated and satisfied in the best way possible, billions of colors exploding before my eyes as I surrender into this incredible moment.

FALLON

I knew last night would end the way it did. It's what I wanted. It's what I had been thinking about since I first laid eyes on Avery. I'm not the type to let anyone in—most of the time, I keep to myself, wrapped up in my shadows and my privacy, wary of strangers and unwilling to open up. Yet this petite woman with generous curves and warm blue eyes has found a crack in my armor, and she did it effortlessly, without even realizing it.

I'm hung up on her now, catching feelings when I know I should keep a clear head. How can I not feel myself drawn to this woman, though? She is beautiful and passionate, dirty minded and funny, ambitious and remarkably resilient. She's putting herself back together after years of trauma and abuse. If I get the chance to lay my hands on that fucker Daniel, I will rip his head clean off his shoulders. Hitting a woman and harming your children is beyond abhorrent. Fury bubbles beneath my surface as I try not to envision those horrific moments. I see the toll it has taken on Avery, on Miley. Even Annie seems slightly more apprehensive than most children her age.

I know what it's like. Abuse takes many forms, but the effect is often the same.

I am compelled to care for them. To do whatever it takes to protect them and keep them safe and laughing like they are right now.

"Careful, Annie," Avery says, giggling as we watch her daughters run around the breakfast table.

The girls are giddy and energized after a hearty meal. Helen is busy cleaning up and doing the dishes while I put another pot of coffee on, waiting patiently by the counter. I'm tired, but in a good way. Every muscle in my body aches, and my skin still tingles from the memory of Avery's lips. My

ears still hear the sound of her voice, of her throaty orgasms and whimpers of passion. I'll be thinking about her often, especially when I'm not losing myself inside her. She is dangerously addictive, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

I don't know how long she'll be around, though and I worry that she will eventually leave. If that happens, I'll be left reeling from her absence. It's a hard pill to swallow.

"Momma, she's fast!" Miley exclaims as Annie laughs and tries to chase after her.

"Miley!" Annie says. "Miley! Catch you!"

"You're not gonna catch me!"

I can't help but smile as I watch these two bundles of pure joy with curly brown hair and warm eyes laughing and playing without a care in the world. I love the look on Avery's face as she, too, watches her girls roaming freely and happily in a safe space. They're protected here. And I will make sure that nothing bad ever happens to them, not while I'm around, anyway.

"Helen is a Godsend," Avery says as I return to the table with the coffee pot. The smell fills her gaze with sunshine while I pour her a cup, then one for myself. "She's so patient with Miley and Annie."

"The patience of a saint," Helen quips from the kitchen sink. "But honestly, your girls are way easier to handle than my nephews ever were. You should've seen me trying to keep Kellan and Fallon from hurting themselves when they were Miley's age."

"Oh, no, Aunt Helen, don't go there," I chuckle dryly.

"That bad, huh?" Avery laughs.

Helen turns the faucet off and turns around to look at us. "Honey, they were veritable handfuls, two devils with sweet smiles who always found a way to get away with the trouble they caused."

"We gave you that much trouble, huh?" I ask.

"I loved every second of it, and I wouldn't have had it any other way," she replies. "You see, Avery, you're supposed to let kids try things for themselves, to get messy and dirty, to understand the consequences of their actions. Their parents tried to keep them under control, on a tight leash. The boys were miserable. But whenever I had them staying over, I'd let them be themselves. Sure, it would get loud and ridiculous and I would spend days scrubbing the chocolate mousse from my kitchen curtains, but the boys were happy and free to just be kids. I dare say it is why they've become the

marvelous men they are today.”

Avery gives me a warm look. It’s making my heart beat a tad faster. “They are wonderful men, indeed.”

“We do the best we can with what we’re given,” I reply.

“So, what are your plans for the day?” Helen asks Avery. “I know I’m looking after the girls and that Fallon here, ever the gentleman, fixed your car.”

“Ah, yes,” Avery shoots back. “Well, I got a call back from one of the folks in town about a remodeling job. I’m gonna go over there today and talk to them about it. With a little bit of luck, we’ll strike a decent deal, and I’ll have my first client bagged by the end of the week.”

“That’s great news,” I say. “Did you get a name?”

“Oh, absolutely. Larry Freeman. He’s got a townhouse up in Hershey.”

“I know Larry,” I reply, smiling. “Good guy. He pays well too. So, don’t be afraid to ask what you know you’re worth.”

Avery seems surprised, but Helen is quick to pick up on the vibe and chimes in. “Avery, Fallon’s car service is one of the best in the county. He knows everybody. Heck, even I know the Freemans. Nice folks, friendly and kind. Working class, but they made a small fortune in cryptocurrency last year at the advice of one of their nephews, and now they have the kind of disposable income that they can invest in remodeling their home. It’s a good house, too, with good bones. I’m familiar with that whole block. They don’t build them like that anymore.”

“Don’t you need some helping hands?” I ask Avery. “It’s a big job from what Larry’s told me.”

“I can handle it,” she says. “I redid my whole apartment after Annie was born. Plaster, flooring, the whole shebang. Once I can afford a worker or two to help me out, I’ll set a budget aside for that. Until then, I’m fine with doing it on my own.”

I don’t really like the sound of that. If anything, I have quickly grown accustomed to making Avery happy, to making her life easier. The fact that she wants to do this alone doesn’t sit right with me, but she is an independent woman, and she deserves enough space to be who she is. I get that. If I can figure out a way to get her to stick around, I’ll have to keep my mouth shut and let Avery do what she thinks is right, no matter how badly I want to step in and help her.

“Besides, given how insanely good Helen’s homemade pizza is, I’m

gonna need a way to burn the extra calories off,” Avery adds, laughing lightly.

“There’s more than one way to burn off extra calories,” I shoot back, feeling the corner of my mouth twitching.

Avery’s cheeks flush pink as Helen smiles and takes the girls away. “Come on, little ladies, time for some finger painting and then a bath.”

The girls follow Helen, while I hand Avery the car keys and give her a broad smile. “You up for a test drive?”

“It’s still my old beat-up Citroën,” she says. “I doubt much has changed in that sense.”

“We can still go on a test drive. I’ve got a couple of hours to spare, and I know a nice spot out in the woods where we could relax for a bit,” I tell her.

My jeans tighten as I look forward to everything I’m going to do to her once we get to that spot. It’s nice and secluded, hidden beneath a thick crown of old pine trees. It’s cold during this time of the year, and it’ll be covered in snow, but given the kind of chemistry that Avery and I happen to share, things will be too hot between us for the cold to even matter.

“A nice spot, huh?” Avery smiles.

“You’ll love it.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will.”

She playfully snatches the keys from my hand and heads for the door. I like the kick in her step as she makes her way over to the foyer and I follow. She’s excited. Good, so am I. I can’t get enough of this woman. My brother and I shared her last night, and I’ve got a feeling she will continue to open up to us, more and more, until a bond is formed, one that nothing and no one can break.

Avery is unique. Kellan knows it. I know it. Luke suspects the same.

It’s a dangerous game I’m playing here, but I can’t help myself. She stumbled into our lives, and now I’m addicted.

AVERY

Fallon and Helen were right—Larry Freeman is a wonderful guy. He’s warm and kind and definitely generous. I followed the advice given to me and negotiated a slightly higher rate than what Larry originally offered. To my relief and delight, he agreed. His wife Marsha even threw in a tray of freshly baked cookies into the mix, something my girls will be very happy about when I get home. *Home*. Well, our temporary home, at least.

I’ve created a plan for Larry and Marsha’s place, taking on one room at a time. There isn’t any in-depth construction work that needs to be done since the original structure, walls, and piping are still in great shape. I’m changing the floors, though. I can do those on my own since the original hardwood is relatively easy to pull up. The kitchen and bathroom tiles are in excellent shape, as well, so I’m going to give them a good scrub and steam cleaning.

“We’re gonna be staying at our kids’ place in North Platte while you work here,” Larry says.

I’m spreading out plastic sheeting across the living room floor before I pop open the paint cans. I’ve already done the reparative plaster applications, and the primer has already set. “That’s great, I would’ve hated to have to move you guys around all the time,” I reply, smiling. “It’s also a good thing that you got all of the old furniture out of here, already.”

“Yeah, I figured you could use the room to move around and do your thing. We sold most of it off, and we had a yard sale for the smaller pieces. Everything else is in storage, but I expect Marsha will want to buy some new stuff once this remodel is done.”

I chuckle softly. “She has good taste, Larry. I hope you’ll trust her choices.”

“Oh, I absolutely do. She made a home of every house we’ve lived in,” he says. “I know she’ll make this one home again too.”

“I’m glad you have the opportunity to do this remodel,” I say to Larry.

“Thanks, me too. I listened to my kids’ advice when I invested in crypto, though I’ve gotta be honest, I didn’t think we’d hit a jackpot like the one we did. It’s all in the timing, I guess.”

“Well, I know who to reach out to when I’ve got some funds to invest,” I laugh lightly. “Maybe some of that good luck will rub off on me.”

“Or I’ll just put you in touch with my son. He’s way more advanced with these things,” he says, keys jingling in his hand. “Alright, then, I’m gonna leave you to it. The key copies are on the windowsill by the door for you to lock up when you’re done. I’ve deactivated the alarm system while you’re undertaking this project, so no need to worry about that. Thanks again, Avery, and should you need anything, please call me. I’ll be resting at my son’s home for most of the week.”

“Will do, Larry. And thank you again, too, for giving me this project. I won’t let you down.”

“Oh, I know you won’t. When the Cassidy boys vouch for someone, I know I can trust them,” he shoots back with a smile, then walks out.

I’m left standing speechless in the middle of the living room, in awe of what he just said. I can’t help but giggle as the door closes behind him, genuinely happy and eager to get started. Kellan and Fallon vouched for me. They’ve never seen any of my work—I had absolutely nothing in my portfolio along the lines of this type of project—yet they took it upon themselves to provide a guarantee on my behalf. I’m going to have to reward them when we’re together again. I know exactly how that reward will play out.

They’ve been so good to me. It’s all the motivation I need in order to do better for myself and my girls. I owe them my life.

I straighten my denim overalls and get to work. The preparation is always the most time consuming but I settle into a rhythm, taping off the corners and edges, as music blares in my ears. I’m running smoothly at full speed, evenly distributing the paint after cutting in and carefully painting the smaller spaces. Two hours later, I’m looking at one full coat of soft beige already drying. It’ll be ready for the second coat by dinnertime, which is perfect because I will then leave it to dry overnight.

My phone buzzes. I reach into the chest pocket of my overalls, take my

earphones off and check the screen. A private number. A familiar uneasiness sets in as I answer. “Hello?”

Nothing.

“Hello?” Once again there’s no response. It’s making my stomach churn. The blood starts rushing to my head as I look at the screen once more. The call is still active, but there’s still nobody speaking. I turn the volume up and hear breathing the other end of the line.

Almost immediately, my heart jumps as the worst-case scenario slams into me and I end the call. I turn the phone off with trembling hands and put it back into my chest pocket. I’m shaking like a leaf, and all I can think about is that it’s Daniel. This is a new number. How could he have gotten it? Only two people outside the house have it—my lawyer, and Larry Freeman. That’s it. I’ve kept all of my other conversations with potential clients via email.

I’m confident my lawyer wouldn’t give my new number out to anyone, especially not to the man who’s trying to hurt me or worse. This doesn’t make sense.

Maybe it’s a spam call; the number was listed somewhere else, and they’re still trying to reach out to whoever had it registered to their name. Besides, this number was assigned under the fake identity that Kellan and his buddy provided for me. No, it can’t be Daniel. I can’t imagine how he would be able to track me down to this number. No. I shake my head, rejecting the idea altogether. I can’t allow myself to even consider it as a possibility because that would mean that nowhere is safe for my daughters.

The panic threatens to set in, so I take a few deep breaths and decide to work through the rest of the day with my phone off. Miley and Annie are with Helen back at the mansion, so I don’t need to worry about them. The guys know where I’m at, so if something were to happen, they know where to find me, not to mention, I know they put a guard outside in a car on the street. I need to put this concern out of my mind and focus on my job. I need the money, and I need the distraction.

The hours go by in peace and quiet. Well, not really quiet since I’ve got the music playing at full volume in my earphones. But tranquil enough to keep me focused and busy. I’m halfway through the second coat when I notice it’s already dark outside. The evening has set, so I check my watch. It’s almost six. I keep forgetting it’s winter, despite the biting cold that snaps at me whenever I open the window to let some fresh air into the living room. The days are shorter.

I used to find peace in the silence of the night. I don't feel that way anymore. If anything, the darkness looming has my senses sharper, my fight-or-flight instincts kicking in at the slightest sound or disruption.

Once the third wall is done, I give myself a moment to get a drink of water. I haven't turned the phone back on yet. The door is locked, all the windows shut. Paranoia has a way of getting to me, though not without reason. I wonder how my girls are doing, but I'm certain they must be alright with Helen. That woman watches them like a hawk. She must've been a Rottweiler in a past life; I've rarely seen anyone as protective and as attentive as she is. And since Helen did have a hand in raising the Cassidy twins, I'm not surprised that Kellan and Fallon turned out to be so strong and valiant. Men like them are hard to come by.

A knock on the door startles me. My heart jumps, every muscle in my body becoming taut and tense. A second knock. The third one signals impatience, and I become worried. I'm already thinking about making my way out of here through the back door.

"Open up, Avery, it's me!" Luke calls out.

Like an instant tranquilizer, his voice fills my soul, and I suddenly relax. The tension flies out of me, and I'm left catching my breath as I walk over to the door.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, when my eyes meet his.

He stands tall and darkened with concern in the doorway. His suit is neatly tailored for his muscular figure, this particular shade of gray bringing out the colder tone of his blue eyes. His blonde hair is pulled back in its usual, sleek manbun, and my fingers tingle yet again as my gaze settles on his short, sand-colored beard. But it's the muscle ticking furiously in his jaw that has my pulse racing again. He's angry.

"What the hell, Avery? Your phone is off," he snaps. "I've been trying to reach you for the past couple of hours."

Panic hits me like a freight train. "Is everything okay? Are my girls safe?"

I would never forgive myself if something happened to them and I had my phone off. I knew they were in Helen's care, and there goes my mind again, the rampage of guilty thoughts begins. Dammit, I'm shaking like a leaf.

"What? No, they're fine. I promised you'd all be safe with us," Luke says. "But I can't fucking protect you if I can't reach you. Why did you turn your phone off?"

“I’m sorry. I was... it must’ve run out of battery. I didn’t notice,” I reply, not sure whether I should tell him the truth. It really could’ve been just a spam call. Logically, it doesn’t make sense that Daniel was able to find my number. If I tell Luke about it, he’d tap and trace every number that called me since I first activated the line, and it could turn out to be a complete waste of time and resources. The last thing I want is for this wonderful man to spend even more time and money on my paranoid ass. “I’m sorry, Luke, I got carried away with the work here.”

“It’s okay but damn, I was worried,” he sighs. I can tell he’s gradually relaxing, his eyes never leaving mine. “So I figured I’d just come over and check up on you.”

“You’re so kind,” I say, smiling softly. “You didn’t have to come all the way over. I mean, you have a guard outside already.”

“Of course I did,” he steps closer, and it’s got my heart skipping beats again. There is something about this man that sends my senses into a frenzied joyride whenever I’m near him. Something I can’t control. I’ve already been intimate with his best friends and business partners. What the hell am I doing swooning over him, too? I must be losing my mind. “I care about you, Avery. And I can’t fucking sit still if I don’t know what’s going on with you.”

“Luke...”

“I mean it. I don’t know how or why or when in such a short span of time, but I do care about you, and I need to know you’re safe at all times. Do you understand?”

I nod slowly, fighting a sudden urge to wrap my arms around his neck. I feel so tiny standing before him, splashes of paint already dry on my overalls. He takes another step forward, a shadow looming over his eyes. My lips part slowly. I can’t help myself. “I understand.”

“Dammit, Avery,” Luke kisses me.

I’m stunned, his lips crushing mine as I surrender. It’s too easy, too natural. The fires burn through me, the orange blaze consuming everything in its path. He cups my chin, his fingertips registering the softness of my skin as his tongue plays with mine. I moan softly and pull back, breathless and alive. “Oh, God, Luke, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” he says, shaking his head and pulling farther away. “I should’ve known it wouldn’t work. You were kind enough to tell me you could see past the prosthetic, but we should both be honest about this—”

“What? No!” I reply, suddenly aware of what he’s thinking, obviously the complete opposite of my own thoughts. I’m wracked with guilt that Luke doesn’t know what happened with Kellan and Fallon. The realization that Luke feels inadequate because of his leg makes me feel even worse. “Luke, no,” I say and put my arms around his neck, pulling him close to me again.

He freezes, giving me a confused look, but I refuse to yield and kiss him. I’m hungry for him. I taste his lips, the lemony sweetness of his mouth, our tongues quick to return to a lazy, playful dance. He grunts harshly and closes his arms around my waist, holding me tight against his hard body. My flesh feels soft, like jelly melting over his rippling muscles. I’m dissolving in his embrace as he deepens the kiss.

“I want you,” I tell him between ragged breaths. “It’s not the leg, I promise.” I can’t stop. I claim his mouth, and he gladly gives me everything.

He’s gentle, firm in his hold, but gentle. Controlled. Calm. Hard as a fucking rock, judging by the throbbing erection currently nudging my belly, but calm and steady in his gestures, while I’m hungrier and greedy for more. I’m the one trailing kisses down the side of his neck, letting my tongue draw invisible lines along his skin before I playfully nip it.

Luke hisses and digs his fingers into my hips. He nibbles on my earlobe and runs his fingers through my hair as he pushes me back against the wall. I’ve lost all control as liquid heat pools between my legs. My hands roam up and down over his torso, my fingers desperately searching for the buttons of his white shirt. There is too much fabric between us. I need skin on skin.

“Avery, you’re driving me crazy,” he whispers, his cheek pressed into mine while his thigh slips between my legs. I cup his erection with one hand, and squeeze firmly, feeling it twitch in my grip. I want him inside me.

“I can’t help myself,” I whisper.

His hand comes up as his tongue slips past my lips. He fondles my breast, fingers pinching the nipple. It perks under his touch, poking through the cotton of my tee and the bra that’s underneath. His other hand finds the side buttons of my overalls as we devour each other. My heart is thumping in my chest, my core so hot, it feels like it could melt. He manages to get past the buttons and my overalls fall to the floor between us. His thigh moves back an inch, but only to make way for his fingers.

Deftly slipping down my belly and under my panties, I gasp when he finds me burning up and soaked for him. “Fucking hell, Avery,” Luke says, blue fires raging in his eyes as he takes a moment to look at me. “I need

you...”

“I.... Oh my God.” I mumble, already unraveling and close to a sharp edge as his fingers work me into a fast-building orgasm. He’s different from Kellan and Fallon. He’s technical. Each movement is precisely focused, treating my clit like the most sensitive thing in the world. Every circular motion sends electrical jolts through my body. “Oh, Luke...”

“I’ve never felt this way before. What are you doing to me, woman?”

Kellan and Fallon pop into my head again. *Guilt, guilt, guilt.* What would they say if they saw us like this? I have to stop. I don’t know how, but I need to pull myself together and stop this. It’s too much. Luke doesn’t deserve this. The twins don’t deserve this, either. Finally, somehow, I manage to gently push Luke back long enough for me to clench my pussy back into a calmer state, for my breath to slow down and recover.

“I’m so sorry,” I say to him. “It’s not you, I promise it’s not you.”

Luke stares at me for a moment, and I can’t move. I’m ashamed, my cheeks as hot as lava as I struggle to hold his gaze. He nods slowly, his features softening as he takes a couple steps back. I feel sick, especially since I just told him that his leg wasn’t an issue, having made it clear that I wanted this. Hell, I wanted him to turn me around, bend me over, and fuck me senseless.

“I’ll wait for you in my car,” he says, his voice calm and gentle. “I’ll escort you back to the house, make sure you’re safe.”

“You don’t have to,” I reply. “I still have another wall to cover.”

“It’s okay. I’ll wait. I need to make sure you’re okay until we get home,” he says. “Don’t worry about a thing, Avery. It’s okay. I’ll wait.” His blue eyes stare into mine.

I think there’s a double entendre there that I’m supposed to pick up on, but I’m not sure I understand its meaning. I’m already involved with Kellan and Fallon. I can’t possibly entertain a relationship of any kind with Luke too. That would be shameless and preposterous, and he deserves so much more, so much better than this.

He leaves me to work, and I get busy with the fourth wall as I wait for the arousal to subside. It’s a stubborn kind of excitement, though. An hour later, I’m still dripping wet and aching for this man, even as I put the lids back on the paint cans and turn the lights off. It’ll be dry in the morning.

Wish I could say the same for me.

EVERY

I try to get some shuteye after I put my girls to bed but find myself staring at the ceiling of my bedroom instead. Outside, it's snowing, giant white clusters falling slowly onto the already white ground, and it reminds me of gazing at a Christmas postcard. The garden lights are on, their warm amber hue glazing the snow in a soft shimmer. There isn't a soul out there. Even the night guards are inside, doing their rounds through the building every other hour or so. With such a top-notch security system in place, they don't need to do much more than that.

Since turning my phone back on, there haven't been any new calls from that unknown number. No new voicemails, either, which makes me believe that it more than likely was a spam call or wrong number. I freaked out over nothing. But it's not the unknown number that's got me on edge. It's the heat still simmering in my belly because I can't get Luke out of my head. His touch, his kisses, the way I melted instantly at his touch. That man could be dangerous in a good way if I allow myself to get too close.

Maybe a midnight snack will calm me down.

I make my way into the hall, barefoot and not bothering to cover myself with a robe. I'm wearing a plain pink cotton nightgown that reaches my knees, so it's not like I could be accused of indecent exposure. Besides, the night guards generally stay on the business side of the mansion with their rounds, leaving the residential wing in the care of the alarm system and the guys. They must be sleeping at this hour. I relish the quiet as I descend the stairs.

Luke was so kind and understanding earlier. He waited for me outside just like he promised, and once I was done with the Freemans' house and

safely inside my car, he followed me back to the mansion, keeping a reasonable distance but never letting another car get between us. He joined me and the girls for dinner, and we talked and laughed like nothing happened. But we both knew something had. And as much as I'm still trying to fight it, I have to admit, I want him so badly it's making my blood boil.

"Luke," I breathe, surprised, as I find him in the kitchen by one of the windows, a cup of tea in his hand.

He glances my way, and I can see the tension all over his face. "What are you doing up at this hour?" he asks, his voice low.

"Couldn't sleep," I reply. "Figured a glass of warm milk might help."

"Is something wrong?"

I could tell him the truth and make everything a thousand times worse. Or I could just pour myself a glass of milk and take it upstairs. I'll drink it cold if it means spending fewer minutes in the presence of a man who rattles my senses into oblivion. "No, I'm okay. Just couldn't sleep," I murmur, heading for the fridge.

"You don't need to lie to me," Luke says and sets the cup on a nearby counter.

As he does, I notice he's wearing a pair of boxer shorts made of dark blue silk. His prosthetic is in place, and while the initial view surprises me, I quickly become accustomed to his full figure. He notices me staring, and for a second, I'm afraid he might leave. It must be hard for him to be his true self around new people. I can't let Luke leave the kitchen thinking I find him less attractive now. I can't.

So, I give him a delicate smile. "You look pretty hot in silk undies."

"That's the best compliment I've had today," Luke chuckles softly. "Talk to me, Avery, what's going on with you? You were rattled when I found you at the Freemans."

"It's nothing, I promise. And I also promise I will tell you if nothing becomes something. You have to understand, Luke, I'm hiding from a man who almost killed me. At this point, anything can rattle me or feel like a threat if I let my fears take over. But my daughters need me focused and rational, so I'm trying my best to regulate my own nervous system in a way that doesn't affect them."

Luke smiles as he comes over. "You're a remarkable woman, you know that?"

"I'm but a fool who woke up," I scoff.

He runs his fingers through my hair when he reaches me. “You’re a warrior who’s been under an evil spell for far too long,” he whispers.

Our eyes meet, and everything around us disappears. The snow falling softly outside. The dim lighting of the kitchen. The shadows of the past and the uncertainty of the future. Everything vanishes, and all I can see is this incredible man towering over me. The heat returns to my loins with a fiery vengeance. I know exactly where this is going yet I can’t find the strength to stop it this time around. I don’t want to.

“Luke, we shouldn’t...” I say, but my hands are already up, palms splayed across his rock-hard chest.

My fingertips glimmer with delight as they register every inch of skin stretching over hard muscles, every short curl of blonde hair that tickles me when I touch him, every atom of this man’s delicious body.

“We shouldn’t, but who gives a damn?” Luke replies and kisses me—hard.

He’s hungry this time. And so am I. The surrender is immediate. Screw the past, screw the future. I only want this moment, right now, right here with him. No one’s around, and we are free to do what we are both desperate for. I kiss him back with just as much hunger, our tongues wrestling as our hands are left to roam freely.

The silence is almost deafening, but I find solace in the drumming of his heart, in the sharp inhaled breaths we each take whenever we touch. I explore the muscles running smoothly down his abs, scanning the tattoos with brief glances as Luke kisses my neck and shoulder. I don’t even register the moment when my nightgown hits the floor, but I’m quickly reminded that I didn’t bother to put any panties on.

Luke takes his sweet time with my breasts first, massaging them then squeezing and pinching my nipples before he closes his lips around each to kiss, lick, and suckle. I gasp and push my chest forward, giving him mouthfuls of me while my fingers dig into his hips. I love these lateral dips of his, especially as the curves allow my fingers to slip beneath the silk boxers. Soon enough, he’s naked, his cock huge and erect, ready for me.

“Avery, we can’t stop this anymore,” he says, looking deep into my eyes as he pushes me against the counter island.

“I don’t want it to stop...”

He gets down on his knees, firmly gripping my knees and prompting me to spread my legs for him. I gasp, my breath uneven and my blood simmering

as I watch him watching me, while he slides his tongue between my wet folds.

“You taste like heaven, baby,” Luke whispers, his blue eyes almost black with desire.

He tastes me at first, licking and kissing my flesh, but then he shifts his focus on my clit. He suckles harder and harder, the pressure building up. I can feel myself clenching as he slips his fingers inside. I tighten myself, and he curls them upward, the thrusts going deeper and faster while his tongue applies ruthless teasing against my swollen nub.

I moan and quiver as I get closer to the edge. I shove my hands into his long, blonde hair, now loose and curly and begging for my fingers to get tangled in it. I hold him down and in place as he eats my pussy and sends me spiraling through a shattering orgasm. “Oh, God...” I am shaken to the core as I ride the waves of ruthless pleasure surging through me.

Luke drinks me, licking every drop until my pussy is primed and ready for more.

My heart has unraveled, and my body is his for the taking.

“Taste yourself,” he says as he comes up and kisses me.

I taste myself on his lips. I could get drunk on this. But Luke is nowhere near done with me. This beautiful, strong man hoists me up and sets me on the island, quick to get between my legs. I lay on my back, and he takes hold of my breasts as he enters me. “Oh, fuck,” I whimper, as I’m stretched beyond belief.

His cock is perfect. Thick and big, opening me up and filling me in the best way possible.

“Touch yourself,” Luke says. “I wanna feel you come with me inside you, Avery.”

I work on my tender clit as Luke starts fucking me deep and hard. Each thrust has my breasts bouncing, but he holds on, keeping me pinned against the cold countertop as he fills me to the brim. I listen to his ragged breathing, I watch his eyes wander up and down my body as he takes the whole view in. I’ve completely surrendered to him, and I’m falling apart.

“Deeper, baby, please,” I moan as I lock my legs around his waist.

He feels so good, I don’t want him to stop. It’s as if our very souls are melding together as he pumps me full of him, fucking me deep. He leans closer and grabs me by the back of the neck, but his left hand stays over my breast, squeezing harder with every thrust. We kiss, and I flick my clit faster,

applying more pressure as I feel the orgasm coming.

Luke covers my mouth with his when he feels me tightening around him. I brace for the climax as he spears me over and over, harder and deeper until I clench and feel the explosion reverberating through my body. I hear his grunts of pleasure as he comes and fills me with his seed. We're riding the wave in shameless silence, careful so no one can hear us screwing on the kitchen island.

It's fucking heaven, and I can barely hold myself together.

The threads of me run loose as I raise my hips to welcome each push, squeezing his cock dry. "Oh, Luke," I whisper, colors bursting before my eyes as he gives me everything he's got.

"You're fucking perfect," he whispers in my ear.

As amazing as it was, I can't bring myself to fully enjoy it. Once the heat of the moment passes, and the sweetness of him settles in the pit of my stomach, reality returns with its shameful light and I'm reminded of who I am, where I am, and what has just transpired.

Luke pulls back and tries to help me sit up. "No, I can't," I manage, tears welling in my eyes.

It's too much. I shouldn't have done this.

I don't know how I manage to slide off the table, but I do. I slip the nightgown back on as Luke watches me with a quiet mixture of confusion and disbelief. I can't even look at him, my throat closing up with shame. What will Kellan and Fallon think?

"Avery."

"No, I can't. I'm so sorry, Luke. Good night."

I run out of the kitchen, damn near tripping at the bottom of the stairs. Moments later, I'm in my bathroom, crying under the hot, running water of the shower, knees at my chest and heart beating way too hard. I feel awful.

It was beautiful. It was tender and passionate. It was everything I'd imagined it would be. Luke is just as good as Kellan and Fallon. But I can't have them all. It's not fair to any of them. It's not fair to me, either. This was a terrible mistake.

LUKE

It's been two days since that incredible night.

Two days since I've been unable to get Avery out of my mind. I knew deep down from the moment I met her that she would have a lasting impact on me. I could see it in her eyes. It was written all over her beautiful curves. It was ingrained in each blonde strand and in the specks of gold lost in her blue eyes. It came off her like a scent, the kind of scent that drives a man to the kind of madness he'd never wish to heal from.

I shouldn't be feeling this way. It's wrong. It'll end in misery. I know that, too.

But I'm already losing control.

"She hasn't been out of her room much," I tell Kellan and Fallon.

We're having coffee in the study on the ground floor. We were supposed to go over the business aspects of our day, but the three of us are clearly and irrevocably enthralled by this woman and her lovely little girls. Our lives have changed, and I only hope they've changed for the better. They will leave, eventually, and this house will feel bland and empty in their absence. But maybe, just maybe, things will work out differently. It's wishful thinking but it's not entirely impossible.

"Yeah, Helen told us. She sticks to the Freeman place and with the girls," Kellan sighs deeply.

"Have you seen her since the other night?" Fallon asks me.

I shake my head. "She doesn't know we've shared women before," I tell him. "She's terrified and ashamed. But she couldn't help herself. It was sublime."

"I don't want to say that Avery could be the one," Kellan begins, "though

we could at least entertain the possibility. She ticks every box.”

“She’s taking this hard.”

Fallon raises an eyebrow, staring at the coffee in his mug. “We should talk to her and ease her mind. She’s been through the grinder already with that prick of an ex-husband of hers. We’re supposed to give her peace and solace, make her feel safe.”

“You’re right,” Kellan concedes. “We’ll definitely need to sit her down and soon. The last thing I want is to drive her away.”

“She can’t go anywhere, not while Daniel is still on the loose,” I remind him. “And speaking of, we haven’t had much luck finding him yet. Those federal feeds haven’t yielded much, though my guys in computer forensics are still combing through the footage.”

“The BOLO hasn’t gotten us anywhere either,” Kellan says. “It’s fine. He’s alive and kicking and itching for revenge. It’s only a matter of time before he makes a mistake. The forensic psychologist said that much. Avery knocked him down a peg when she hit him and fled. His narcissistic ego can’t take the humiliation. He is compelled to come looking for her.”

“Yeah, and that’s what worries me. There are plenty of us, yes, and the mansion is highly secure. I just want to make sure we catch the fucker before he gets anywhere even remotely close to Avery and the girls again. They’ve had enough trauma to last them a lifetime.”

Fallon exhales sharply. “We should take her out to dinner. If we’re gonna have... you know, the talk about us.”

“I don’t know how she’ll take it,” Kellan expresses his concern. “I am well aware that we absolutely have to broach the topic with her, but I have to admit, I’m worried it’ll freak her out.”

“Well, you two shared her already,” I tell them. “So, it’s not the most foreign of territories for her. We just need to ease her in. I’m sure it’ll soothe her conscience once she understands how we operate. It’s not like this sort of relationship just pops up frequently in society. We do need to let her know it’s okay. That it’s what we want.”

The sound of rushed footsteps and girly cheers coming down the stairs has the three of us sitting up straight and ending the conversation as Annie and Miley clumsily rush into the study to greet us. Helen is close behind them, wearing her usual fancy emerald-green pantsuit and cream boots. Wanting some normalcy, Avery found a center that offered preschool and kindergarten and enrolled the girls. Helen is driving the little angels there

today.

“Morning, Kel-lan!” Annie coos as she hugs his knee.

Kellan laughs and takes her in his arms, the two of them huddled in the plush armchair. I think he’s definitely Annie’s favorite. “Good morning, sunshine. How’d you sleep?” he asks.

“Like a baby,” Miley replies on her sister’s behalf as she goes over to Fallon. “Can I have a hug?”

“You want a hug from me?” Fallon lights up.

I’m constantly amazed by how quickly we’re reduced to gooey, shiny puddles of love whenever we’re around these little girls. They are the spitting image of their mother—colorful, funny, and energetic, just like her—innocent souls who deserve safety and nurturing and all the care in the world. I am compelled to keep them happy and well for the rest of their lives, no matter what happens between Avery and us going forward. My honor won’t allow for less.

“The girls are particularly fond of you guys today because they heard we’re organizing a weekend trip to the Winter Wonderland Fair up in Hershey,” Helen laughs. “I just told them, and they insisted to come down here and thank you.”

“Tank you, Kel-lan!” Annie says.

“You’re most welcome, honey,” Kellan laughs, melting over her.

“And thank you, Fallon, thank you, Luke,” Miley says, moving away from Fallon to come over and give me a hug as well.

I let her wrap her tender arms around my neck, careful to set my coffee mug on the side table next to my chair first. “It’s my pleasure, Miley. We’re gonna have a lot of fun, I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, but Momma said we can’t eat too much candy,” Miley pouts.

“Too much doesn’t mean none at all,” I reply. “We’ll get some to bring home, too. Keep the good stuff in storage.”

Miley leans in, as if to conspire against her mother. “Just don’t tell her.”

I play along and lean in as well. “It’ll be our secret. Where’s Momma now?”

She looks sad for a moment. “Tired. She sleeps a lot.”

“Girls why don’t you finish getting your snowsuits and boots on then wait for me by the door?” Helen says. Miley gives me one more squeeze before taking her little sister’s hand and leaving the study.

“You three should try to get her out of the house soon,” Helen states after

the girls are gone. “While I’m glad Avery agreed to let them go to school while they stay here, I do worry it’ll leave her even less grounded.”

I give her a curious look. “You saw her earlier, right?”

“Yes.”

“How did she seem?” I ask.

“Exhausted. Brooding. On edge. Whenever the phone rings, she’s easily startled. I don’t think she’s been sleeping well, and she has barely touched any food over the past couple of days. I don’t want the girls to worry about her, but it appears they already are,” Helen replies.

Kellan, Fallon and I exchange knowing glances. We know we’re definitely catching feelings, and we absolutely have to have the talk with Avery. She needs us, now more than ever, and we’ve been walking on eggshells around her in order not to scare her off. It’s time for us to give her an introduction to who we really are.

I’m not sure how she will react, but I do know I can’t get enough of her. I need more. So much more, and soon.

AVERY

I'm not proud of how I've been behaving over the past couple of days but given everything that I've had to shoulder for so long, I'm trying to cut myself some slack for not being able to deal with this whole Luke, Fallon, and Kellan situation. The truth is, I want all three in equal measure, but I know it's not possible. While I'm not shocked that the Cassidy twins are fine with sharing a woman, I can't see them cutting Luke into the combination.

Perhaps I would've been better off if I'd just stuck to my lane, remodeling and looking after my girls, rebuilding my life, and expressing my gratitude to the men who rescued us from the side of a snowy road. But it's too late for that. I'm in deep already, and I need to make amends. I'm not sure how, but the guys won't tolerate me avoiding them for much longer. I am still living in their home after all. I will have to own up to what I've done. And if they decide they need me to move out, I'll use the Freemans' payments to get myself a studio apartment here in North Platte until I can afford something better.

In the meantime, I'll keep my focus on work. The Freemans' townhouse is coming along and then some. The living room and two of the three bedrooms are done, leaving one bedroom along with the hallways left to paint. I'm hoping to finish tonight so I can spend some time with my girls and go to bed early. I'm exhausted on so many levels.

I check my phone then set it down before I get started on a second coat of paint. There haven't been any other strange calls in the past few days, but I am still on edge. It'll probably be a while before I will be able to really get myself out of this anxious state. The music is blaring in my headphones, and for the better part of a minute, I'm completely disconnected from the world.

But my phone rings, and I'm brought back to reality yet again.

"Dammit," I curse under my breath. I need to stop doing this. I check the screen and breathe a sigh of relief when I see Kellan's name, but then I remember I've been actively avoiding him and his brother. "Hey, Kellan, what's up?"

"Avery, I know you're busy, but we were all hoping we could have dinner tonight," he says.

His voice sounds calm, yet there is an underlying tension I can't ignore.

"Yes, I would love to have dinner with you," I tell him, trying to sound as soft as I can, given the knot forming in my throat. "Is everything okay?"

"Don't worry about a thing," he says. "What time will you be done with the Freemans' place?"

"Eight-ish."

"Alright, I'll text you the address to the restaurant, okay?"

"Okay." So much for going home to the girls and getting to bed early.

I finish around seven and in an honorable fashion. The third bedroom and the hallways are done, with the second coats left to dry overnight. To my relief, I find a couple of blouses, clean jeans, and boots in the trunk of my car. The universe is smiling down upon me, so I take advantage of the Freemans' place being empty and use their shower for a quick refresh.

Once I'm showered, I dress in jeans and a turquoise blue top matched with a pair of simple black boots. I bring my bag back to the car and give myself a minute to mentally prepare for the date night ahead. I'm nervous. It's dark outside, and snow covers every single inch of the street. The townhouses are capped white on their slated rooftops, and the hedges look as though they're adorned with powdered sugar under the warm glow of the streetlamps.

It's nice and quiet. It's the kind of town I'd like to settle in, if only I could have some peace of mind. As long as Daniel is still a free man, I can't even dream about finding a home anywhere in the world where I wouldn't be looking over my shoulder all the damn time. I take a deep breath, the cold winter air filling my lungs and clearing my mind for a few seconds.

A car rolls by. It's an old sedan, but it's the man in the driver's seat that has my attention. I can only see the profile, but my mind is already ablaze and my blood rushes downward. He looks strangely familiar. Blonde-bleached hair, glasses, the nose. But the clothes don't make sense. The plaid shirt, the unkempt stubble. No, it can't be him. It's not him. It's not his car,

either.

“Sally, get back here!” a woman calls out.

I turn my head to see a young mother running after her toddler down the sidewalk. The little one is wrapped in winter clothes, the thick kind of jacket filled with goose-down, making Sally look like a small, plush ball as she tries to run through the snow. She coos and giggles then slips, inadvertently falling face first into the white, icy blanket. Her cheeks are red, and she’s laughing hysterically by the time her mother reaches her. Thankfully, she appears to be unharmed from the fall.

I’m tempted to smile, but then I see the sedan rolling farther ahead.

It couldn’t have been Daniel. No, it wasn’t him. It’s my mind playing tricks again, just like it did back at the pub. I see him everywhere because I’m terrified of him. If only the authorities could find him and rid me of this constant uneasiness. Shaking the thoughts away, I get behind the wheel and brace myself for the evening ahead.

EVERY

Chez Robert is a lovely French-American diner close to the North Platte City Hall building. It's wedged between a coffee shop and a fashion boutique, but it stands out with its swirling letters hung above the striped awnings. I imagine they have cute, cafe-style tables and chairs ready in the summer for people to enjoy their food and drinks on the sidewalk, just like they would in Paris. It's not that crowded at this hour surprisingly, then again, Christmas is just around the corner, and most folks are trying to get as much work done as they can before the holidays.

I enter the restaurant and scan the place, quickly spotting Kellan, Fallon, and Luke.

The three of them look so handsome, it's got my engines roaring in all the wrong ways. Clad in smart, dark-colored shirts and finely tailored black pants, they seem brilliantly prepared for me in ways I wasn't expecting. All I can do is smile softly and walk over to their table, my heart wedged in my throat and thumping like a furious drum.

"Hey, guys," I manage upon reaching them and sitting down.

Luke gives me a wink. He doesn't seem angry or upset. If anything, he leans into the back of his chair, seeming downright relaxed and at ease. It does make me feel better, but it doesn't do anything to wash away the guilt I've been dealing with over the past couple of days. Fallon's eyes never leave me, his expression dark and firm. I'm hoping desperately to get through this dinner.

The waiter brings menus over, and I try to focus on the laminated pages to the best of my abilities, but the way Kellan keeps smiling at me has my temperature spiking. It's getting harder for me to breathe, so I take a sip of

water and exhale sharply. “So... what’s up?” I ask.

“Maybe it’s best if we address the elephant in the room, first,” Kellan chuckles. “Avery, you need to stop worrying about us, stop feeling guilty.”

“What do you mean?” I reply, though I think it’s obvious my cheeks are burning red with shame.

“We know about you and Luke,” he says. “And I just wanna say—”

“I am so sorry!” I blurt out, but he raises a hand to politely silence me.

“Hold on, let me finish,” he says. “Avery, it’s okay. It’s absolutely okay, and it’s actually a really good thing that you and Luke hit it off the way you did. I’m glad, and so is Fallon.”

I’m speechless. I stare at them with a mixture of confusion and disbelief while they exchange knowing glances and half-smiles. I feel like I’m on the outside looking in, unable to make a lick of sense of this whole thing.

“We’ve shared women before,” Kellan says while Fallon and Luke watch me closely. “Never a woman like you, but my brother and my best friend have always been a part of my life. Of every aspect of my life. We’re not like other guys, Avery. We’ve shared a deep bond since we were teenagers, and that bond only strengthened when we served together. The military and our experiences abroad have brought us closer and tighter. We each have our own lives and careers, but we also share a house, a lucrative business, and any woman who is bold enough to welcome the three of us.”

“Whoa,” I murmur, feeling my eyes widen with shock.

Luke smiles warmly. “We didn’t want to approach you this way from the beginning because we didn’t know what your limits were. On top of that, you’re coming out of a traumatic relationship and you’re still healing from the damage caused by that. We didn’t want to overwhelm you in any way, so we agreed to let everything happen naturally. You can’t deny the attraction that exists between us, can you, Avery?”

“No...”

“You don’t have to feel guilty or ashamed for wanting to be with the three of us,” he says. “We’re not the jealous types. We share and we give ourselves willingly to a woman who is happy to be with us. And if we’re able to please you, to protect you, and to give you everything you need and deserve at the same time, then all the better.”

“It’s why I wanted us to meet tonight. The four of us,” Kellan adds. “We like you, Avery. All three of us. We like you and we want you in our lives for as long as you’re willing and open to it. If you don’t want this to move

forward, if you don't want to explore things further, it's okay. It's not a problem. You have complete control and the power of consent here. We will understand, no matter what."

"But it doesn't change how we feel about you," Fallon interjects. "Nor does it change the fact that while you are under our roof, you are protected and cherished and supported in whatever you decide to do."

"I... I don't know what to say," I tell them, and I really don't.

My heart says yes. My body says yes. Hell, even my brain wants to jump into it. But I've learned my share of hard lessons over the years, and I know that I carry terrible ghosts with me. On the other hand, what we've been doing has been strictly of a physical nature. The pleasure is undeniable. The way I feel when I'm with them is undeniable. This is hedonism at its finest, and for the longest time, I have denied myself everything solely for the purpose of appeasing a man who was impossible to please in the first place.

Maybe this is my opportunity to try something different. Crazy, but different. Maybe this is my chance to fully step out of my comfort zone and explore what exists beyond. These three men are extraordinary in every possible sense. Physical attraction aside, they are strong-willed, brave, protective by nature, and determined to hold space for me in this. They support me and they have welcomed me and my girls with arms wide open.

"Say you'll give it a try," Kellan says. He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. The touch alone is enough to send playful shivers trickling down my spine. "No strings attached, mind you. No specific commitment. But we'd like to be with you, Avery. The three of us. For as long as you'll have us."

"And like we've already said, whatever you decide, whatever you desire, we will respect that," Fallon adds.

Luke nods at the waiter, who makes his way over.

"Ready to order?" the young man with big, green eyes and a flat smile asks.

"I think so, yes," Luke replies, then looks at us. Once the order is jotted down, the waiter returns with a bottle of red wine and four glasses. I patiently and quietly wait for him to finish pouring, while the guys keep their eyes on me. Once the waiter is gone, Fallon speaks first.

"So, what do you think, Avery?"

"Yes. I'm willing to give this a try and see where it leads. The truth is, I like each of you, that much is obvious. I've never done something like this

before though, so I'm not sure what to do next."

Luke leans in and plants a kiss on my cheek. "You just relax, enjoy the wine and dinner, and then we'll all go home and take things to the next level, if you're ready."

"Are you ready?" Kellan asks me.

I nod slowly.

Ready? I am dripping wet, my core wound tight, every atom in my body screaming yes, over and over until I can't hear anything else. The girls are in Helen's care for the rest of the night. My life has changed for the better since Kellan rescued me from the side of that road. And despite the snow falling outside, there's a fire burning sweetly inside my chest, the kind of fire that only these three men can fully extinguish.

EVERY

We spend the rest of our dinner talking and laughing, leaving the awkwardness of the earlier conversation far behind. I apologize for my tendency to withdraw when I feel uneasy or uncomfortable, guilty or ashamed, and they all assure me that it's okay, that they never took it personally. It made sense, and they understood. It was important to them that we have this conversation tonight.

The food is great, and the wine goes down way too easily.

I lean into Fallon as we walk out of the restaurant. Kellan takes my car, while I climb into the backseat of Fallon's SUV. Given the ongoing snowfall, we drive carefully back to the mansion, keeping the conversation to a minimum. Truth be told, the sexual tension between us is so thick and palpable, it makes it hard for me to even talk.

Once we get home, I go and check in on my girls who are sleeping peacefully. I kiss them each goodnight before heading back downstairs to meet the guys in the living room.

After grabbing a bottle of Bordeaux he fished out of the wine cellar earlier particularly for the occasion, Luke takes us upstairs to his room. "I had a feeling you'd say yes," he quips as he pulls the cork out and lets the wine breathe for a minute.

"Well, we were *hoping* you'd say yes," Kellan adds with a wink.

Fallon fetches four glasses from the kitchen, then closes and locks the door to Luke's room behind him. The four of us sit in heavy but delicious silence as we sip our wine, constantly stealing glances at one another. Outside, the winter storm rages on, a fierce wind blowing against the tall windows. Inside, however, the room temperature rises with each minute that

passes.

“How are you feeling?” Luke asks, settled by the window.

Fallon stands by the bed, glass in hand as he licks his lower lip. Kellan comes closer, having left his glass on the side table by the door. I glance around, briefly submerged in the deep reds of the room—the wallpaper, the furniture, and even the fabrics carry a shade of burgundy that feels sensual and sexy. It’s warm and soft, yet heavy and heady at the same time. It’s different from what I’d imagined Luke’s room would be like, but I like it.

“I’m good. Comfortable,” I reply, putting my glass down as well.

“Wonderful,” Kellan says and kisses me deeply.

A subtle moan escapes my throat as I return the kiss. Our tongues swirl and wrestle, intensifying the blaze already raging within me. He runs his fingers through my hair, looking deep into my eyes as I notice Fallon and Luke slowly approaching. My heart is beating a million miles per minute, and it doesn’t show signs of stopping anytime soon. The air is so thick with arousal and anticipation, I could cut it with a knife.

“Undress for us,” Kellan whispers, then takes a step back.

We lose our layers at the same time, watching one another as our clothes hit the floor. The shoes and boots go first. Then the pants and shirts. My lingerie is the last to fall as I stand naked and ready before them. Their eyes darken with desire as they move closer, lips parted as shadows dance across their faces.

For a moment, I am overwhelmed by their dominant presence.

Kellan stands tall and strong, muscular and gorgeously fit. I admire the tattoos and the narrow dip of his hips while my hands gradually work their way up my own body. I feel the need to touch and squeeze my breasts as I shift my focus onto Fallon, this mountain of a man with a gargantuan cock and a hungry look in his eyes. He could crush me in the palm of his hand if he wanted to, yet his touch is so soft and delicate, I practically melt when his fingers find my nipple and pinch it, ever so lightly.

My breath hitches as I gaze up at Luke, my whole body quivering as he smiles and trails kisses down the side of my neck. He’s a beautiful soul, a handsome man, a provider through and through. His prosthetic and his scars only serve to amplify him in the best possible way. If anything, I want him even more because of it, not less.

I touch his chest, letting my palm splay across the blonde curls covering his rippling pecs, trailing my nails back and forth.

Fallon takes my other hand and guides it down to his cock. I grab hold and welcome the firmness, the enormous girth. I lick my lips, dying to feel him inside me once again. Kellan cups my pussy gently, getting a feel for what awaits him.

“I love how you’re always ready for us,” he says, his fingers sliding between my wet folds.

My swollen nub instantly reacts to his touch, my core tightening as he teases me.

“Your skin is so soft,” Luke adds, then kisses my shoulder. He bites into it, gently at first, until my nipples perk up under Fallon’s hungry eyes.

“Are you a good girl, Avery?” Kellan asks me.

I nod once. “I’m a very good girl.”

“Then get on your knees,” he commands me.

Without hesitation, I kneel as they close ranks in front of me, cocks twitching with anticipation. I know what they want, and I do it gladly, willingly, hungrily. I take each of them in my mouth, never breaking eye contact as I relax the back of my throat and loosen my jaw to get as much in as possible. Slowly but surely, Kellan fills my mouth and I feel the veins swelling along his shaft.

I taste the precum on his tip, licking it off, eager for more.

“Fucking hell,” Luke curses under his breath as he shoves both hands in my hair to hold my head in place. “Take it, baby, all of it.”

And I do. He fucks my mouth with decisive thrusts, and I take him in, deeper and deeper until I can barely breathe. Tears trickle down my cheeks, but they’re nothing compared to what drips down the insides of my thighs as Fallon takes his turn. He’s the biggest and the thickest. My lips stretch as I feed on him, as I suck and lick him into a frenzy, holding the base of his cock with one hand while I massage his hardened balls with the other.

“You’re a fucking natural,” Kellan whispers when he retakes control.

Deep-throating me, he smiles like the devil as he claims my mouth, deeper and faster and harder. I’m so wet, I’m dripping, hoping that they don’t intend to let me suffer for much longer. Before I can register the shift in our positions, I find myself back on my feet and bent over the bed.

Luke’s hands run up and down my back as he fucks me from behind, with Fallon and Kellan kneeling on the bed in front of me. With their engorged cocks in each of my hands, I moan and whimper as I blow them, ravenous in my exploits and licking every glorious inch. Luke thrusts himself deeper and

harder inside me, stretching and filling me to the brim.

“Oh, God, don’t stop!” I cry out when his hand slips around my hip and finds my clit screaming for attention. The orgasm rocks me to the very core of my existence as he pounds into me, harder and harder until I unravel, feeling as if I just broke apart into a billion little pieces.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” he growls as he fucks me senseless. I melt against him while Kellan and Fallon keep my mouth busy.

They take turns, giving me everything they’ve got. When Fallon spears me with his full length, I come again, arching my spine as he grabs a handful of my hair and gently pulls my head back. He gives it to me with perfection, each thrust intensifying my orgasm, my pussy overflowing with sweet juices.

Kellan gets on his back and I climb on, riding him, as Fallon massages my breasts, pinching my nipples until a third climax washes over me. My flesh is like melted butter, my skin hypersensitive, my core unraveling as I fill myself with Kellan. It’s delicious and mindless madness as I surrender to them.

“I want you in my mouth,” I tell Luke at one point, dazed and hungry for more.

I’m standing now, bent over as I suck him hard and fast. Fallon takes me from behind again, while Kellan is beside us with one hand between my legs, stroking himself and my tender clit at the same time. Fallon grunts harshly as I feel him come, feel him spilling his seed with deep thrusts. My knees are weak, but I don’t want this to end.

“Take me, Kellan,” I whimper, then look up at Luke. “I want you, too. Inside me. Fill me up.”

Luke smiles and bites his lower lip, one hand caressing my face as Kellan claims me yet again. I’m shivering and crying tears of joy as I suck Luke while Kellan comes with a hefty burst. I revel in the slapping sound of skin on skin, my heart singing as I clench myself tightly around him, squeezing him dry. By the time Luke finishes inside me, I’m somewhere up in the heavens, held firmly by Fallon and Kellan.

I need them to keep me upright while Luke takes what I gladly and gleefully offer.

I need them to consume me, to turn me over, to squeeze my ass and fondle my breasts, to run their fingers through my hair, to kiss me relentlessly as Luke explodes into a fucking frenzy and pounds me into oblivion.

I don’t ever want this night to end.

It was only just beginning.

KELLAN

That first night with the four of us was incredible. I relive every moment whenever I get the chance, my mind wandering back to that complete surrender. Avery is incredible and delighted to be shared between three men. The bond could become unbreakable if we nurture it properly. I've never felt this way before about anyone. She truly is special, and the thought scares and exhilarates me at the same time.

But life has a way of reminding me that it will never truly be easy or safe for the three of us to build something worthwhile, something stable, healthy and complex, at least not without rooting out the very evil that has plagued us since we were children. The threat of Avery's ex notwithstanding, it's my own flesh and blood that I fear most. My parents. Two of the most toxic and dangerous people I have ever had to deal with.

I thought I'd gotten rid of them and their influence the moment I joined the Navy and took hold of my trust fund. But they waited patiently and went about their dirty business in my and my brother's absence, their filthy claws digging deeper into Lincoln County. By the time I got back and earned my badge as county sheriff, Mom and Dad had most of this place by the balls. It has taken a lot of backdoor dealing and covert tactics to start knocking their pieces off the gameboard.

Because that's all this is to them, a game. A game they intend to win no matter the cost.

The prize? Power and money, influence and our obedience. They've amassed plenty of the first three, but Fallon and I remain steady in our resistance. I have been working hard to tear the Cassidy empire down through legal methods. Finally, my work is beginning to pay off. I can tell that it's

paying off because my mother and father have been droning on about my persistence for the past thirty minutes.

They continue to talk as we walk out of the sheriff's department. I've been nodding and mumbling yes, no, or whatever here and there, but they keep on going, determined to exhaust me into submission. Luckily for me, I know them both better than they know themselves.

"You can investigate as much as you want," Dad says as we reach the top of the stairs leading down to the parking lot. "My accountants and their partner firms have nothing to hide."

"Is that why we arrested three of them for embezzlement last week?" I reply bluntly, unable to hide my amusement. There is a layer of bitterness underneath, but I can't let him see that. I can't let him see that his tactics can still get to me if I'm not careful or sure enough of myself. "Listen, you and Mom do whatever you want. I warned you from the moment I was elected Sheriff of Lincoln County that I wouldn't let things slide anymore."

"And we warned you to stay out of the family business," Mom snaps. "You chose to walk away, Kellan. You can't control us from the outside."

"I told you I'd come at you with the whole strength of the law behind me if you tried to muscle me out of the department," I shoot back with a half-smile. "It's not my fault you've both gotten too brazen and cocky for your britches. Things don't work the way they used to. People notice things. They reach out and ask for help when they see other folks breaking the law."

"Have you no shame?" Dad blurts out.

Careful not to slip on the ice partially glazing the stone steps, I make my way down to where I parked my car, fully aware that my parents' town car is parked next to it. Their way of flexing their muscles at me, I guess. I spot the driver behind the wheel, the engine purring softly as he awaits their return.

"What does shame have to do with upholding the law?" I ask. "My department got a tip. We investigated. We found egregious wrongdoing and plenty of illegalities, so we took action. If your accountants were confident and thought that maybe, oh, I don't know, just because I'm a Cassidy myself that I'm not gonna throw the book at them, well, that's not my fault, now, is it?"

My mother scoffs as she hooks her arm through my father's. I watch them as they descend the stairs with their blazing arrogance on full display. They're in their mid-sixties and proud as ever, clad in the finest woolen coats, leather belts and boots custom-tailored at Newman's, the county's most

revered tailor. The guy handles presidential suits, and my parents have lunch with him once a month. That's how connected they are. But it doesn't matter because I will still arrest them when I gather enough evidence.

"Your grandmother would be so ashamed of who you've become," my mother says.

"I'm sure she would. Crookedness runs deep in the Cassidy bloodline, so I imagine I'm the blackest sheep if there ever was one," I reply dryly, then look to my father. "I need you to understand that this entire conversation is futile. I will continue my investigation, and if I find you or your companies connected in any way, I will come for you."

"Is that a threat?" my father snaps, his silver mustache quivering with anger.

"It's a promise. I don't do threats. You and your kind do threats, and that's why we're having this conversation," I tell him. "You're the ones who enjoy intimidating folks into submission, only this time it didn't work out the way you wanted it to. It's a different age, Pops, and your old methods don't work anymore."

Mom rolls her eyes and looks to her husband. If it weren't for Aunt Helen, we probably would've grown up to be just as dirty and awful as our parents. We can't pick our families, but we can definitely choose to walk away from those who consistently hurt us, regardless of who they are.

"I'm deeply ashamed to call you my son," she says. "Had I known you would turn against us, I would've dissolved your trust fund."

"But you didn't," I reply. "And be thankful Fallon isn't around to hear you say such things. You know he's less gentle in his replies."

"I can't believe you would treat your own kin this way," Mom says.

I shrug and point at their car. "You brought this upon yourselves. Now, you've said your piece, I've listened, and I don't really care how rattled you are. I will make a note of it for the investigation. It means I'm getting one step closer."

"We're not done yet," Dad replies. "You'll pay for this."

"I guess it's my turn to ask if that's a threat," I say. "Don't forget that half of your enterprises are currently being investigated by the SEC. I don't think it's a healthy approach for you to threaten the Sheriff. As a matter of fact, it's illegal to threaten a law enforcement officer and I could arrest you right here, right now."

Dad takes a step forward, his jaw fiercely clenched as he points an angry

finger at me. “I don’t think it’s a healthy approach for you to think you can beat us at our own game. We’ve been doing this long before you were born, son, and we will preserve our family’s name and fortune even when our own children fail in their duties.”

“I’m quivering with fear,” I mutter and wave them both away. “Happy Holidays.”

“You’ll regret this!” my mother yelps.

I can’t be bothered to even look at them anymore. I know what this is about. They realize I’m getting closer, and after an entire year of complete silence, the two of them have finally decided to approach me. I’m not sure what they hoped to accomplish, exactly. Were they aiming to scare me away, to get me to back down? Surely, they know I would never do that. They know better than anyone else that I am relentless, they’re the ones that taught me. They’re mad because I’m not being relentless with them in criminal activities.

I watch them get in the back of the town car but not before each of them give me one last glare. There was a time when I would’ve been hurt by their words, when I would’ve done anything to prove my worth to them. But a parent is supposed to already know and nurture their child’s worth.

Mom and Dad’s problem is that I know how to beat them at their own game. And I’ve got my brother’s support in doing it. Once the town car leaves the parking lot, I breathe a sigh of relief, well aware that this is not the last I’ll be hearing from them. But I will be ready. And I will have the law in my hands and on my side, the very law they have been skirting with blatant impropriety.

A car pulls into the parking lot, a familiar-looking sedan.

I stand by my driver’s door for about a minute, watching the vehicle and memorizing the details, a professional habit, I suppose. I recognize the car, though. My brother fixed it not that long ago. I remember the old, faded stickers by the gas cap. Randy gets out, sporting a woolen hat over his bleached-blond hair and a thick jean jacket with a plush inner lining. The dark circles under his brown eyes tell me he hasn’t slept much lately.

“Good morning, Sheriff,” he greets me with a warm smile.

“Good morning, Randy. I see you’re still in town.”

“Yeah, I’m trying to get my feet back on the ground, but I’m not having as much luck with the classifieds as I had hoped,” he replies with his Southern twang. “How’ve you been, sir?”

“Good, busy with work, mostly. I like to keep busy. What brings you here, then?”

Randy sighs deeply and walks over, his shoulders hunched in a pitiful manner. He looks as though the whole world is bearing down on him. “Sir, I actually wanted to ask you if you’re hiring here at the station,” he says. “I’m no lawman, but I can clean, I can change a lightbulb, I can fix any faulty wiring before you’d have to call in a certified electrician. I know a little bit about everything, just enough to tell you with a hand on my heart that I’d be an asset here.”

“I’m sorry, Randy, but we’re not hiring. We’re happy with our custodial and maintenance staff, and we’re not looking for anyone else.”

He lowers his gaze in what I can only describe as genuine disappointment. “Oh. That’s okay. It’s just... I can’t get a job. I ain’t got no money, I’m struggling, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up. I got enough change in my pocket to maybe buy myself a warm soup at the diner down the road, but I don’t know what the hell I’m gonna do tomorrow.”

“That bad, huh?” I can’t help but feel sorry for the guy.

Thankfully I’ve never found myself in such a situation before, but I do understand the plight and the desperation. I’ve seen my Aunt Helen pull herself out of the gutter after my parents destroyed her family and her career, and she was lucky to have Fallon and me by her side. Randy looks lonely and hopeless. I can’t even imagine what he’s going through. No man should ever suffer like this.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Is there anywhere that you know where I might apply for a job? I tried the diner, too, but them waitresses over there told me to scram unless I’m a paying customer,” he says. “I just wanna work for my money, sir, I ain’t no criminal.”

“Listen, I’ll tell you what. I can’t promise anything, but I will talk to my brother and see if he’s got an opening at his garage. There have been instances where he needed a second pair of hands in there,” I tell him. “Again, I repeat, I am not promising anything here.”

Randy lights up like the sun, his eyes wide and luminous with hope. “For real? You’re gonna do that for me? Sir, you’re too kind!”

“I’ll ask. I can’t guarantee a job, though.”

“Oh, thank you, sir, thank you ever so much!”

“We try to look out for each other however we can.”

“Still, sir, you’re too kind, I can’t thank you enough!”

“I’d rather see you working than having to pick you up off the streets or out of a 7/11 mugging,” I reply with a casual shrug.

“Oh, no, I told you. I’m a good man, Sheriff. I don’t hurt folks, I don’t steal, I barely ever told a lie my whole life. Maybe that’s why I’m in the gutter, now. Maybe I’ve been too soft and kind to others. I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to regret being a good person,” I tell him. “I’ll see you around.”

“Can I give you my number, just in case your brother says he’ll hire me?”

“Of course.”

Randy takes out a business card he swiped from the diner and hands it over to me. It has his cell number scrawled on the back in blue ballpoint ink. “Thank you, Sheriff. You have yourself a blessed day.”

“You, too, Randy.”

He gets back behind the wheel of the sedan and drives off, the tires slipping slightly across the frozen patches along the main route out of the parking lot. I look up and see the skies darkening again. It’ll snow for the third time this week. It’s the snowiest winter I’ve seen in the past few years. Not that I mind.

Snow days mean less traffic in my county and more time for me to spend at home with Avery and the girls. They’ve become an integral part of my life in such a short time. I should be worried about how quickly I’ve become attached to them, but on the other hand, I keep thinking maybe this could be it. The moment I’ve waited for my whole life.

The woman who might change everything for the better.

EVERY

I t's a sunny Sunday morning in the middle of winter.

The garden stretching behind the house looks picturesque, a snowy wonderland unraveling at my feet. Everything is white and sparkly under the sun's golden light. The old pine trees wear thick crowns of snow over their branches, and my girls are having the time of their life as they run around, cheering and laughing and chasing each other.

They're snug and warm in their pink and orange ski overalls and snow boots, their cheeks ruddy as steam rolls past their lips with each exhale. I can't remember the last time I saw them so happy, so free and careless and simply able to be themselves. They are safe and loved and it shows. It makes me feel proud and a warm tenderness fills me up.

I keep an eye on them while Luke and I sit on a bench close by. Annie has a hard time keeping up with her sister, frequently falling face first, but the snow is soft and cool, so she pulls herself back on her feet and immediately resumes chasing after Miley. They'll be sleeping like logs tonight, for sure. Luke unscrews the steel cap from a large thermos and refills our tin mugs with mulled wine. The smell of winter spices fills my nose—cinnamon, nutmeg, and orange peel with just a dash of honey and pepper. Absolutely delicious.

"Who made this magnificent concoction?" I ask, leaning into him.

He's got an arm around my shoulders, occasionally planting kisses on my temple. "Aunt Helen of course. It's a family recipe. Kellan and Fallon's mother used to make it every winter too. But I think Aunt Helen's is the best. It's got love in it," Luke says.

"I can taste it."

I look up and lose myself in the soft, blue pools of his eyes. Luke smiles and kisses me on the lips. “Last night was something else,” he whispers.

It was. I’m still reeling. My whole body is sore, every muscle taut and overworked. They shared me again, filling me and stretching me, claiming me over and over. My pussy still aches, but in the best way. It feels good to be with them, to belong to them in such a profound way. We did agree it’s physical and fun, yet I think we all know it’s becoming more than that.

“I’m baffled by how much energy they both have. These two are frickin’ nuclear,” Luke says.

Affection glimmers in his eyes as he looks at my girls. They’ve grown on him. They’ve grown on Fallon and Kellan, too. The Cassidy twins melt whenever Annie and Miley run into the room. Annie gravitates to Kellan more—probably because she remembers him rescuing us that snowy night, when we were stranded on the side of the road. Not to mention he’s dashing and strong, much like the knights in the fairytales we read every night before bedtime. Miley seems to have a cute crush on Fallon. He’s big, burly and dark, yet he melts like a popsicle left in the sun whenever she goes up to him and wraps her arms around his leg.

As for Luke, the girls adore him. They feel comfortable with him, showing a silent respect toward him, listening when he speaks, when he asks them to do something. They help him with the dishes, they argue over who gets to pass the salt to him during dinner, and they follow him around the mansion like puppies whenever he’s not in his office, eager to please him. Once a week, we gather together in the study—Annie clinging to Kellan’s neck and Miley resting on Fallon’s knee, me sitting in between them—while Luke reads a story to us before we all go to bed. It’s become a family tradition of sorts.

Family.

What an odd word for this situation. Yet it seems to fit somehow.

“What’s wrong?” Luke asks, likely noticing the tinge of sadness in my gaze. I can feel it washing over me, the pain in my heart swelling whenever I think about the day I will inevitably have to leave this place.

“Nothing. I’m just... I’m just so grateful for everything that you’ve done for me and my girls,” I tell him with a warm smile. “And I guess I’m sad that someday it will all be over.”

“Everything ends, eventually,” Luke sighs deeply. “It doesn’t have to happen tomorrow, though. Are you in a rush to leave, Avery?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then what’s stopping you from enjoying this moment?” he asks, pressing his forehead into mine. “Why not enjoy the here and now more before we let tomorrow take over? We can’t change the past, we can’t predict the future, but we can live in the present and make the most of it.”

“You’re absolutely right, Luke. But I’m a mother of two. A single mother. Sooner or later, I’m going to have to do something in order to give my girls the home and the healthy environment that they deserve to grow up in.”

Luke gives me a curious look. “Don’t they have that here?” he asks.

“Well, yes, they do. But it’s temporary,” I say. “I know it. They know it too. We are guests here, and while we’ve made a home of this place, it’s not really our permanent home, is it?”

He thinks about it for a moment, gazing out into the distance while Miley plucks Annie out of a mound of snow, trying hard not to laugh.

“It could be,” Luke says after a few moments.

“I think it’s a conversation we need to have later,” I reply.

I’m backing away; maybe I shouldn’t, but things are going too well between us. Too much of a good thing might cause an addiction, and the last thing I need is another emotional attachment, especially toward three men. I’m still healing from a horribly toxic relationship with one, and I can’t bring myself to fully trust my heart with another man—let alone three. I just can’t afford to make future plans with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke. There’s too much to lose.

They’re helping me. They’re sharing me. And they’re keeping my girls safe. That’s all there is to it. That’s all it can be, given the circumstances.

Luke can feel me withdrawing, and he pulls me closer, unwilling to let go just yet. “You’re right,” he says. “We can talk about this another time. But I’m just saying, Avery, what’s the rush? Live a little. Take your time. Let’s see how long we can enjoy this. It can’t do anybody any harm, can it?”

“No. I guess not.”

The irony of those words. I know I’ll get my heart broken if I’m not careful. So, it would definitely do harm to me. My girls are already comfortable here, which will make our departure that much more painful, therefore harming them. But Luke does have a point about timing. We’ve only been here for a little while and I need more time to rebuild myself, anyway. As long as Daniel is still out there, most likely searching for me, I

can't exactly waltz out into the world. I'm not safe beyond this bubble.

Kellan and Fallon come through the back gate, both of them wearing bright smiles as they trudge across the snow.

"Hey, ladies!" Kellan greets the girls.

As soon as they see him and his brother, Annie and Miley jump with joy and proceed to run toward them. Of course, they each trip and fall into the snow a couple of times before they reach them, but once they do, it's like heaven on earth for my girls. Annie begs for Kellan to pick her up, and he scoops her into his arms, laughing as he brings her back to us. Miley gets a piggyback ride from Fallon, whose otherwise dark features become illuminated whenever she's around.

"Kel-lan! Kel-lan!" Annie coos, her tiny hands reaching up, her little fingers grasping his short, black beard. "Love you, Kel-lan!"

"I love you, too, honey," he says. And it's so obvious that he means it.

"What have you been up to?" Fallon asks Miley as the four of them come over.

Miley holds on, hands splayed across his cheeks as she smiles with great pride. "Just trouble. Lots and lots of trouble, like you taught me!" she says.

"Don't let your mother hear you, or I'll get into *real* trouble," Fallon quips.

All I can do is laugh as they join us. It'll be a beautiful afternoon with the six of us. My heart fills with sweet warmth, and the taste of mulled wine lingers on my lips as I relax in Luke's arms. We'll spend the rest of the day out here, talking and playing with the girls in the snow.

A couple of months ago, I would've never imagined that I would end up in a place like this, much less a situation like this. I honestly didn't think I would ever feel this, that the universe could be so good, so kind to me. Sometimes, I worry that I'm going to wake up and it will all have been nothing but a dream. A beautiful, wintery dream in the heart of a blazing hell. Until Daniel is caught, I will not know true peace. But I will at least enjoy these small moments.

FALLON

It feels too good to be true at times but I know it is. Kellan knows it. Luke knows it. And I know for a fact that Avery is worried about it. We're wonderful together and we complete one another in ways I didn't think were possible. We have become each other's peace, and the girls are happy and thriving under our care. I didn't expect for things to evolve to this point, but dammit, I am loving every second. Until that prick is caught, though, we're all living with a shadow over our shoulders.

I'm busy enough with work at the garage and the security firm to not have enough time to spare in order to become more involved in the search efforts that Kellan and Luke are currently working on. They're trying to track him down faster, and my federal contacts have been helpful with their authorizations, but it's still not enough. It's only a matter of time before the fucker slips, though. The only positive aspect here is that he doesn't know where Avery is. And she is safe at the mansion, under our care and protection.

"Randy, pass me that Triwing screwdriver, will you?" I call out from underneath the hood of a '67 Buick in dire need of some love and care. "Randy. The Triwing, buddy! I call out again.

"Uh, yeah, sure thing, boss," he mutters, but he doesn't sound too happy.

I straighten my back and take a look to my right, only to find Randy staring at one of the toolboxes like it's some kind of alien piece of technology that he has yet to wrap his head around. The Triwing screwdriver sits at the top of a pile, right under his nose. "You okay, buddy?" I ask.

"Yeah, I can't find the darned thing," he says, unable to look me in the eyes. "We really need to tidy up around here. Mind if I do it after closing

hours, boss?”

“It’s right there.”

Finally, Randy looks up at me, somewhat confused. His face is partially covered with grease, some of it smudging his scruffy, unkempt beard. His work overalls are black and dirty. He’s only been with me for a couple of days now, but I can tell he’s never done any manual labor before in his life. His hands are clean and almost delicate, and the man has absolutely no idea about cars and mechanical tools. “Where?” he asks.

“Right there,” I point at it.

To my dismay, he still doesn’t recognize it, so I walk over and take it out of the toolbox, not willing to hide my irritation. “This is a Triwing screwdriver. If you didn’t know anything about fixing cars, you shouldn’t have come here to waste my time.”

“I’m sorry,” Randy blurts out, as he follows me back to the car.

I keep working on the engine, taking it one piece and one screw at a time until I’m able to get deeper into the Buick’s entrails. My mood is shifting downward, however, because I don’t like being lied to. I understood my brother’s desire to help this guy, but he’s causing me more work instead of less.

“I’m sorry, I really am,” Randy says with a trembling voice. “I’m just desperate to work, Fallon, I swear to you. I’ll do anything. I’ll learn everything there is to know about fixing cars. Believe me when I tell you that I’m a fast learner. You won’t even have to babysit me, I promise. I’ll read up on whatever manual you need me to read up on. I’ll clean the shop and hand you any tool you need. I’ll order parts and bring you customers if you need ‘em. I’ll do anything, just please don’t fire me.”

“Why’d you lie, then? You could’ve just said you didn’t know anything.”

“I needed to make sure you’d hire me. I’m desperate here. I’m hungry and living out of my car. I’m defaulting on my student loans and I can’t even get a job befitting the degree I got myself into student debt for in the first place,” Randy says, seemingly at his wit’s end. “I can’t live like this for much longer. I need a home, I need a roof over my head, a bed to sleep in, and I need food. How am I gonna build myself back up if nobody will give me a chance?”

I take a deep breath and step back from the Buick as I try to gather my thoughts. He’s pitiful, and I do my best to understand his situation. He doesn’t strike me as a bad guy, just a lost little southern boy in search of a

better life. The whole of Lincoln County is known as one of the more prosperous parts of Nebraska, so I can't exactly blame the guy for coming all the way up here looking for a job and a place to live. But I keep my own standards high, and there has been a breach of trust that I cannot simply ignore.

Yet I can't kick him to the curb just yet, either. I'm not a monster. Not anymore.

"Please, Fallon, forgive me," Randy adds, close to tears. "I'll do anything..."

"You'll stick to cleaning up, to opening and closing the shop, to welcoming customers and taking phone calls for me," I decide. "You'll tidy up after me, you'll order whatever I need, and you will take every fixed car for a test drive around the block before we call the customers to come in and pick their vehicles up. You'll also chase anybody who's late on their bills."

"I can do that!" Randy says, his eagerness resembling that of a child stepping into Disneyland for the first time. "I'm gonna keep this place clean. Spotless! I'll do whatever you need me to do in order to make your life easier, I promise."

"And no more lying."

"No more lyin', I swear."

I look at him for a long, heavy moment. He seems so small and meek before me. Then again, everybody seems small and meek before me. I'm well aware of my intimidating size, though I've rarely had to consciously use it in order to get something out of a situation. I nod slowly and go back to fixing this marvelous old Buick, hoping I'll be able to deliver it in perfect working condition once I'm done with it.

"Alright, then," I mumble. "You can go ahead and clean the office, there's no point in cleaning up the garage just yet."

"Thank you, Fallon. Thank you."

I listen to the sound of his footsteps receding into the back office and wonder if I've made the right choice. My heart feels good about giving this guy another chance. But if he fucks it up, he's out of here. I don't give second chances. I barely give one.

A few hours later, as the early winter evening begins to set over the town, I wrap up my work for the day and slip into the service shower before changing into my regular clothes. I'm stopping by Avery's and my favorite diner to pick up a couple of slices of pecan pie for her. She's dying for some

of their signature crumble, and I'd be a fool not to delight my woman with such a small and precious pleasure of life. *My woman*. Is she, though? I don't know.

But she is mine while she's here, and that's all that matters. Deep down, I dread the day I'll have to watch Avery leave. Not today, though.

Once I'm out of the shower, I dress into clean jeans, a button up cotton shirt, and leather boots before heading into the back office to say goodbye to Randy. I find him organizing the file cabinet, taking each drawer at a time and throwing out the old stuff—he knows to only keep folders dated from last year onward. Everything else can go as we're no longer required to save copies a year after the service was completed.

"How are you coming along?" I ask him.

"Oh, I'm good, Fallon. It's going easier than I'd expected, but that's because you have a good filing system," Randy says with a bright smile. "I should be done before eight, I reckon."

Since I keep no money in this office, I'm fine with letting him stay. "Cool. I'll see you tomorrow, then. Lock up for me, will you?"

"Yes, sir!"

I can't help but smile as I head out and get behind the wheel of my SUV. I'm excited to see Avery. She has already texted, kindly reminding me to not forget about the pie, and I'm eager to fulfill her wishes. I have her all to myself tonight and while I absolutely enjoy sharing her with Luke and Kellan, I do love the nights when it's just the two of us. We get to do the dirtier and rougher stuff she loves. She gets to ride me like the wild thing that she truly is. There's something about us that goes deep into the darker side of decadence, but I always make sure she's enjoying it and comfortable.

My cock jumps with excitement.

I turn the key in the ignition, but the engine chokes.

"Shit," I mumble, frowning as I turn the key again.

It won't start.

That can't be right. This car is less than a year out of the manufacturing plant. First owner. She was pristine when I got her, and I baby her. She runs smoothly, her engine purring like a loving kitty cat whenever it's turned on. This isn't supposed to happen.

I check my watch, realizing I've only got about half an hour before I'll be late getting home, so I quickly check under the hood to try and figure out what's wrong with my car. Cursing under my breath, I realize I have to do a

full computer diagnosis, and that alone would take a couple of hours.

“Dammit,” I growl as I slap the hood down with a heavy thud.

Randy rushes out of the garage with a worried look on his face. “What’s wrong, boss?”

“There’s something wrong with my car,” I say. “I don’t have the time to do a full computer diagnostic.”

“Did you look under the hood?” he asks.

I nod once. “I don’t think it’s a mechanical problem, and it’s not something I can fix right now. I’m late for my date, and I don’t want my woman waiting for me.”

“It’s nasty outside, too,” Randy exhales sharply as he looks up. Snowflakes start falling slowly over the town, adding more inches to the existing white blanket that’s covering most of Nebraska. “I doubt you’ll find a cab to get you back home soon. Hey, what about your brother?”

“He’s out.”

“And your friend Luke?”

Randy has met Luke during a brief visit at the shop. He has been nothing but kind and welcoming to everyone who sets foot in my garage. I’ll give the boy credit, he’s good-hearted and friendly. It’ll be a bonus for my customers since I lack that particular social patience.

“Luke isn’t around, either.”

“Okay, can I drive you, then?” Randy asks with a casual shrug. “My car’s an old lady, but you fixed her up real nice. She can get us there.”

I give him a surprised glance. “You would do that?”

“After everything you did for me? I would drive you to the moon and back!” Randy exclaims, fishing through his overall pockets for the keys. “Lemme just close the shop, and I’ll be right out.”

I smile and wait outside under the darkening sky, content that I didn’t fire Randy on the spot earlier. For a moment, I was tempted to send him packing. Turns out that would’ve been a poor decision, since he is now my best chance at getting to the diner and then back to the mansion on time. I want to enjoy every single minute that I can get in Avery’s company.

The woman has me gleefully addicted. And I love it.

The drive back to the mansion is relatively smooth. Snowfall is intensifying, but Randy’s car and the new winter tires I installed do a decent job of getting us there without any issues. He pulls up outside the mansion, smiling as he reminisces on his younger days back in Louisiana. The night is

dark and heavy but everything seems calm and quiet.

“You know, I used to love this girl with all my heart. The minute I met her I knew she was the one for me. The belle of the ball,” Randy says with a lingering smile as his hands rest on the steering wheel. “I’d take her everywhere. Why, we used to dominate the honkytonks every Friday night. We were the best dancers there.”

“What was she like?” I ask. Surprisingly, he knows how to tell a good story. He has kept me entertained over the past thirty minutes.

“Oh, delightful. A bubbly blonde with warm blue eyes and a heart of gold. Everybody loved her. She was always smiling, always had a kind word to say about everyone, and she could never hold a grudge. She made me happy, and we were gonna take over the world together. She was my dream girl.”

“What happened, then?”

I look out and see the lights glimmering in some of the windows. Avery must be upstairs in her room, getting ready for dinner, but I spot Aunt Helen in the study and the girls with her, running around. I can almost hear them cheering and laughing as Aunt Helen tries to herd them back into the dining room. Kellan and Luke’s cars are gone, but that was to be expected. They should be back tomorrow, once they’re done talking to a patrol officer in the next county over who may have seen Daniel in his town. The BOLO is finally starting to pay off.

“Oh, I lost her,” Randy sighs deeply. “I was a fool. I didn’t use my words. My temper got the better of me, and she left me. She ran off with a big guy, a big muscly guy who thought he was better than me. I never got a chance to earn her forgiveness. But I learned my lesson and I’ve been trying to atone for my sins ever since. I put myself through school, you know. Hence the student debt. I wanted to make myself better so that maybe one day I’d find her and show her that I’m a different person now.

I look over at him and smile. “You’re a man sticking to his morals. You prefer an honest day’s work over a life of crime,” I tell him. “You’d rather clean the floors in a garage than knock somebody over the head for a wallet. Everybody goes through a rough patch in life. Some more than others. But what matters is that you are doing your best to be a decent human being, Randy, and that says more about you than you will ever know.”

“You think so?” he asks, his gaze softening.

“I know so. While I may not have been a fan of the lying, you keep

working hard and proving yourself,” I say. “It can’t be easy, especially when you have a degree and a student loan big enough to drive you into financial ruin. But you’re doing the best you can with what you’re given in a particularly hostile economy. Better days will come, Randy. You keep doing what you’re doing, and you’ll see that.”

He stares at me, and for a moment I see shadows flickering in his brown eyes, lips pressing into a thin line. One deep breath later, and the darkness fades away, a sad smile taking over as he looks out at the mansion’s front steps just as the doors burst wide open. Miley and Annie come out running and laughing.

“Do you think I’ll ever see her again?” Randy asks.

“Who?”

“My beloved.”

“Maybe. You never know,” I tell him. “Listen, Randy, thanks for the ride. You’ve been a great help. I gotta go pick up my girls, though. They’re coming for me, as you can see.”

He laughs lightly, his eyes never leaving them. “I didn’t know you had kids.”

“They came into my life a short while ago.”

“They are beautiful,” he says.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, buddy.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Where will you be staying tonight?” I ask before letting him go for the night. “You said you’re sleeping in your car. I could give you some money. An advance.”

“Nah, you can pay me tomorrow, it’s alright. I’m seeing a lady friend tonight. One of the waitresses at the diner. Once she found out that I’m workin’ for you, she wasn’t so prickly no more,” Randy laughs. “Goodnight, boss, I’ll see you in the mornin’!”

I close the passenger door and carefully make my way across the snow to collect Miley and Annie before they get all wet and mushy in their house slippers. Randy’s car lingers in the front for a while as I scoop the girls up and throw them both over my shoulders like sacks of potatoes.

“Get over here, you little rascals!” I quip.

“Fallon!” Miley laughs. “You’re late!”

“You late!” Annie agrees, though she loves being carried like this. Her giggles reverberate through my ribcage, and the sound fills my heart with

warmth and joy. “Late, late, late!”

“I know, but I’m only a few minutes late!” I reply.

I hear Randy’s car pulling out onto the road, but somehow, I can still feel his eyes on us. There must be a part of him that wonders what life would’ve been like if he hadn’t lost that belle of his. He probably never would’ve made his way up to Nebraska, searching for something better. I can’t fathom losing a good woman like he did. I know that Avery awaits inside, and that someday, I could lose her. But that’s not today.

I don’t want to end up like Randy, thinking about her in the darkness of a cold winter night. At least he’s going to have warm company in another woman’s bed tonight. And that sure beats sleeping in the back seat of a car while a blizzard is raging outside.

EVERY

I would like nothing more than to fully relax into this small corner of Heaven. And that is exactly what this place is, Heaven. I am surrounded by guardian angels beyond Kellan, Fallon, and Luke. Helen, Marcus, and every other member of the staff, including the two hundred operatives currently employed by Wolfhound Security—all highly skilled and trained to protect veterans of the United States Navy, Army, or Marines—are also my guardian angels. We are never alone, and the girls and I love being in the company of so many strong men and women. The female operatives are absolute bad asses, and I'm pretty sure Miley dreams of becoming just like them when she grows up. Recently, she's been spending more time around the gym when the female operatives come in, if only to watch them as they train.

Their strength is inspiring. I only wish I'd taken a couple of self-defense classes myself. Maybe I would've avoided the violent conflicts that ultimately pushed me to run away from Daniel. Still not knowing where he is more than two months later is becoming a problem.

"He couldn't have just completely disappeared," I say to Kellan at one point during dinner.

Annie and Miley are sound asleep in their beds upstairs, and I'm spending the rest of my evening with my three men. Kellan and Luke have just returned from an out-of-state trip, part of their investigation into Daniel's whereabouts. But their search has yet to give us a clue regarding that bastard's location. It's making me feel uneasy.

Fallon pours more wine into my glass. "He didn't disappear, but he is remarkably good at keeping a low profile."

“He could be wearing a disguise,” Luke suggests, absent-mindedly scratching his short, blonde beard. “I mean, it doesn’t take much to make yourself look like a completely different person.”

“Or just enough to fool the cameras,” Kellan agrees. “You’re right. We might have to work on some computer portraits with hair color and length variations. Hats, sunglasses...”

“Facial hair, too,” Fallon says.

That would make sense, but it also means that the cops and the Wolfhound Security operatives need to widen their visual search net. I’ve learned enough about their investigative methods and resources to understand the amplitude of such a mission, and it’s quite troublesome—especially considering that they’re all just trying to protect me and my baby girls. It makes me feel awful, and like a burden.

“What’s wrong?” Kellan asks me, noticing my inability to look up from my plate. “I thought you liked my pepper-coated roast beef.”

“Oh, it’s delicious,” I reply with a soft smile. “It’s not the food, Kellan. It’s Daniel. I just don’t feel comfortable with the thought of him still being out there. I honestly thought he would have been caught by now.”

“I know, and I’m sorry it’s taking so long,” Kellan replies. “We’re doing the best we can within the confines of the law.”

Fallon scoffs, shaking his head. “I could always call my other guy.”

“No. We said we’d do this by the book,” Kellan insists, his brow furrowing slightly. “We need the law on our side when we do catch the fucker. Otherwise, whatever case we try to build against him will crumble in court.”

“What other guy?” I ask, suddenly curious. My own desperation must be getting the better of me because I wouldn’t normally ask such things. I’d simply leave the entire operation in their capable hands. But I’m tired of constantly looking over my shoulder everywhere I go, tired of constantly worrying about the safety of my girls.

Fallon gives me a long, wary look. “A friend of mine in intelligence,” he finally says. “He owes me a favor or two, though I know that once his debt is paid, I will never see or hear from him again. The man’s a bit of a ghost.”

“An honorable ghost,” Luke chuckles. “He could’ve just vanished on you from the beginning.”

“Who are you talking about?”

I look around, noticing their subtle smiles and the exchange of knowing

glances. These men have a long and troubled history, yet I've always wanted to know more about them. I want to know everything. The good, the bad, the nitty and the gritty. I feel like they're made out of layers, and I want to peel each of those layers away until I find the core, the sweetest and purest of souls hidden deep within each of them.

"We worked a surveillance mission once, when we first started this company," Fallon says. "The three of us were fresh out of the service and not as stealthy as we thought we were. Funny enough, our client wasn't very forthcoming with all the intel they gave us, either. They were working for a branch of the government, and unbeknownst to us, they had us spying on another branch of the government."

"You can imagine how that went down."

"I'm guessing not well," I say.

Luke laughs lightly. "We crapped our pants when our van was suddenly surrounded by fifty armed gentlemen who refused to show us any form of identification. They didn't technically exist as U.S. citizens, while the three of us were constantly droning on about our rights as U.S. citizens. It was awkward, and we almost got black-bagged that night until Fallon's friend interjected. He wasn't a friend at the time, but he figured out that we didn't have a clue as to what we were actually involved in."

"So, what happened?" I ask.

Fallon exhales sharply. "My friend understood our situation, then went on to make a couple of phone calls to verify who we were and what we were doing."

"Afterward, he considered us assets and called us in to help on a few ops. Fallon saved his life on the last one," Kellan says.

"Ah, so he really does owe you," I conclude, nodding as I process the story and try to imagine the events that led them into that position. These men are incredibly well-connected in places I wouldn't even be able to walk into, and yet I still feel uneasy because of Daniel. *Damn*. "And you can't get him involved in any of this?"

Fallon shakes his head again, then takes a sip of his wine. "I could get him involved, but there is always a chance that someone, somewhere, might figure out that we used covert assistance. It depends on how good Daniel's is. We've had similar surprises before when we assisted out-of-state law enforcement with their investigations, only to have the whole case fall apart in front of the judge. My brother is right—we might be better off doing

everything by the book.”

“I just can’t believe he hasn’t shown up anywhere,” I say, gulping the rest of my wine down.

The food is delicious, but I can barely stomach anything these days. There are evenings when I could easily raid the fridge and go on a furious binge, and then there are moments when the mere smell of roasted potatoes or a garlic stir-fry make me want to puke my soul out. It’s the stress of the situation, I know it. While I’m safe within the confines of the manor, I can’t help but feel like a sitting duck outside.

I haven’t been getting any more weird calls or text messages from unknown numbers. I even checked my old phone number, and there weren’t any messages left on that one, either. Daniel seems to have evaporated into thin air, and I do not like his silence. It’s the calm before a storm, and I don’t know if I can weather another one. I don’t want my girls to suffer anymore. We need peace and to be able to fully relax. We need Daniel behind bars and safely away from us.

“He will,” Kellan tries to assure me. “Sooner or later, he will surface.”

“And when he does, we’ll be there. In the meantime, you and the girls are safe here,” Luke adds, his hand covering mine atop the dinner table. His touch is enough to comfort me, but only for a moment.

EVERY

A few days later, I'm making my way out of a supply store in North Platte. The Freemans were so pleased with how their townhouse turned out that they recommended me to one of their neighbors. There's no better advertising than word-of-mouth in these small towns, so I'm thrilled to have a new home-improvement job to focus on while the guys continue their search for Daniel.

I carry the bags and boxes over to my car and load them in the trunk, my fingers hurting from the cold. I'd hoped this month would thaw everything out a little, but I've got a feeling it's colder now than it was in December. It hasn't snowed in a couple of days, but the town is covered in a thick layer of white, the cold air keeping the snow from melting. The roads are always cleaned and salted, though. The dark grey pavement offers a stark contrast against the snow, but I like it. It doesn't take away from the scene being picturesque but offers a hint of life slowly resuming after the holidays as more and more cars roam through North Platte during the day.

The bakery is open, and the smell of fresh sourdough just taken out of the oven fills my senses. Across the street, the café is bustling, and I can't wait for the tables to be placed out on the sidewalk come spring. In the meantime, however, people are lining up inside for steamy drinks and foamy lattes, cappuccinos and chocolate croissants. I like this town more than I'd thought I would—it's quaint and modest, but there is a quality to life here that I have rarely seen anywhere else.

"I'm starving," I tell myself, feeling a persistent hunger pang in the pit of my stomach. I'm not usually hungry this early in the morning; a tall coffee with a smidge of milk is more than enough. But the smell of warm pastries

oozing out of the café across the street is starting to entice me.

Why the hell not indulge?

I check both ways before starting to cross the street, then I notice Daniel outside the café.

The blood freezes in my veins. My muscles twitch. My joints are all but locked. I'm standing still, staring at him, horror quick to unravel in the back of my throat as I try to figure out whether he's real or simply a vivid nightmare that I conjured up just by thinking about him.

"It can't be," I whisper.

He looks at me with flat eyes and an evil grin. His brown hair is cut shorter than usual, and his beard is longer. He's wearing clothes outside of his normal taste, but it's him. It's definitely him. And I am fucking terrified, unable to move, scream or do anything.

My palms are clammy, my hands are trembling, and the car keys are jingling, my index finger hooked through the steel ring. My coat suddenly feels way too heavy on my shoulders. I want to scream, I *need* to scream.

But my voice is gone. Steam rolls from my parted lips, yet not a sound comes out.

Daniel watches me, that smug smile making my skin crawl. It's him. And I'm all alone out here. Nobody walking by is aware of what a monster he is.

"Avery! I thought you were working on the Masons' house?" Helen's voice pulls me out of my living nightmare and I glance over to my left.

I'm shaking like a leaf as I see her coming down my side of the street.

I look back at the café, but Daniel is gone.

Relief and terror wash over me at once. I burst into tears, quivering and sobbing as I realize precisely how vulnerable I still am where this man is concerned.

"Oh, honey, what's wrong?" Helen yelps and rushes over.

I'm crying my heart out as Helen reaches me in the blink of an eye, hands on my shoulders as she tries to comfort me.

"He's here," I manage between broken hiccups. "He's here."

"Who's here, Avery?"

"Daniel. He's here."

Helen stills for a moment, then straightens her back and carefully looks around, up and down the street. "I don't see him anywhere, honey, are you sure?" she asks.

"I'm sure. I saw him. I know it was him. I'm not going crazy."

“No one said you’re going crazy, Avery. Please, take a deep breath.”

“I need to call Kellan. He needs to know. My girls...” I pause and give her a horrified look. “Where are my girls, Helen?”

“They’re with Luke, back at the house, remember? He said he was taking the day off to spend some time with them,” she says, trying to sound as reassuring as she possibly can.

I know I’m a fucking hot mess right about now, but I can’t help it. My hands are shaking so bad that I can’t even fish my phone out of my coat pocket without dropping it on the frozen ground. “Shit, shit,” I curse under my breath.

“I’ll call him, honey. It’s gonna be okay,” she says.

But I think we both know that’s not true. Daniel found me. I don’t know how, I don’t know when, or for how long he’s been here, but he found me. And that number he just pulled outside the café was completely intentional—he wants me scared.

His campaign of terror has begun.

AVERY

I'm pacing the study like a caged lioness, constantly huffing and puffing and monumentally failing to keep myself together. My moment of semi-peace and safety has come to an end. My paradise is crumbling, the dream I built here gradually unraveling. It's exactly what Daniel wanted. I suspect he's been around for a while, watching and waiting for me to get comfortable enough before showing his face.

"I'm not safe anywhere, my girls aren't safe," I say, stopping by the window to look outside again. It's a ridiculous thing to say within the confines of the mansion and I know it. This place is under heavy security and constant video surveillance. The property is virtually impenetrable if you don't have an access card for the front gates, and there are sensors mounted everywhere. Not even a fox can come in without triggering them.

Kellan comes over, resting his hands on my shoulders. "Avery, take it easy. You are absolutely safe here, and so are the girls."

"They just started school," I almost start crying again. "It's not fair if I have to pull them out."

"You don't have to do that," he says. "You can't just hide in your shell and isolate them from the rest of the world whenever Daniel shows up. You need to keep their lives as normal as possible."

"How can you say that?" I whirl around, letting the fury of the situation get the better of me. "I'm trying to keep my daughters safe and away from that monster!"

"I know, but you are also isolating them, which can make it harder later on for you to hold up a case against Daniel in court," he replies firmly. "The school is one of the most secure places in the entire county, and I will make

sure we have operatives watching the building twenty-four seven, doubling the security while the girls are there. Helen will keep an eye on them here, along with the security staff, and you need to keep working on that house.”

I’m genuinely confused. The guys have been talking for the past thirty minutes but I’ve been too busy panicking and spiraling out of control, so I haven’t exactly paid attention to what was actually being said.

“I don’t understand.”

“We agreed we’d have you and the girls go on with your lives here as if nothing happened,” Luke gently reminds me as he comes closer. I spot Fallon in one of the armchairs, a muscle ticking furiously in his bearded jaw. “We need to lure Daniel out. He won’t come here; he probably knows that the place is heavily guarded. So, we need you at the Masons’ house, working on it as you have been, and the girls in school every day like normal.”

“I’m bait. Annie and Miley are fucking bait,” I bite out, my cheeks burning red.

“It’s the only way to catch him. Legally speaking,” Fallon growls from his seat. “I don’t like this any more than you do, Avery, but we have to be careful. We have to catch this fucker attempting to do something to you or the girls, and that’s when the entirety of hell will rain down on him.”

“Emphasis on *attempting* to do something,” Luke says. “He won’t be able to get close enough to do any actual harm.”

“I have the entire sheriff’s department combing the district for him,” Kellan adds. “Every motel, hotel, bed and breakfast, Airbnb, boarding house, and rental property in North Platte, Hershey, and beyond. He has to be staying somewhere. We’re checking parking lots and gas stations, too. Bars and pubs. Everywhere with a CCTV system. Trust me, Avery, we will find him.”

As much as I hate to admit it, they’re actually making sense. We never really discussed what we would do if and when Daniel showed up again. It’s not the best way to go about it, but it is effective. Kellan is right— I will need an ironclad case in court. I need to make sure Daniel can never come near me or the girls ever again.

“Is there any way to make sure he can’t be in the same state as me or the girls ever again?” I ask, my voice low and trembling.

“In court,” Kellan says. “You could ask the judge for that. There might be the possibility of a restraining order with a radius wide enough to cover an entire state. We’d have to discuss this with a specialized attorney.”

Luke nods in agreement. “Then it’s time for me to make some calls of my own, get the firm involved.”

“What firm?” I ask.

“Hanson & Hart,” he says. “They work with me on personal issues, as well as Wolfhound Security issues. They have a huge roster of attorneys and paralegals, each of them perfectly capable of handling this situation.”

“Five hundred bucks an hour type of lawyers,” I mutter. “I can’t afford that, Luke, it’s too much.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” he says.

But I snap again. “I *do* need to worry about that and about everything else, too! I can’t keep mooching off you like this.”

“That should be the least of your concerns right now,” Kellan says, half-smiling. “I’ve said it before and I will say it again, what matters to us is that you and the girls are safe and well-taken care of until you get back on your feet. Until that day comes, Fallon, Luke, and I have taken it upon ourselves to provide whatever it is you need to put that miserable bastard behind bars and out of your life, forever.”

“And I appreciate it, I really do,” I tell him, “But I feel so fucking helpless right now and I hate it.”

Fallon gets up and walks over. He towers over me with his massive shoulders and those dark green eyes that can pierce holes into my very soul. “You’re one of the most capable women I’ve ever met, Avery Madison. You just need a moment to rest in between battles. Helping you, it’s barely any effort for us to do it. Besides, you’ve given back plenty by simply being here. Don’t think we’re not happy to have you around, to see your girls happy and carefree, just like they deserve to be. Set your pride aside for one damn minute and let us take care of you.”

I want to. I honestly do.

They have the resources, the funds, and the manpower needed to get rid of Daniel. The fact that they insist on doing everything through the appropriate legal channels should be nothing short of commendable, but my desperation is pushing my own reasoning past its limits. I’m in that dark place in my mind where I’d rather see Daniel dead and gone forever.

As much as I try to hide it, I am worried about Avery and her daughters. I've done and I will continue to do my best to keep them safe, but Daniel has proven himself infinitely more capable and more elusive than I had originally anticipated. Every day, I go over the CCTV footage, personally scanning every available feed, and I even roped a couple of deputies in with access to facial recognition software in order to cover as much ground as possible.

Even with potential disguises, I should've seen something by now.

Part of me worries that Avery might flee if she feels infinitely threatened. If she did indeed see him, then he wanted to be seen solely for the purpose of messing with her head.

But if she only *thought* she saw him, and it was all in her head then the stress is getting to her on a whole new level. I secretly hope she imagined it—at least then I'd feel more at ease. Yet at the same time, we all know that the sooner we apprehend the fucker, the better for everyone, especially the girls. I'm not a fan of using them or Avery to draw him out, but it's the only way, particularly since he's been so good at covering his tracks so far.

Luke comes into my office just as I'm about to open another camera feed with footage from the past twenty-four hours. None of our markers have been picked up by the software, so I'm having to do a manual search, one of many in the past couple of days.

"What's up?"

He gives me a sour look and settles into the chair across from my desk. He's wearing one of his black suits—a color and style usually reserved solely for meetings with state authorities or his law firm, Hanson & Hart. Given our

more recent discussion, I reckon he just came back from a meeting with his lawyers. “I wanted to talk to you about Avery,” he says.

“You have my full attention,” I reply, though I do keep one eye on the computer screen, watching as various people pull in and out of a popular gas station in North Platte. That bastard has to pop up somewhere eventually unless Avery has had it wrong this whole time, and Daniel has no interest in coming after her. But I don’t think that’s the case. “What about Avery?”

“I’m worried about her,” Luke exhales sharply. “She’s erratic, on edge. I just stopped by the Masons’ house, and she was literally shaking while painting one of the kitchen walls.”

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know. But I’m starting to think she might take matters into her own hands,” Luke replies. “She might be planning to take the girls and run off. Avery thinks it’s no longer safe despite our many reassurances. If Daniel truly found her in North Platte, she might feel that she has to change towns again, if only to put some distance between him and the little ones.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that possibility, too,” I concede, leaning back into my swivel chair. “It’s not like we can stop her though.”

“Shouldn’t we try? Maybe formulate some sort of plan to convince her to stay?”

I give him a hard look. “We can’t keep her here against her will, Luke. She’s not ours to keep.”

Who am I kidding? I’m past the point of no return here, and so are Luke and Fallon. We’re head over heels with this woman, and we’re working overtime to put her frayed mind at ease. As much as I try to keep a clear head and a clean rationale over the whole situation, I might as well admit to myself that I have fallen for Avery—deeply and irreversibly. Judging by the look on Luke’s face and knowing my twin brother as well as I do, at least I can take comfort in knowing that I am definitely not the only one in this predicament.

“Kellan, it’s not just about how we feel about her,” Luke says. “It’s about doing what’s right. I’ve seen what a terrified woman can do, her first instinct would be to run away and inadvertently put herself in more danger. You heard Avery yesterday—she already feels like she’s a ‘burden’. If she thinks that Daniel could get closer, she will most likely flee. And we will never forgive ourselves if we just let her run away. Especially if something happens to her or the girls.”

“Once she’s out of our care, Avery will be a target,” I mutter. “Yeah, you

make a valid point.”

“Valid point aside, come on, man, how much longer are we gonna keep lying to ourselves?”

“Let’s not talk feelings here. Not now,” I say.

Luke raises an eyebrow. “Oh, but I think that now is precisely the time to address this. I’m definitely falling for her. Fallon, too. You? I’m not so sure, you’re always so righteous and stoic. You’re hard to read, sometimes.”

“I’m not indifferent,” I choose to concede this time around. “But I need to be focused and sharp, especially if Daniel really is here.”

“What do you mean? Avery saw him.”

“Are we completely sure about that? Helen didn’t see him. He’s not on any of the cameras.”

Luke clears his throat, looking for an appropriate response, but I can tell that this angle doesn’t sit well with him. “There weren’t any cameras pointed at the café where Daniel was supposedly standing. We don’t have CCTV to neither confirm nor deny.”

“We only have Avery’s word,” I insist. “Think about it for a moment. What if the stress of the situation is making her—”

“See things? Are you saying Avery is losing her mind?”

“I’m not saying that. No, she’s not losing her mind, dammit, Luke,” I pinch the bridge of my nose, unable to process my own frustration. “It’s just that she could’ve thought she saw him. A hallucination, perhaps, brought upon by the sheer stress of the situation. She could’ve thought it was real, that’s all. I’m just considering the possibility here, especially since there isn’t anything popping up on any cameras. The man isn’t a ghost. We should’ve seen him by now.”

“But the café didn’t have cameras. Neither did the shop across the street. We all saw that footage, Kellan. Every other CCTV unit was too far from that spot. The images were too grainy to make anything out,” Luke insists.

“I know.”

Luke takes another deep breath and closes his eyes for a moment. I guess he knows me well enough not to let his own defensive instincts get in the way. He believes Avery. I only wish I could do the same, but my position as sheriff forces me to consider every possibility—there are no coincidences and I need palpable proof.

“Listen, let’s keep monitoring the CCTV feeds,” he says after a short but heavy silence. “I’ve got agents posted on the school for Annie and Miley, and

two more watching the Masons' house while Avery is there. She is under constant surveillance, and she knows it."

"Yet she's still jittery."

"Yeah. We need to find this fucker before he scares her away. Honestly, Kellan, I don't want to lose this woman, or her girls. Not after everything we've done together. You can't lie to me, and you can't lie to yourself, either. We said we wouldn't catch feelings but that is exactly what happened. We might as well face it and figure out a way to work with it in the long term. But Avery needs to be free from Daniel, first."

I nod slowly. "What did your lawyers say?"

"Not what I had hoped. They know the county court judges fairly well, and they worry we may not have enough for such a wide-range protective order for Avery against Daniel. There needs to be evidence of egregious violence."

"Egregious."

The mere word sends shivers down my spine.

"Yeah. We can't let Daniel get too close to her. It'd only take seconds to kill her. We can't risk it. The only thing we can do is grab him, have you arrest him attempting to harm Avery or the girls, and then try and push for the case to go over to one of the circuit courts, instead. If we're lucky enough to land a sympathetic judge there, we might have a better shot at keeping Daniel one state over from Avery even after he is released from prison."

I don't like this. I don't like it one bit.

Then again, we haven't even gotten close enough to Daniel Madison to even make an arrest, so this specific scenario is still pretty far away. Nevertheless, it's the kind of bridge we need to be mindful of in order to make sure there aren't any nasty surprises farther down the road for Avery and her daughters. My heart aches at the thought of losing her. Luke is on point, regardless. I've caught feelings. The kind of deep feelings that may take a lifetime to heal from if we lose her. I don't want that to ever happen, she and the girls mean too much.

They've become an integral part of my existence in such a short time, it's almost baffling. I have to make sure I come through for this woman without destroying my own career in the process, though. I'll need my sheriff's badge when things inevitably go south with my parents, too. I'll need the full force of the law behind me. It's a tight corner that I find myself wedged into.

I must be wise in every step I take from here.

FALLON

Today is not a good day.

Yesterday was even worse. Seeing Avery unravel the way she did shook me to the fucking core. Even in the hardest of times since she's been with us, she's been able to keep it together for the sake of her girls. I know Kellan is slightly skeptical about whether Avery even saw Daniel, but I'm certain that she did. Her reaction, the horror in her eyes, the tremor in her voice... all of it was real. Real enough to her to make my blood run cold.

I wish I could do more to make her feel safe but we're already stretched pretty thin. Our clients require a majority of our armed agents in the field, and Kellan's department has requested the remaining available operatives from Wolfhound Security to join his deputies in combing the whole of Lincoln County until they find Daniel. We've got two men watching the girls while they're at school, and another two with eyes on Avery while she's at the Masons' place. We keep waiting for that prick to show up.

And speaking of pricks who fail to show up, Randy hasn't come to work today. It's pissing me off. I've got back orders for parts that he needs to deal with, and a Buick I'm still working on. I need him here.

"Where the fuck are you?" I growl into the phone as I leave yet another voicemail for him. "This isn't looking good, buddy. Call me back."

I put the phone down and look around at the garage. It's a mess.

Randy was supposed to clean up yesterday evening but that got pushed aside when my car wouldn't start and he ended up driving me home. After our conversation yesterday, I expected he would have come early in the morning to complete the task. Something is going on with this fella, and, I don't have the patience to put up with it. I've got enough on my plate as it is,

especially since Luke worries that Avery might run away with the girls if we don't catch Daniel soon.

I'm restless, frustrated, and downright pissed off.

I try to do some work on the Buick, but I can't focus. The constant clangs and clatters of my wandering mind have me taking a couple of steps back and a deep breath before I decide to call it a day. I leave a written note for Randy on the main work bench.

You'd better be in by the time I get back, or consider yourself fired, I write.

While I understand matters of the heart and the difficulties of life, I need people that I can rely on to work with, people who will show up when they're supposed to show up. Someone who, if they can't make it in, they let me know so I can plan the rest of my day and workload. I gave Randy a chance, took him at his word. I'm greatly regretting that now.

This whole Avery situation is already taking up too much bandwidth, and I'm starting to think it's going to get worse before it gets better.

I need to do something. I don't know what exactly, but I can't be here anymore.

A short drive later, I'm back at the house. Luke is in one of the main briefing rooms, barking orders at six of our operatives from the computer forensics department. His jacket rests on one of the chairs, and he has removed his tie. The top two buttons of his shirt are loose. I rarely see him like this in the middle of the day. It's a sign of stress and chaos for a man who usually has everything under control.

"Go through every single fucking second of the past thirty hours," he says. "Focus on that street and the entire block if you have to. Match the timing to the call we got from Avery and see if there was somebody standing just outside the café. Get a jacket color, pants color, hair or hat color, and check other neighboring video feeds. If that fucker was there, he walked off somewhere. There has to be one camera that captured a better view of him, or at least enough to give us a clue."

"We'll input his height and weight into the search algorithm," one of the operatives says. "If he's careful to hide his face from the cameras, his height and weight should help us narrow down the possibilities."

"Precisely. Go all in, guys and gals. Avery needs us," Luke says. "Meeting adjourned. I need a report before midnight."

"He's paying double for the overtime," I quip in a poor attempt to lighten

the mood.

The entire place is immersed in a sense of high stress and urgency, and I can tell it's taking a toll on everybody, not just Luke. The operatives give me faded chuckles and smiles as they excuse themselves and leave the meeting room, each of them determined to get to the bottom of this. At least we're fortunate enough to have some of the country's sharpest minds at work here.

Once they're out of the room, Luke lets a heavy sigh roll from his chest as he collapses into one of the chairs and closes his eyes for a moment.

"What are you doing here?" he asks me. "Aren't you supposed to be at the shop, working on that sexy Buick you've been droning on about for the past week?"

"Randy's AWOL, and I don't have the patience to deal with anything shop-related right now," I reply bluntly. "I figured the Buick can wait, hoping I can be of more help here. Avery is trying to keep busy with the Masons' house, the little ones are still in school and I'm fucking lost."

"You and me both," Luke says. "I don't understand how Daniel got so smart at avoiding the cameras. According to Kellan, Lincoln County is one of the safest in Nebraska precisely because of the closed-circuit systems installed in every single fucking town. And yet, Daniel Madison managed to elude every single camera and continues to do so. It boggles the mind."

I let out a heavy sigh and take a seat next to him. My shoulders hurt, tension gathering just under the back of my neck. I haven't felt this way since the Navy—right before the ship blew up. "I have a feeling Daniel knows exactly what he's doing. He's clever and conniving. It would make sense that a narcissistic control freak like him would know how to avoid being seen everywhere."

"Well, it's not helping us, that's for sure."

"Nope. But we're doing the best we can. I think our best bet is still by baiting the bastard out."

"All we have to do is sit and wait. Annie and Miley don't know what's going on, so at least they're oblivious to the danger. But Avery is coming apart at the seams. I worry about her." The pained look on his face tells me how much.

"What can we do?" I ask with a slight shrug. "Kellan has the legal reins here, and he's limited on so many levels. I could reach out to some of our old Navy buddies, but I can't trust them to keep it from Kellan."

"One of them would absolutely be compelled to tell him. Honor bound."

We both know it.”

“I don’t think the law can help us, though,” I say the one thing I’ve avoided saying out loud since Avery first came into the picture. I have considered this possibility more than once, but I have trusted my brother and our security firm to handle it. Daniel has proven himself annoyingly capable, however, and I’m finding my thoughts bouncing back to a dark and dangerous scenario. One which I can no longer ignore. “Luke, I might have to do something.”

He gives me a troubled look. “What are you talking about?”

“I might ask you to let me be the first to know if you have a location on Daniel, before you notify Kellan and the sheriff’s department. I don’t trust the court, man, I don’t trust the judges, either. The legal system is a sham to those who know how to play it. Look at my parents. Look at how they’re waltzing around, free and only slightly irritated by Kellan’s investigations. They’re confident they are immune to justice. It’s ridiculous.”

Luke leans forward, elbows resting on his knees. The blue of his eyes has darkened to a shade of midnight, his forehead crinkled and coldness exuding from every pore.

“Fallon, if you go down that road, you’ll put Kellan in a tough spot.”

“I know. But Daniel shouldn’t be allowed to live. You know it. I know it. He will find a way to keep coming after Avery and the girls. He will never let them be, they will never feel completely safe or be at peace as long as he breathes. I can’t sit by and let him toy with her like this.”

“We have to trust Kellan here.”

“I want to. Don’t you think I don’t want to? He’s my twin brother for God’s sake. But I’ve met enough people like Daniel to know that this is only the beginning. It’ll get worse. And you’re right, I think Avery will try to make a run for it sooner or later. She doesn’t know how we feel about her, she doesn’t understand how deep this bond of ours truly runs, and I get it. She’s been so busy surviving and protecting her girls, she doesn’t have the clarity to notice what you and I and Kellan have already become aware of. We can’t let her get hurt or worse. We can’t let her leave.”

Luke groans with genuine anguish, and I know I’m bringing up terrible memories for him.

I remember precisely what he is capable of in terms of violence. And he’s certainly aware of my propensity for it, too. It took us a couple of years to pull ourselves out of that darkness. Kellan had the police force to keep him

on the straight and narrow. Besides that, Kellan was always the only righteous guy in our platoon. The rest of us could easily turn into monsters if the situation demanded it.

“I’m stirring nasty shit up here, I’m sorry,” I tell Luke. “But I’m just telling you that I am ready to go down that road if that’s what it takes to keep Avery and the girls here and safe.”

“Don’t do this to Kellan.”

“He’ll have to arrest me if he finds out,” I sigh deeply. “I’d do the same if I were him. But I don’t really care. Not where Avery is concerned. He’d be upset, yeah, but he would also understand. I haven’t decided on anything yet, but I have given it enough thought to come here and talk to you about it.”

“Why *are* you talking to me about it?” Luke asks, cocking his head to the side. “Do you expect me to talk you out of it?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

He smiles, but it’s a bitter smile. The smile of a defeated man. His own demons have breached the surface. “I wouldn’t. I’d probably cover for you. Fucking hell, Fallon, I’d probably join you. As much as I hate to admit it, you may be right about Daniel. Killing him might be the only way—”

“No, I want you to stay out of it, Luke,” I cut him off. “Don’t even think about it. I saw what the Navy did to you, man. I don’t want you falling down that rabbit hole again. You deserve better. Besides, Avery is going to need you and Kellan to be there to pick up the pieces when it comes time to pay for what I’m ready to do.”

“Fallon. There has to be another way.”

“I’m not sure there is. Look at us. It’s been over two months since Avery came into the picture, two months that we’ve been searching for this guy. He made it into North Platte and even had the audacity to show his face to Avery, yet we’re still not even close to picking him up. He’s practically laughing in our faces. And after what she did to get away from him, you and I both know that he will kill her once he gets his hands on her.”

Luke shakes his head, then curses under his breath and gets up, slowly walking over to one of the large windows overlooking the front gardens. It’s snowing again. The view should offer a smidge of tranquility, but all I can think about is how hard it’ll be to move quickly from one point to another if a blizzard hits again. I need clean roads and decent weather if I’m to go after this guy.

“I don’t know, Fallon. It’s a pretty drastic measure. I’m ready to back you

up however I can, but let's hold off until tomorrow, at least."

"Just promise me one thing," I say. He gives me a wondering glance.

"What is it?"

"You'll tell me first if you identify Daniel anywhere. The tech guys are currently combing the shit out of hours' worth of CCTV footage with new search parameters. He's got to pop up at some street corner, parking lot, 7/11, something. Wherever you see him, please, Luke, tell me first. I'll get ahead and track him down. I can find him."

Luke thinks about it for a moment. "And once you find him, what will you do? Will you kill him, or will you bring Kellan in?"

"I guess I'll have to decide on the spot."

His expression tells me he doesn't like that and I get it. I wouldn't either if I were in his shoes. Luke is tempted to kill that fucker, too, but I won't let him destroy his life. He's worked so hard to get this security firm up and running. He loves Avery and the girls. Kellan loves them, too. They would be with her if I'm no longer around.

She's worth it.

She's worth the sacrifice. I'll let the old monster out of me for one last run. All I need is an hour ahead of Kellan and enough bullets to remove Daniel from this world. Then, and only then, will Avery be able to breathe again.

AVERY

The paranoia is definitely getting to me. I no longer know what's real and what's imagined. Kellan may have gotten into my head a little bit, too, causing me to wonder if I really did see Daniel the other day, but every fiber in my body is screaming at me that it was real. It felt too real in my gut and the way my body reacted for it to be just a bad dream or a hallucination. It was him. I cannot doubt myself on this. There is too much at stake.

I pull up outside the girls' school in North Platte shortly after I finish at the Masons' house. I was unable to accomplish much unfortunately but I can't focus, and the last thing I need is a dissatisfied customer just as I'm trying to build my career and pull myself back together. Looking around as I get out of my car, I notice an eerie quiet.

There was supposed to be a Wolfhound car parked across the street—a black sedan with chrome rims and WLF on the plate. I don't see them anywhere. My stomach churns as I take one last glance around. Maybe I missed them. But the street is unusually clear with barely a hint of traffic. It's snowing, so I'm sure that's contributing to less people being on the roads.

I make my way into the building and stop by the secretary's desk, first. I can hear teachers talking and children laughing from nearby rooms. The walls are covered in warm, walnut wood paneling, the floors dressed in lacquered hardwood, and hundreds of colorful kids' artwork hanging everywhere. It's supposed to inspire serenity and inspiration, yet it's not working on me. Then again, I'm a walking trainwreck, so I shouldn't be surprised that I'm unable to emotionally connect to the environment and allow it to soothe me. What's important is that Miley and Annie love being here.

Which will make leaving this place that much harder.

“Good afternoon,” the secretary greets me with an expression of surprise. Her face is weathered but kind. “Can I help you?”

“Hi. Yes,” I reply with a tight smile. “I was hoping I could get my girls out early today. Miley and Annie Madison”

The secretary gets up and shakes my hand. “I’m Mary, nice to meet you. You’re Miley and Annie’s mother?”

“Yes. Avery Madison. Sorry, I didn’t introduce myself,” I reply, laughing nervously.

“That’s alright. Can I see some ID, if you don’t mind?”

I’m relieved to know they check IDs, that not just anybody can walk in and pick kids up without properly identifying themselves first. It should comfort me, but I still can’t shake this constant feeling of uneasiness currently broiling in the pit of my stomach. I fish the fake driver’s license out of my purse and show it to her. She carefully checks it, then instantly relaxes and smiles broadly.

“Thank you,” Mary says. “I’ll go fetch the girls. Please, have a seat.”

She points at a couple of chairs close to her desk, and I nod in appreciation, but I don’t think I’m able to sit down. I need to see Annie and Miley. I watch Mary as she walks over to the end of the hallway, her short, square heels clicking across the hardwood.

Every second that passes adds more tension to my shoulders. A weight settles on the back of my neck, its grip tightening until I feel as though I’m being held firmly in place in a manner similar to one of the many waking nightmares I’ve had since I left Daniel. From the moment I saw him outside that café, I have experienced a deluge of every single trauma that has nestled deep within me. I thought I’d found true love and a savior in the guise of this man. He took me out of a miserable situation only to put me in something much worse. It took me a long time to realize the hard truth.

Now, it’s even harder to come to terms with what happened, mainly because it’s still happening. He is still hounding me, actively seeking to hurt me. I don’t know what more I can handle. I hate the idea of leaving Kellan, Fallon, and Luke—especially after everything they’ve done for me. But I do have this fake ID and bank account that I can use going forward. It could keep me off the radar long enough to find a way out of the country. Mexico sounds nice... me and my girls away from it all, starting over.

It's the path of a coward, my dad would say. My dad's not here though

and I'm alone. As much as I want to believe that the Cassidy twins and Luke are by my side, what gives me the right to irreparably alter their lives and careers because of my choices? I chose Daniel a long time ago. I kept choosing him until I'd finally had enough. This is my cross to bear. My demon to vanquish.

Mary comes back into the office with an odd look on her face and without my girls. In the back of my head, the worst-case scenario is already taking shape, its poisonous tendrils reaching out, stinging my ears and temples.

"I'm sorry, there seems to have been a misunderstanding," Mary says upon reaching me.

"What do you mean? Where are Miley and Annie? Aren't they in class?" I ask, but my voice is trembling. Panic is quickly setting in.

"It appears a gentleman from Wolfhound Security picked them up about an hour ago," Mary replies, then shows me a sign-in registry. "He signed in and out with a Wolfhound Security badge number, full name, and phone number. I had an appointment this morning, so the principal handled it. We've worked with Wolfhound many times and knew they were security for your girls, so she didn't think anything of it."

"This can't be happening," I mumble, dread washing over me.

Mary tries to touch my shoulder, but I slap her hand away. "I'm sorry. This is the agent's number, please, do give them a call. We did our due diligence."

She's still talking when I decide to turn away and walk back out into the cold of winter. I'm shaking like a leaf as I try to dial that number on my cellphone, only to reach an automated voicemail.

"The number you have reached is currently unavailable. Please leave a message after the tone," the robot says.

I curse under my breath, tears pricking my eyes. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK! This can't be happening."

Nobody from Wolfhound Security was supposed to pick them up. They were only meant to monitor the school while the girls were there. It now makes sense why I couldn't see the agents' car anywhere when I arrived. But Luke would've called to tell me if he authorized them to take my girls out of school so none of this is sitting well. I'm about to call him when an unknown number comes through first.

I stare at the screen for the first three rings before I answer. "Hello?"

"Hey, honey." Daniel's voice makes the hairs on the back of my neck

spike up.

“How did you get this number?” I manage.

“Oh, Avery. You continue to underestimate me,” he replies, almost laughing. “Listen, we need to talk. Miley and Annie miss you.”

The hard truth hits me like a brick in the teeth. “*It was you.* You took them out of school.”

“It wasn’t as difficult as I thought it would be,” he says. His calmness only adds to my anxiety and the horror of what has happened. “You’d be amazed what you are capable of if you want something bad enough. And I really want my family back, Avery. I want my life back.”

“Daniel, I swear to God, if you hurt them—”

“Don’t take that fucking tone with me,” he says dangerously. “I’m the one with the power here, something you seem to have forgotten. We’re gonna do things nice and easy. You’re gonna do what I tell you, otherwise you’ll never see Annie or Miley again.”

“What do you want?”

I keep looking around, hoping I might spot him somewhere nearby. Maybe he’s watching me from a parked car or from one of the buildings across the street, but the sound of a distant train engine makes me realize he’s somewhere out on the edge of town. My brain is firing at full speed, but I can’t come up with anything smart or safe, given the monster I’m dealing with. The wounded little girl within me quivers with fear and despair, her screams echoing in the back of my head. I’m alone and helpless again.

“Well, you’ve seen enough thriller movies to know the drill. No cops, no feds, not a single call to any of those dicks you’ve been shacking up with,” Daniel says. “I apologized to the girls for the misunderstanding we had the night you kidnapped my children and abandoned me. Miley has told me a lot about the time they’ve been spending with your friends. You fucking whore.”

“You have no right to—”

“You want what’s best for your daughters, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll follow my instructions to the letter. I’ll send you an address. You need to be there in thirty minutes. If you’re late, I’m gone. We’re gone. If I so much as sniff outside company, we’re gone. Don’t be your stupid usual self, Avery. I just wanna talk.”

“Fine.”

“Once you receive the address you are to dispose of your cell phone in

that orange bin outside the dry cleaners, understand?” he says.

I glance across the street and see the bin in question. Disgust unfurls in my throat. “You had this all planned out, didn’t you?”

“I’ve had my eyes on you for a while, babe. Did you really think you could simply get away from me? That you could keep my daughters from me? Enough with this nonsense. Do as you’re told, and maybe we can be a happy family again.”

The line goes dead.

I’m about to start crying when the text message comes through with a street name and number. I check it on a map app, make a mental note of the location, then take the phone apart and rush across the street to dump it in the orange bin. I leave the battery out atop a mound of snow, hoping it might help if anybody comes looking for me. It’s the most I can do under the circumstances, and it’s a long shot, at best.

Armed with a shaky resolve, I head back to my car and pull out a knife I keep in the trunk, hiding it in my jacket pocket. It’s not something I wish to ever have to use, but I need to be able to defend myself and my girls. I’ve no doubt Daniel will try to hurt me once we’re face to face. His fits of rage are horrible, and I don’t want Annie or Miley to be within his reach ever again. It needs to end today. One way or another, it will end today.

This is my only shot at true freedom.

I must take it.

The address is on the southwestern edge of North Platte. I’m looking at a string of abandoned four-story buildings overlooking a train yard. The sky above is grey and ugly, which is a perfectly fitting metaphor for how I feel inside. There is barely a soul around—a couple of homeless guys trudging up the street and the occasional car driving past with no intention of stopping or even slowing down. Nobody wants to be out here, which means I’m not likely to receive any sort of assistance from a stranger.

I find the street number quickly, noting that the parking spaces along the battered and frozen sidewalk are currently unoccupied. If Daniel is here, he must’ve parked somewhere behind the building. I look up and notice the worn façade with black iron frames on the broken and spray-painted windows. This place has been deserted for a long time, and I doubt anyone from City Hall has bothered to come around to inspect it. It should be condemned.

I take a deep breath and go in.

The hallway is dark and dirty and it smells heavy and musty. I see rat droppings everywhere, along with discarded newspapers, torn envelopes, and several used IV needles. This must be a preferred spot for those who find solace and comfort in the company of hard drugs and liquor. I step over a few cracked beer bottles and make my way up the creaky stairs, wondering what this place must've been like when people actually lived here.

It couldn't have been that bad. This was once a thriving part of North Platte. People raised their children here. They used to buy their groceries at the abandoned mart down the road. They must've enjoyed their cups of coffee out on the sidewalk on a warm spring day at some point. But all of that is gone. What's left is a dirty, dilapidated pathetic shell of a building.

As instructed, I head up to the second floor and find apartment number fourteen. The door is scratched up and the green paint has faded. My heart thuds furiously as I turn the knob and find that it's open. I tremble as I go in, one hand in my pocket, tightly clutching the knife.

"Annie? Miley?" I call out, hoping that I might hear them, praying that they're safe.

But silence is the only response.

I take a few cautious steps deeper into the narrow hallway, paying attention to any hint of movement. The shadows are long, beams of light breaching through the dirty living room windows. Yet I hear nothing. Not even a peep or a sigh. My girls aren't here.

A door opens to my left, too fast for me to react.

I see him.

His hand swings out.

Daniel punches me hard in the side of the head. Stars explode before my eyes.

I feel myself falling. The darkness swallows me whole as I hit the floor with a thud.

LUKE

“They were supposed to be back here two hours ago,” I say as neither Fallon nor Kellan are able to tell me where Avery and the girls are.

We’ve been so busy going over CCTV footage that we didn’t even notice the time until Helen came in to take charge of Annie and Miley, assuming they’d be back from school by now. My nerves are stretched thin, none of this makes sense.

“I can’t reach her,” Kellan says as he hangs up on a third attempt at calling Avery. “The phone has been turned off.”

“Let me see,” I mutter and go on my laptop. “We didn’t fit her phone with a tracker for nothing.”

The last call she got was from an unknown number just outside the school at an hour when the girls were supposed to still be in class. Fallon and Kellan inch closer, both of them frowning at the laptop screen with understandable confusion.

“This doesn’t seem right. The signal cuts off here,” Fallon points at the online map. “What is this, a dry cleaners?”

“I think so,” Kellan says, then looks at me. “Where are the agents you had watching her?”

I check my phone but don’t see any text updates from either Smith or Paxton. It’s unlike them, and it’s only serving to amplify my uneasiness. I try calling both, but I can’t get through to them, either. With shaking fingers, I type their GPS identification number into the same online map, but it seems to have been disabled. I’m getting an error message, and it’s got Kellan cursing like a sailor.

“This is bullshit!” he snaps. “What the fuck is going on, Luke?”

“I don’t know.”

Fallon growls hoarsely with newfound anger. “I don’t like this. Call the fucking school.”

“I have a better idea,” I reply.

Half an hour later, the three of us get out of my SUV outside the girls’ school. There’s no sign of Avery’s car. I can’t see Smith and Paxton’s undercover sedan anywhere, either. It’s cold, it’s snowing, and it’s getting darker. It’ll be night soon, and the kids have already been sent home. Checking my phone again, I’m not receiving any new updates from the GPS trackers. They’re still deactivated.

“Whatever is going on, I think the three of us can easily point to a suspect,” I say.

“Son of a bitch,” Fallon hisses, angrily looking around. I’ve seen this look on his face before, and it led to a particularly brutal outcome.

“Listen, we need to do this smart and fast,” Kellan cuts in. “I’ll go check with the principal and find out what happened. Avery must’ve picked them up if the GPS confirms that she was here. Worst-case scenario is she made a run for it like I suspected she would.” He looks at Fallon. “I need you to check the dry cleaners. The phone must be somewhere in or around that place.” He looks at me. “What was the last transmitted location of Smith and Paxton?”

“Right where we’re standing,” I reply.

“Okay, do a perimeter search,” Kellan says. “Round the block. I’ll put a BOLO out on Avery’s car in the meantime.”

We each agree with a nod and split up. Kellan goes into the building, his phone already burning hot as he starts making calls to his deputies for the appropriate measures. We need to pinpoint where Avery’s car is. If she has run off, then she is in danger—no doubt Daniel will be going after her. We knew this might happen, but we’d hoped we could talk some sense into her before it did.

I thought we’d managed to persuade Avery to stick around a little bit longer since she is much safer with us than out there on her own. But dammit, that woman is too stubborn for her own good.

The ghost pain in my leg has returned. It only happens when the stress is at an all-time high, when I am overwhelmed and unable to control the situation. I always try to appear like I have it together, but there are moments when I feel as though I may unravel and fall apart, unable to ever put myself

back into a single piece again. This is one such moment, as the thought of losing Avery and the girls forever fries my circuits and has me spinning out of control.

I catch a glimpse of Fallon rummaging through an orange bin outside the dry cleaners just before I turn the corner and make my way around the school building. There are plenty of cars parked on this particular side street, so I need to focus on finding the sedan that Smith and Paxton checked out this morning for today's shift.

Another turn, and I'm behind the school's private property. The whole perimeter is fenced and guarded with security cameras, but I don't need access to any of them just yet. To my dismay, I find the car wedged between an old, brown pickup truck and a green minivan. The license plates match to the sedan they had checked out for their shift—it's a Wolfhound Security vehicle.

I rush over and check the front seat first. The driver and the passenger seats are empty, but there is blood splattered across the inside of the passenger door. My stomach churns as I use my computerized skeleton key to unlock the vehicle and check the backseat, since the windows are smudged and frozen. This car has been unattended for a while.

"Fuck!" I yell as I see Paxton and Smith's bodies thrown one on top of the other in the backseat, blood pooled and congealed along the leather and over the floormats. "Shit, shit... SHIT!" I snarl as I quickly proceed to turn Smith over.

Their ID badges are gone. Their guns and phones are gone, too. The killer didn't bother to take their wallets, though.

By the time Fallon and Kellan catch up with me, I'm shaking and making calls, alerting the entire security company that we've lost two agents and that Daniel Madison may have gotten his hands on Avery and her daughters. It takes the Cassidy twins about a minute to take the whole picture in, but once they do, I watch their demeanors shift from worried men to armed and determined machines. I'm fearful for Fallon the most. He's darker than ever, quiet, as he hands over Avery's dismantled phone. "I found it in the bin outside the dry cleaners," he says, his tone flat and cold.

"He has her," Kellan concludes, the pain in his voice cutting through my own heart.

There is no doubt in my mind that Daniel has Avery and the girls. The best explanation is that he posed as Smith when he entered the school. From

what we've seen of Daniel throughout our investigation—photos that Avery has given us, IDs—he resembles Smith in stature and facial features, enough to pass as the agent with a brief flash of his badge. The fact that he had the audacity to use Smith's badge, to leave a mockery of Smith's signature on the sign-in register after he brutally killed him, is nothing short of sociopathic. He walked out with Annie and Miley, then waited until Avery arrived to make his move.

We don't know whether he took her from outside the dry cleaners or lured her to another location, but I am willing to bet that the last call that Avery got before her phone was discarded came from that fucker. Daniel is holding one too many cards here.

“What the fuck do we do?” I hear myself asking, almost shouting the question.

“We find her,” Kellan promptly replies, his jaw tight and tense. “We're not out of options yet.”

I can see from Fallon's expression that finding Avery may not be everything we'll end up doing tonight. My worst nightmare has come true. That one possibility I'd thought we could avoid. I swore to myself that I wouldn't fall for this woman, especially since I understood from day one that she could leave our lives as quickly as she entered them.

My honor demands that I do something, my heart won't let me walk away.

No matter what, we're getting Avery back.

My head hurts.

I slowly open my eyes and try to keep my breath even as I take in my surroundings. I don't recognize this place—where am I? Then I remember, I'm at the apartment in that dreadful, abandoned building. Oh God, Daniel came out and punched me. Where are my girls?

Suddenly I realize I'm not at the apartment anymore. This looks like some sort of cabin.

The walls are made of wood—horizontal logs and old windows with cracked glass and enough dirt on them to inform me that no one has been here in a long time. Figures. Daniel found the perfect hiding spot, judging by the pine trees lining the view outside. There's tons of snow and not a single sound of traffic or civilization. I'm out in the woods, somewhere far enough from North Platte to make me understand precisely the depth of shit in which I'm stuck.

“No...” I moan as I realize that my hands are tied to the back of an old chair. The plastic cable ties cut into my skin, sending waves of pain shooting up my arms.

My back hurts and I can't move my legs. My ankles are also bound but with a thick length of rope. Painful heat persists in my cheek, and I can barely see through my left eye. It must be swollen. That blow really knocked my lights out. I could have a concussion or worse, but I'm not sure it matters anymore. I look around again.

I'm in a living room with an open-plan kitchen. There's an inch of dust and grime everywhere. The sofa is covered with an ancient-looking blanket and there are tin mugs abandoned on the coffee table. A pair of battered boots

have been left by the door, a pack of cigarettes abandoned next to an ashtray on the counter separating the kitchen from the living area. Spiders casually hang from their intricate webs drawn across the brick fireplace. I can see a mound of ash resting at the bottom.

There is no way anyone has actually been living here though I can't help but wonder if Daniel has been spending his nights here. It's too cold without a fire so he would have had to of found one hell of a sleeping bag to survive the Nebraskan winter in this place.

Where are my girls?

"Annie! Miley!" I call out with a shaky voice.

"Momma!" I hear Miley cry from the room to my right, most likely a bedroom. My heart is racing, the blood pumping fiercely through my veins.

I struggle against my restraints, but I can't free myself. "Momma's coming, honey, I promise!"

"Momma's not going anywhere," Daniel comes in through the back door, wearing a smug smile and a thick winter coat. "Momma's spending some quality time with Daddy, first."

"What the hell did you do, you son of a bitch," I snarl.

Daniel scoffs and smacks me across the face. He makes sure to hit me right where it's already tender and swollen. It hurts like a thousand needles puncturing my skin at the same time, and I can't stop the tears from flowing freely as I whimper from the pain. "'Don't worry about our daughters," he adds. "They're fine, under lock and key until they learn to respect their father."

"My God, Daniel, you've gone too far this time," I manage.

"Oh, no, honey, I've just begun to explore my limits," he says, taking a seat on the sofa.

Only now do I realize that I'm not as cold as I should be, given the cabin's condition. The faint smell of heated metal has me turning my head to find an oil heater plugged into a far wall. There must be one in the girls' room as well. At least he's not letting us freeze to death, though I'm not sure what his endgame is anymore. He's enjoying this too much.

"What is going on, Daniel? What are you trying to accomplish here?" I ask. Remembering some of the training that Kellan gave me in case I ever had to deal with such a situation, I decide I need to keep this bastard talking and buy myself as much time as I possibly can. Kellan and I only ever discussed this precise moment as a far-fetched scenario, not the blistering

reality that it has clearly become. “Where are we? What time is it?”

My ex-husband smiles, leaning back into the sofa with great satisfaction. “Oh, now you wanna talk to me, Avery? After all my attempts to reach out and engage in meaningful and constructive conversation? Too little, too late, don’t you think?”

It’s light enough outside that I can see the forest. It was early evening when I found the apartment building, so I must’ve been knocked out for the entire night here. Kellan, Fallon, and Luke must be out of their minds with worry. They’re probably turning the whole county over looking for us. I didn’t think Daniel would go this far.

“I’m unable to move, and you’re probably going to kill me,” I tell Daniel. “So, you might as well tell me the truth.”

“I don’t want to kill you, Avery, but I do have to teach you a lesson. It all depends on how willing you are to learn,” he says.

Upon a more careful inspection, I notice the bleached blonde patches at the top of his head. He’s cut his hair really short, but I can tell it was dyed before. His stubble is thicker and darker than how he usually wears it. He’s wearing a plaid shirt and dirty, raggedy jeans—the polar opposite of his usual suit and tie. This man made it an essential part of his identity to always look good and perfectly groomed, and I know he is anything but comfortable looking like this.

“How long have we been here?” I ask again as I reel in from the pain of his violence. I need to make sure he doesn’t hit me again.

“Since last night,” he says, the corner of his mouth ticking with amusement. “The girls are nice and comfy in their room, you don’t need to worry about them. They’re well fed and taken care of. Not that you deserve to know, but I’m giving you this courtesy despite the way you treated me.”

“The way *I* treated *you*? Seriously?”

He leans forward, cracking his knuckles—clearly itching to hit me again. “I’d mind what I say if I were you, honey. You’re not in a position to talk back to me.”

“Where are we?” I ask again, trying to change the subject.

“If you’re hoping that your boyfriends will find us, I hate to disappoint you. Nobody knows where you are, and nobody’s coming for you,” he says. “We’ve got this place all to ourselves, and we’re gonna take advantage of every moment we have together. With a little bit of luck and just the right amount of cooperation on your part, the four of us might walk out of here a

family again.”

“My God, Daniel. You’ll never get away with this. You hurt me. You hurt Miley!”

With lightning speed, he gets up and slaps me again. I cry out in sheer agony as he towers above me. “Don’t you dare bring that up again!” Daniel hisses. “Do you think I enjoyed doing that? Do you think I wanted to hurt Miley? My own flesh and blood! You made me, Avery. You’re responsible for everything that happened between us!”

“Please, stop,” I sob, struggling to get over the dizziness that his blow left behind. “What do you want, Daniel? I’ll do anything, just let Annie and Miley go.”

“They’re not going anywhere. They’re our daughters, and you’re my wife. We belong together.”

“We’re divorced.”

“That’s just paperwork,” he scoffs. “I’m not letting you tear this family apart ever again.”

“The police are looking for you.”

Daniel grabs a handful of my hair and yanks my head back. My scalp burns as I try not to let him see how badly he’s hurting me, even though I can taste blood on my lips. “You’re to blame for that, too,” he says. “You should’ve been a better wife and mother, Avery. Maybe then we wouldn’t be in this situation. All you had to do was obey and cherish your man.”

“How did you find us?”

“Oh, you didn’t make it easy,” he laughs lightly. “But I’m a persistent man. And Nebraska ain’t as hard to dig through as you may think. It took me a while, I’ll give you some credit there. But I did it. I made some calls, called in a few favors. You’d be surprised what money can do in this day and age.”

That must mean corruption at some level. Somebody gave him information they weren’t supposed to divulge. He paid someone off. All he would’ve needed was a radius of my location to search through. Maybe I could’ve been more careful, even with a fake identity. But none of that matters now. The only thing that does matter is that I have to survive this somehow. I have to figure out a way to free myself and save my girls.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I say.

Daniel gives me an icy cold grin. “You still think you’re smarter than me.” He takes out a gun and leaves it on the coffee table next to me. “I guess we’ll have to do this the hard way, then.”

“No, I just need to use the bathroom. I’m stiff and cold and in pain, Daniel.”

“Piss your pants, that’ll warm you up,” he scoffs. “I’m in pain, too. I’ve been in pain since you left me.” He points to the red scar on his temple. “See this? I have to wear this for the rest of my life. This is your work of art, remember? I was only trying to reason with you.”

This man is either delusional or determined to never take responsibility for any of the horrible things he’s done to me. I cannot antagonize him, though—I need to keep him calm for as long as I can. It’s hard when every fiber in my body screams hostility, when my very soul aches to see him on the floor, drowning in a puddle of his own blood. He is the devil incarnate. A monster that has finally caught up with us. I was foolish to think I would ever be safe from him.

“What do you want from me, Daniel?” I ask.

“What I’ve always wanted,” he replies. “I want you back. I want our girls to grow up with a mother and a father. I want what I’m owed, Avery, my family.”

“And if I can’t give you that?”

“Then I’ll be a single dad, and you’ll be food for worms,” he says, eerily calm and content. “The choice is yours.”

The mere sound of his voice makes me want to vomit and hopelessness begins to creep up on me, but my girls need me to survive this. I don’t know how I can overpower him. I’m bound and defenseless, his to hurt however he pleases. He’s got my daughters locked in a bedroom where they can probably hear everything that is happening.

I’d thought hope was a dangerous thing to have, but hopelessness is worse.

EVERY

Trying to reason with an unhinged man like Daniel is futile. I've tried everything I can think of. He refuses to take accountability, and the only way I'm getting out of here is if I can convince him that I am willing to be his wife again, to be a family. Deep down, however, I'm certain he knows that's never going to happen, no matter what I say. He knows I'll try to escape as soon as he unties me. Only death will free me.

"I was thinking Mexico," he says, absently gazing out the window. *Mexico... the same place I thought of.* My face hurts on both sides, now. He keeps hitting me, even when I'm quiet. I can't hear the girls anymore. They must've worn themselves out crying. I can't imagine what they must be going through. I'm to blame. I should've taken them and left the minute I saw Daniel outside the café. "It's nice and warm there all through the year. We could find a place close to the beach," he adds. "The girls would love the sun, the sea, and the sand."

"The police will find us," I reply. "One way or another, they will catch up. Why don't you just turn yourself in, Daniel? You'll do some time, but it'll be a shorter sentence than what you'll be looking at if you continue with this."

"Some time?" he laughs. "For double homicide? Oh, honey, you're so fucking dumb, it hurts."

"Double homicide?" I ask, shocked.

"Whose ID do you think I used to get the girls out of school yesterday?"

I suddenly remember the sign-in sheet and what Mary had said. A Wolfhound Security agent had signed the girls out. "You posed as one of Luke's employees. Oh, God, Daniel. You killed two security agents for this?"

“And I will do a lot worse to keep my girls,” he says.

“You’re insane!” I blurt out, and it’s all he needs to fly into another fit of rage.

“I’ll show you insane,” Daniel snarls and takes the gun, shoving the muzzle in my mouth.

I cry and gag from the cold metal pressing down on my tongue. The blood freezes in my veins as the fear cripples me, stunning my senses. I can’t move. I can’t even breathe as he turns the safety off. All he has to do is pull the trigger, and it’s over.

“How does it feel, Avery? How does it feel to know that I’m the last face you will ever see?” Daniel asks.

I’m unable to feel anything except absolute terror. I think back on the life I’ve lived, the decisions that brought me to this moment. I think about being unable to see Miley and Annie grow up. I think of Kellan. Fallon. Luke. God, I could have lived such a beautiful life with them, we would’ve had it all—love, peace, tranquility, safety. If only...

If only what?

There is only one way that this is going to end.

I’m not ready to die.

Daniel’s insidious grin sends shivers down my spine.

The sound of glass breaking behind him steals that evil grin away. Something metallic hits the wooden floor with a clang, followed by a rolling sound then a hiss. Smoke swells and fills the room. Daniel takes the gun out of my mouth and turns around.

Somebody shouts from outside. “Close your eyes, Avery!”

It’s Kellan.!

I close them tight and hold my breath as relief envelops me at the same moment that smoke engulfs the room. BOOM!

White light. Deafening silence.

A flash-bang grenade.

I’ve fallen to the side, hitting the floor with my shoulder, and it hurts like a motherfucker. I hear the door crashing open, boots thudding across the hardwood, men shouting.

“DON’T MOVE!”

“PUT YOUR HANDS UP!”

Where the fuck is Daniel?

“I see Avery!”

Fallon's voice. The shuffling of rushed steps.

I can't see a thing through the smoke. I'm choking and coughing. "What's going on?" I manage, but I barely recognize my own voice.

Silhouettes swoop down around me. Somebody gently grabs my wrist and checks my pulse. "You're okay, baby," Fallon says.

"Fallon!" I call out and look up.

I look into his forest green eyes behind the tactical goggles. He's in full gear, the mountain of a man clad in black Kevlar and armed to the teeth. They found us. I can't believe they found us. I see a small blade flash as he cuts me loose. I'm finally free, my ankles and wrists burning from the pain. Relief reluctantly washes over me, something tells me it's not over.

BANG! BANG!

I scream.

"He's in the bedroom!" I hear Kellan shout.

"The girls are in there!" I call out. "My babies are in there!"

Fallon helps me up but he doesn't let me go. The smoke in the cabin begins to clear. All the windows have been broken. There are over a dozen men in here, all with assault rifles aimed at the bedroom door. Writhing and flailing like a crazed lunatic, I try to get away from Fallon. I need to get to Miley and Annie.

"LET ME GO! He's got my girls!"

"Hold on, Avery," Fallon grunts, one arm locked around my waist, preventing me from getting up, his body covering mine for protection. "Hold on."

I see Kellan take the lead, motioning for his men to stand down. Heavy silence falls over the cabin as he carefully moves toward the bedroom door. Cautious in every motion, he opens the door to reveal Daniel holding Miley in front of him. Thankfully, the gun is nowhere to be found, but the bastard is holding my daughter, the coward hiding behind his child with a crazed look on his face.

Miley is pale and silent, dried tears staining her face. My heart breaks when I see her, she's too terrified to cry one more tear. Annie is wailing and screaming somewhere in a corner. I can't even see her. Time slows down as Fallon resists my struggle to free myself.

"Every Wolfhound weapon has a GPS tracker planted in it," Fallon whispers in my ear. "Daniel ditched your car and probably thought he'd lose us that way. He didn't."

“He has Miley!” I am beside myself, shaking and crying, unable to control my own body anymore.

None of the men are moving, but they’re all watching him. Kellan has his weapon raised and pointed at Daniel, who is holding Miley with one arm. I can’t even breathe.

“Don’t be stupid,” Kellan tells Daniel. “You’re surrounded. You’re not getting out of here.”

“You are not taking my kids away from me,” Daniel hisses. “I’ll kill everyone in here first before I let that happen.”

“These are your children, Daniel,” Kellan says, his voice calm and even. “Are you really going to kill your own children?”

“If I have to,” he replies coldly.

I’m speechless.

Time seems to stop altogether. It’s as if I’m being forced to watch a movie I don’t want to know the ending of. I take in a deep breath and hold it. Movement in the window behind Daniel catches my eye. A tall man with broad shoulders. An assault rifle. It’s aimed at the back of Daniel’s head, and Daniel has no idea he’s there since he’s got his back to the window.

My brain nearly shorts out as I spot Kellan’s subtle nod.

The bullet cracks the window, piercing Daniel’s skull.

It’s over in a split-second. He drops Miley.

“Keep your eyes closed!” I scream at her.

Miley screams as she falls to the floor but thank God she clenches her eyes shut. Annie continues to wail from her hiding spot.

“It’s okay, honey,” I hear Kellan say. I didn’t even register the speed with which he got to her.

Daniel is dead on the ground, blood pooling around his head. Oh, God, it’s over. I look up to see Luke outside the cabin window as he takes his hat and mask off. He’s the one who fired the deadly shot. He killed Daniel. He saved Miley and Annie.

He saved all of us. It’s finally over.

LUKE

I didn't want for things to come to this but it was the only way to keep Fallon from destroying his life by taking Daniel out. And it was the only way we could make sure the girls and Avery would survive. Once we found the cabin and completed our thermal imaging of the entire structure, we knew that Daniel would use his own daughters as leverage one way or another. We also knew that the fucker could not be allowed to see another day on this earth. I had to do something to protect Fallon from the darkness and to protect Kellan's career.

Kellan deputized me before we got to the cabin. It was a legitimate shot and legally I had every right to do what I did. I was protecting innocent lives, lives that would have been snuffed out if I hadn't pulled the trigger. I lost a small piece of myself in the process but Avery is safe. Miley and Annie are safe. That's all that matters.

"Annie, stay where you are and keep your eyes closed, honey!" Avery shouts as she rushes into the bedroom.

Kellan has Miley in his arms. The little girl sobs and hides her face against his chest while Avery scoops a crying Annie up. Together, they take the girls out of the cabin, and I meet them out front as the rest of our crew handle the situation inside. Fallon joins us, his weapon hanging from his shoulder.

I left mine in the snow for evidence.

Sirens wail in the distance as Kellan's deputies make their way up the narrow country road leading to the abandoned cabin. It'll be one hell of a mess to clear up, but I find comfort in knowing that we did the right thing.

"I thought I'd never see you again," Avery cries as she holds Annie close.

Miley reaches out from Kellan's arms and hugs her mother. Avery kisses her softly and whispers soothing words in her ear. They will need some time to recover from this horrendous trauma. Annie is red-faced and tired, having cried her tiny heart out. The smoke couldn't have done any good, either.

"We had an incident a while back," Kellan explains. "We decided to plant GPS trackers on every weapon issued to Wolfhound Security agents."

"Yeah, Fallon mentioned something about that," Avery replies, blinking slowly.

The adrenalin must be wearing off. She is clearly exhausted, physically and emotionally drained. Relief is a double-edged sword in situations such as this. The body leaves its fight-or-flight state, suddenly depleted and unable to process much else. She will be sleeping for days, I reckon. But she will be fine. One way or another, Avery will pull herself back together. And we'll be there to help.

"I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner," Kellan says. "We had to make sure we knew precisely what we were walking into, and to be certain we could get you and the girls out safely."

"Oh my God, Kellan! I didn't think you'd be able to find us at all," Avery sighs deeply. "But you did. You saved us." She looks at me, and the pain in her eyes tells me everything I need to know. "You saved us Luke. I can't even imagine how this must feel for you."

"Look at you, still worrying about my feelings," I can't help but chuckle softly.

"None of this matters," Fallon intervenes. "It's over, Avery. You hear me? It's really over."

"Yeah."

But I can tell that Avery still doesn't believe it. From the way she keeps looking around, it's as if she's expecting to see Daniel come out of the cabin alive. Her soul is wounded worse than her face. She will have nightmares, PTSD. All of them will need some sort of therapy down the line, I'm sure. We've got good relationships with a couple of prominent children's psychologists that they will be able to work with.

"You're not running off on us ever again," Kellan tells Avery. "Never."

"I didn't want to," Avery says. "I felt like he didn't give me a choice."

"Hey!" Fallon snaps, startling the girls. "You're okay, alright? We're all okay. We're gonna be fine. And we're gonna go home after all this is over. We're gonna eat a nice, hot meal, and maybe some apple pie, ya' hear me?"

“Apple pie!” Miley exclaims with a shy smile. “I like apple pie.”

“Do you like cinnamon in your apple pie?” Fallon asks. Both girls nod enthusiastically. “Well I don’t, but we’ll get two apple pies. One for me, and one for you. Guess which one’s gonna have all the cinnamon you want in it?”

“Mine!” Miley shoots back.

Avery can’t help but smile. Annie seems calmer; exhausted, but safe and comforted in her mother’s arms. Miley still clings to Kellan for dear life.

The deputies finally arrive with flashing lights and screeching sirens. Guilt cuts me deep. It’s been a long time since I’ve had to kill a man.

I repeat the same mantra to myself over and over until it sticks.

It was worth it. It was justified. It was worth it. It was justified.

I know I had to do what I did.

I look at Avery and her daughters knowing I’d do it again in a heartbeat to protect them.

AVERY

Everything happened so fast after we left the cabin, I barely noticed when evening began to set over the sky again. I'm in Kellan's office, gazing out the window of the sheriff's department. Helen thankfully has my girls back at the house. They were both hungry and exhausted, they needed a hot bath, a warm bed, and someone to keep them close while I completed the statements and procedures following the incident.

I am beyond grateful for Helen.

I can't wait to be home with them again though, to hold them in my arms, kiss them and assure them that they are safe.

I'm wrapped in a blanket, sitting quietly as I wait for Kellan to get back. He's taken all the statements he needed—from me, from Luke and Fallon, and from every agent involved in the rescue. He even had the school principal come down to complete his file on Daniel before sending the whole thing over to the District Attorney. He's making sure every single aspect of the entire incident is covered so nobody takes the fall for what happened. Especially Luke.

Looking back, I try to walk myself through the decision-making process that led to them storming the cabin the way they did. It was a calculated risk, and Luke's intervention was unavoidable. We all know it and I'm learning to live with it. Daniel had to die. He was not going to let me leave that cabin alive, likely a murder-suicide.

"I found the mole," Kellan says as he, Fallon, and Luke come back into the office. "I found out who gave Daniel the intel he needed to find you."

"Who was it?" I ask.

"Some shitbag in the State Troopers' department," he replies. "Daniel had

some kind of dirt on him. We'll find out more once he's in custody. But we're covered, we're definitely covered."

"So, it's really over," I exhale sharply.

"Yes, and you need to keep the ice pack on," he says, nodding at the rapidly defrosting ice pack in my hand. I completely forgot about it. I'm so numb from everything that happened that I can barely feel the pain of Daniel's blows. My left eye feels better, though, and the swelling has definitely gone down. It'll be bruised for a while, but it's nothing that can't be fixed with the right amount of concealer. "We should get you to the hospital," Kellan adds. "Run a few tests on you, make sure you're okay."

I get up and put on a warm, thankful smile. "I'm okay, I promise. I just want to get out of here."

"Yeah, about that," Kellan says, exchanging brief glances with Fallon and Luke before he shuts the door to his office. "We wanted to talk to you about something, Avery."

"Oh?"

Fallon is the first to come closer, his gaze dark yet soft. "What do you want to do?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"It's over. You're free. You got your life and your freedom back in every possible sense," Luke replies. "So, what's the plan?"

I think about it for a moment. "I'm not really sure. Everything happened so fast, I'm still trying to wrap my head around what happened, to figure out how I feel right now."

"Don't go," Kellan sighs deeply. "Stay with us."

I know I should say something, but my words have left me. All I can do is look at these three wonderful men as they come closer, their massive, muscular frames overpowering my will altogether. Who am I kidding? I was always safe with them. I was happy and content, well taken care of, and cherished. The thought of leaving them hurts me more than any of Daniel's punches ever did.

"We love you," Luke says. "Each in our own way, Avery, but we love you. We've made it work so far, why not keep going?"

"The four of us?" I reply. "We were supposed to have fun... that was it."

Fallon smiles. "I think we can all agree it became way more than just fun. Avery, dammit, can't you see us? We're hopelessly in love with you."

Luke touches my hand. "I love you, Avery. And I want you in my life. I

believe you feel the same way—I see it in your eyes, I feel it in your touch. We belong together.”

I want to tell him that yes, I do feel the same. I want to throw myself in their arms and surrender completely to them. But Kellan picks up on my hesitation and hugs me tightly, covering my face with tender, loving kisses. I lose my self-control and welcome his affection. I feel his love pouring into my heart, my very soul expanding as I soften in his embrace.

“Why not give it a try?” he asks. “Miley and Annie have already made a home with us. They’re happy and safe. And you’ve already started a new life here. You’ve got remodeling jobs and plenty of opportunities to develop your career. You have our full support in anything you decide to do, Avery, but we want to be with you. We want to give this thing we have a real shot.”

“How will it work?” I ask him. “The world wouldn’t understand.”

“The world doesn’t need to understand,” Fallon says, cupping my cheek while Kellan still holds me tight. Luke kisses my temple. “It’ll be our secret, Avery. Our sweet, wonderful secret. What happens behind closed doors, stays behind closed doors.”

“You’ll always be safe and happy with us,” Luke says. “And now that Daniel is gone, you have no reason to run, no reason to struggle starting over again. You can just pick up where you left off.”

This is crazy, right?

My heart is screaming yes. My body is responding to their presence in such a deliciously familiar manner. I can no longer deny my feelings for them. I just survived the most traumatic event of my life and here are my three guardian angels, professing their love and telling me they want to share a life together.

What’s crazy is if you walk away from this.

“Let’s try,” Kellan says. “Stick around for a little while longer and see what happens. We’ll work it out. I know we will.”

“Think about it, Avery,” Luke says. “You’ve got nothing to lose. We want you in our lives, and we will do everything in our power to make sure you never regret the day we met.”

“I could never regret that day,” I concede with a deep exhale. “I love you. The three of you. I’ve loved you for a while, now. I don’t know when it happened, I don’t know when my heart clicked into place, but I’m done holding back, I’m done lying to myself. I love you, Kellan. I love you, Fallon. I love you, Luke. I love us too much not to try and see what more we

could do together.”

Kellan smiles gently and kisses me once more. Fallon and Luke’s arms snake around us, and we melt into each other. I have no idea where this will lead. I don’t have a clue as to whether it’ll actually work out or not.

But they’re right—there is no harm in trying, not when our hearts are already so tightly bound together. The girls already love them. They’ve grown attached to Helen, the house, and their school. They like it here. And I like it here, too.

The nightmare is over.

I’m done surviving. It’s time for me to start living.

AVERY

I can't believe how quickly the week flew by since the events at the cabin. I'd thought I'd freed myself the moment I first filed for divorce, but it pains me to admit that I wasn't truly free until I saw Daniel dead on the floor. I know it was the only way things could've ended. He brought it upon himself. One day, I will put all this behind me. I will heal and become a better version of myself. I will grow and I will thrive. So will my girls.

We're in good hands, now.

Miley and Annie are back in school, and Helen is ever the doting babysitter—a second mother, I might say. The legal system will handle Daniel's death accordingly. It was labeled as a justified kill, and Luke won't have any issues because of it. Wolfhound Security has lost two good agents in the process, but they will move on, and they will grow stronger and better because of it. And the prick who sold me out to Daniel will go to prison for what he did. His reasons don't matter anymore. He broke the law and put me and my daughters in mortal peril. I'm done forgiving anybody who hurts me or my children, directly or indirectly.

I finished the Masons' house. They were so delighted, they promised to recommend my services to others in their family and close circle of friends. I'm already getting calls for new projects. The outlook is more than positive. I have plenty of reasons to see a prosperous career here.

My face looks better. The bruises still hurt, but Helen tipped me off on a particular brand of concealer that does a wonderful job, allowing me to go out in public without feeling like I need to wear giant sunglasses.

"Oh, good, you're home!" Kellan exclaims as he comes into the foyer to greet me.

I've been out looking for some new fabrics for the Masons' curtains—one last favor after they've already paid me in full. They were so nice to me, I simply couldn't refuse their request to help them with this small but important detail for their home. I'm still in my work jeans and sweater, but I always feel devastatingly gorgeous whenever my men look at me.

"I'm home, indeed," I giggle as he takes me in his arms and kisses me.

"Come on, you have to see this," Kellan replies.

Fallon and Luke come out of the study, both of them smiling like excited little boys.

"You're gonna love it," Luke says.

"Love what?" I ask as both he and Fallon take turns kissing me. It's our welcoming ritual, a habit I enjoy more and more each day as they make me feel like an integral part of their lives with every single gesture, every glance, every word and touch they bestow upon me. I struck gold with these three.

"What's going on?"

"Come on," Fallon chuckles and takes me by the hand.

We rush up the stairs, and I laugh as we go into the residential wing. At the far end of a wide hallway, past the paintings and overflowing vases filled with peonies and fragranced roses, a room awaits. I find myself walking through the double doors of a sprawling master bedroom.

"Wait," I say, stopping in the middle of this wonderful corner of heaven. "Guys, I don't remember this room. What am I missing?"

Kellan closes the doors behind us with a devilish smile on his handsome face, while I look around and take in every single detail. It's a massive space with tall French windows. The curtains are splendid layers of soft green and pale yellow brocade. The floor is covered in a thick layer of gold-flaked plush carpet that has me slipping out of my boots and socks so I can feel the softness on my bare feet.

The entire room has been painted in a delicate green with white crown molding, while the furniture sports a royal cherry stain with a perfect, lacquered finish. The giant bed holds a massive canopy with dainty lace curtains flowing smoothly under the warm, golden light of the Tiffany-style chandelier, while the fully fitted bar greets us with an exquisite display of Bohemian crystal glasses and what I can only describe as a limitless supply of freshly chilled champagne.

"What is all this?" I ask.

Luke heads over to the bar and pours me a glass of champagne. I take a

long sip as Fallon proceeds to take his clothes off. Kellan is halfway through with unbuttoning his shirt.

“It’s our playroom,” Luke says, watching me with hungry, blue eyes. “Our world away from the world. We had it redecorated while you were busy with the Masons’ house.”

“You could’ve told me. I would’ve decorated it for free,” I quip.

Kellan grins as he loses the last of his clothes, his cock hard and swollen with desire. “This was our surprise for you. It would’ve spoiled the whole thing if we’d told you, don’t you think?”

“Right.” I chuckle and finish my champagne in one generous gulp. Luke takes the glass back to the bar, then proceeds to remove his clothes, as well. “It’s beautiful. I doubt I would’ve done a better job, truth be told.”

I’m the only one still dressed as my three men surround me, hard and ready and eager to claim every inch of my body and soul.

“I’m glad you like it because we’re gonna use it. A lot,” Fallon says.

They help me out of my clothes, covering me with kisses. “I love you,” I whisper as Kellan takes one nipple in his mouth. “I love that you thought of doing this for us.”

Fallon stands behind me, so close that his cock is neatly nestled between my buttocks, the tip already tasting the juices dripping from my aching, ravenous pussy. My breasts perk up, tender and hyper-sensitive as Kellan takes his sweet time massaging and kissing them, licking and suckling the nipples until they’re pink and hard.

“Oh, God,” I manage, letting my head rest on Fallon’s shoulder as Luke’s hand slips between my legs.

“You’re always so fucking ready, baby,” Luke growls as he finds my clit swollen and in desperate need of release. His fingers deftly work me into a frenzy while Kellan squeezes my breasts and Fallon rubs his cock against my slick opening, then playfully bites into my shoulder.

Their touch causes millions of fires to ignite everywhere—across my skin and deep within. My core rumbles and my body shakes as I come from Luke’s incessant handiwork. Fallon spears me with his cock at the same time, eager to feel me grip him as he plunges deeply into me. I gasp from the sheer size of this man, stretching and welcoming every glorious inch as he bends me over to thrust deeper still.

Kellan awaits, and I take him in my mouth, then Luke. It’s a pleasure to service my men in every way that I can. I love holding their cocks as I lick

and suckle them like delicious lollipops while Fallon pounds into me, harder and deeper until I come again. I'm dripping wet and coming apart at the seams.

We end up on the bed as evening falls over the mansion.

I'm sweating and crying out in sheer ecstasy as I ride Luke into the sweetest madness. Kellan straddles his leg, settled behind me and joining Luke inside. I'm stretched beyond belief, filled with two gorgeous cocks as Fallon stands above, both hands gripping the canopy's wooden frame as he deep throats me into oblivion.

This is it, the heaven I've always dreamed of. The complete surrender and the insatiable abandonment of a deep love. They love me with everything they've got. My heart sings as I lose track of my thundering orgasms, screaming as I feel both Kellan and Luke coming and spilling their hot seed within me.

I stick my tongue out and welcome Fallon's release, swallowing each drop as I listen to their mindless grunts of raw pleasure, as I drink him dry and welcome their love, their eternal devotion. It's the beginning of a new life. It's the truest kind of love, and I am fortunate enough to experience it with these three incredible men. Three magnificent souls who will stop at nothing to keep me happy, safe, and cherished. Why would I ever leave this place, when I have found the sincerest form of happiness, the most intense form of bliss, the most beautiful kind of life?

I'm not going anywhere.

I am home.

EPILOGUE

I should've seen this coming.

Weeks ago when Kellan, Fallon, and Luke unveiled our own personal playroom, and knowing there were more rooms in the house that hadn't been put to any particular use, I should've known that they would prepare another space just for me and my interior design business.

I'm standing in my new home office and I absolutely love it.

Still sore from a night of rambunctious lovemaking, still sleepy and more tired than usual, and still able to be surprised by the kindness and the generosity of these incredible men.

"Well? What do you think?" Luke asks.

"What do I think?" I can barely speak as I take it all in.

"Yeah, what do you think?" Kellan replies, grinning from ear to ear.

I look at him, never ceasing to be amazed by how enticing his green eyes can be. He's letting his black hair grow a tad longer than usual, but I like it. Those rebellious curls dancing across his forehead have my fingers tingling with desire. Fallon stands next to him, bigger and broader but just as gorgeous. God, I always feel safe when he's around. And Luke, this splendid ray of sunshine with bright blue eyes and the kind of debonair smile that has my heart thumping all the time.

"What do I think? I think you three have lost your goddamn minds and I couldn't love you more for it," I reply, my eyes filling with tears of joy. "I never thought you'd do something like this."

"We have our own offices here in the Wolfhound wing," Fallon says. "It didn't seem fair for you not to have one, especially since your business has really taken off lately."

It has, truth be told. I've had to register my own company, and I even hired an assistant from North Platte to help me with the orders and the project management behind the scenes. Soon enough, I'll be able to afford actual craftsmen to assist me with the execution. I'll be the mastermind behind the interior designs while others better skilled at the physical labor will turn my vision into reality. My heart is so full of joy, I feel as if it might explode.

"You deserve this," Luke says. "Your own creative space, with inspiration sources on every shelf."

I run my fingers along the book spines and I can't help but smile. "I see you've brought in all of my favorite authors and designers."

"It's been a painstaking mission to take secret notes whenever you mention one name or another," Luke chuckles softly.

"It's amazing," I tell them.

"No, Avery. You're amazing," Kellan replies. "And your business is only going to keep growing here. Of that I'm sure."

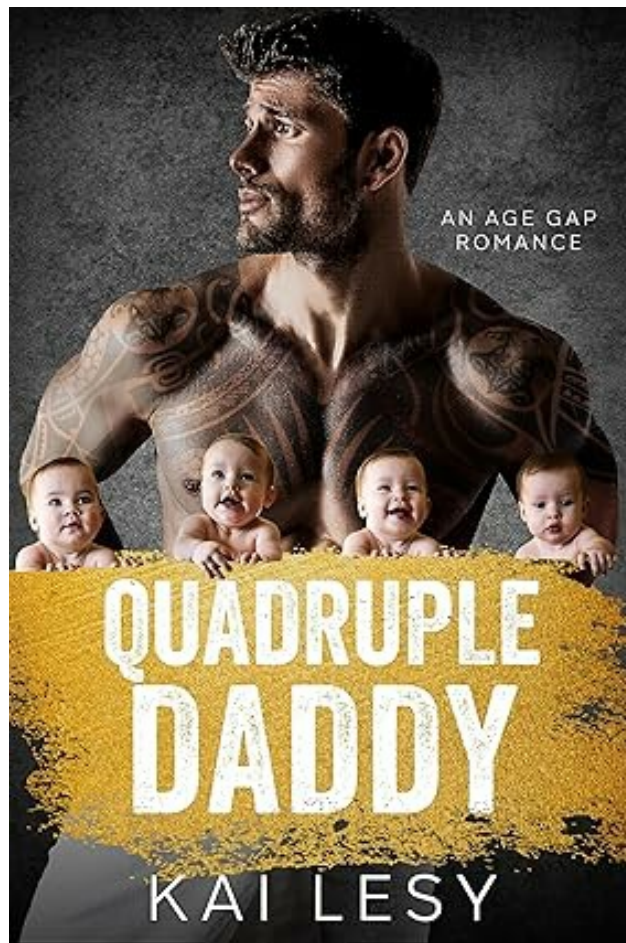
Unbeknownst to them, I can only agree. I'm growing alright. Not just from a professional or emotional point of view, but from a physical perspective, too. I sleep more than usual. I'm hungrier than normal. My mood swings have me struggling to keep it together at times. The girls and the work keep me busy enough, though I'm not sure how much longer I can avoid the unavoidable. All I can do right now is hug and kiss my men.

The End

Get a sneak peek into the future of Avery's happily ever after [HERE](#).

Check out more steamy steamy reverse harem bestsellers [HERE](#).

QUADRUPLE DADDY (PREVIEW)



"FOUR heartbeats. Are you kidding me?!?"

My babies' father is much older.
My best friend's older brother.
And a former Mafia man.

So how the heck did I agree to having his babies??? Four babies!!!!
Well... it's complicated.

Our Arrangement came with 3 core rules:
NO emotions. **NO** attachment. Absolutely **NO** turning back.

And I just discovered he's been keeping a secret...
The kind that could easily put us ALL in mortal danger.

Did I make the biggest mistake of my life?!?!

BELLA

“**W**ait a second, did you say *four* heartbeats?” My heart pounded heavily in my chest as I stared at the ultrasound tech.

“Yes, four heartbeats and four little babies. Here, let me show you,” she said, turning the monitor around so I could get an even better view. “Baby A is right here, Baby B is here, Baby C is trying to hide but you can make him or her out here... and Baby D is easy to miss but is right there.”

I stared at the screen in disbelief. Was this the reason I have been putting on more weight than usual? I thought it was all the extra carbs I had allowed myself to eat since I was pregnant, and all the milkshakes I’d been craving. My doctor had been concerned at how fast I was gaining, and well, now it suddenly made sense.

Gabe, the father of the babies I was carrying, hadn’t said a word yet. I looked over at him. His jaw was tight, his eyes staring at the screen, but there was no emotion, nothing that would give away how he was feeling. His hands gripped the side of the bed I was laying in, his knuckles white.

“You conceived through IVF, correct?” the tech asked.

“Yes, I’m a gestational carrier,” I said. Otherwise known as a surrogate, but most medical professions seemed to prefer the other term these days.

“Do you know how many embryos they implanted?”

“Two,” I said, my head spinning as I remembered what the doctors had told me. “Because of my young age, they said implanting more would lead to a higher chance of multiples, we were already prepared for the possibility of twins, but... how? With only two embryos?”

“It looks like they both split,” she said. “Do you have a family history of multiples?”

“No, I’m an only child. My mom is also an only child, while my dad had a brother, but they weren’t twins. I don’t understand how this could have happened?”

“The fertility drugs you had to take to help increase your chances of successful implantation can also cause multiples,” she answered.

I looked up at Gabe who was still staring at the screen. His brown eyes turned to me and we shared a look. He had wanted one baby but said he would be more than happy with twins. How did he feel about quadruplets? These were his babies, and I knew that there were options but I wasn’t sure I wanted to consider those options.

“Gabe?” I managed to choke out.

“Yes?” His voice came out lower than usual.

“Are you okay?”

He took a second before he responded, and when he did, it was a curt nod.

We would have to talk about all of this later, of course. Gabe wasn’t one to talk about his feelings anyway, but in the presence of a stranger, it was even harder to get a response from him.

He turned to the tech, finally taking a deep breath. “What’s next? What do we need to do to make sure all of the babies and Bella are safe and healthy?”

“Well, first thing we need to do is find you an obstetrician that is experienced with multiples and high-risk pregnancies.”

“High-risk?” Both Gabe and I said at the same time.

I wasn’t an idiot, I knew that having more than one baby at a time posed a risk to not only the babies but also me. Still, hearing those words spoken out loud caused me some anxiety. I knew that carrying a baby for Gabe for nine months wouldn’t be easy money, but it was about to get exponentially more difficult.

“Yes, high-risk. With multiples, most women aren’t able to carry to term, yet we want to make sure that the babies aren’t born too soon, either. It also poses higher risk for the mother.”

I had originally thought I’d take a few weeks off from my job toward the end of the pregnancy, but now it was looking like I’d need more time than that. Considering I was a barista, I was on my feet all day, every day.

Gabe spoke up. “It’s fine, we will make sure Bella gets plenty of rest and she will be in good hands.”

I stared at him. I was his surrogate, not his girlfriend or wife, living together was not something we'd ever discussed. Maybe he meant hiring some help for me or paying me enough so that I could quit my crappy job. Both would be acceptable to me.

A little while later in the car, however, he threw me for a loop.

"You're going to move in with me until the babies are born."

"Excuse me?" I stammered. "Don't I have a say in this?"

He turned to look at me, a smile pulling at his lips. "Are you really going to turn down a chance to stay at my place, with my staff waiting on you hand and foot?"

"What about my job?" I asked.

"Your new job is making sure those babies, and you, stay as safe and healthy as possible. I'm sure Starbucks will understand the situation you're in."

I settled back into the seat, my hand resting on my belly. I didn't care about the barista job; I knew there would be others. It was just to get me by until I could pay for grad school and finish my degree, so I could finally follow my dreams. Which was why I had approached Gabe about being his surrogate in the first place.

He did have a point about his house. His place was obscenely large, with an entire staff to clean and to cook; I wouldn't have to lift a finger for the rest of the pregnancy. I could rest. Living with Gabe might be weird due to my long-standing crush on him, but I could put those feelings aside for the safety of the babies. And because, well, after the last few years of working until I collapsed day after day, some rest sounded nice.

There was also the bonus that Ava was staying with him too. Living with my best friend for the next few months would be fun. She was busy with law school, so we didn't get to see each other as much as I would have liked. Now we'd have more opportunities to spend time together, sharing a roof.

"So... is that a yes?" Gabe asked, a glance in my direction.

"It's a yes, but I do have to go back to Chicago and let my roommate know and get my stuff from the apartment."

"Absolutely, and I'm happy to help with all of that."

"Thanks, Gabe," I said.

He was focused on driving, but I couldn't stop myself from staring at him. I'd crushed over this man for as long as I could remember, likely from the first moment I met him when I was six or so. Ava and I had been friends

since kindergarten, and the first time I went over to her house and met her older brothers, I was smitten with Gabe. Of course, I was a child back then, and one would think childhood crushes eventually die out but there I was, twenty-four years old admiring every curve of Gabe's jawline.

He was going to make gorgeous babies. I pictured them with his dark brown hair and chocolate eyes.

Gabe caught me staring, so I quickly turned my head away, looking out the windshield.

"You live in a very nice neighborhood," I said. I had always loved St. Louis, and Gabe lived near Forest Park—one of the largest urban parks in the United States. It would be an amazing place to grow up, and I expected his kids were going to live a very nice life.

A tinge of sadness seared my heart.

His kids.

Yet they were growing inside of me.

I had known what I was getting myself into when we agreed to the arrangement, but at times, the love I felt for the babies was almost too much to bear, and I worried how I was going to feel when the time came for me to give them up and not have a hand in raising them. I knew I might still see them because I was close to his family, but they wouldn't call me mom. My heart ached at the thought.

But I knew it was something I'd have to get over.

I signed the agreement and besides, I had to get my life together before I could ever think of raising children of my own. I had time.

Those words didn't quell the pain in my heart, but I did my best to not think about it as Gabe pulled into his driveway. The large metal gates opened for us, and he drove toward the circular drive in front of his gorgeous estate.

Before I could get out of the car, Gabe rushed over to my side and opened the door, lending me a hand.

"I'm not helpless just yet," I told him with a laugh, even though the extra weight in my midsection did make some things harder already. I took his hand and thanked him for his help.

Ava must have been watching for us because as soon as I was on my feet, my best friend was running down the stairs, an eager look on her face. She looked a lot like Gabe with the same dark hair and big brown eyes.

"Sooo,.... Did we find out if I'm having a niece or nephew?"

"You know, that's one thing we didn't find out today," I said with a

laugh. “But I’m guessing there’s going to be at least one of each, the odds are good for that, right, Gabe?”

“I’d imagine so,” he said.

Ava looked at me, then at her brother, with a confused expression. “What do you mean?”

“Apparently there’s four little De Lucas’ in there, nice and cozy.”

“Four?” Ava’s eyes grew even wider.

“Yep, four of them,” I said, digging out the ultrasound photo the tech had printed for us. I showed Ava each baby as they had done for us earlier.

“Four babies?” Ava said again, her voice cracking. “But how, I don’t understand.”

“That’s the risk with fertility drugs and multiple implantations,” I replied.

Ava still looked stunned, taking the photo from my hand and bringing it closer to her face as if to get a better view. She stared at it for a long time as I chuckled to myself.

“I couldn’t believe it either. Hell, I still can’t believe it,” I said.

Gabe cleared his throat. “This means the pregnancy is going to be high-risk, so to make sure Bella is as safe and comfortable as possible, I’ve asked her to move in with us.”

Ava looked up from the photo and remained stoic. Perhaps it was shock. Perhaps it was something more. Ava had struggled with me being her brother’s surrogate initially, and she had just started coming around to the idea. She said it was a little strange that her best friend was having her brother’s baby, especially knowing that I’d had a lifelong crush on him.

She turned toward me, unblinking. “Wow, this is all just—wow.”

“Can you give us a minute?” I asked Gabe.

“Of course, I’ll be inside. I can show you where you’ll be staying as soon as you’re ready,” he said.

Gabe headed up the stairs, leaving Ava and I alone in the front yard. She handed the photo back to me, and at first, she wouldn’t even look me in the eye.

“Ava, if this is too weird for you, I’m sure we can come up with something else.”

“Too weird? No, I love the idea of you staying here under the same roof as me. I’ve always thought of you as a sister, it’s just...” she trailed off.

“What?”

“It’s just, I’m still struggling with the idea that you’re having my brother’s baby, well, babies, and while I know it’s just a professional arrangement, I worry that with your hormones and your feelings for Gabe, that things could get... messy.”

“They won’t get messy, Ava. I’m grown enough to know that Gabe and I will never happen outside of my dreams. Even pregnancy hormones won’t convince me otherwise.”

“I just don’t want you hurt, Bella. I love you both more than life itself.”

“I appreciate that, Ava. I wouldn’t have signed up for this if I thought I would end up hurt.”

“I sometimes feel bad that I mentioned my brother’s plans to you in the first place, knowing that you were already looking into egg donation and what not to pay for school. I knew you were desperate to find a way and it was like I dangled a carrot right in front of your face.”

I placed a hand on Ava’s arm and smiled at her. “You presented me with the opportunity of a lifetime, one that I’m grateful for, and I know Gabe is too. You’ve helped both of our dreams come true by telling me about Gabe’s decision to hire a surrogate.”

Ava bit her lip and stared up at me. “I hope so.”

“I know so,” I said. “And now, think of the fun we’re going to have living under the same roof for the next few months.”

“It will be nice having you here; I’ve missed you so much since you moved to Chicago.”

I pulled her into a hug. “I missed you too.”

“I have to leave for class soon but let me show you around a bit first.” She looped her arm through mine and together we walked up the stairs and into her brother’s home.

* * *

AVA SHOWED ME HER ROOM, which was on the second floor and overlooking the expansive garden and pool in the backyard. She had to rush off soon, so she handed me off to Gabe, whom we found in his office.

“Always working,” Ava muttered as we stepped inside the large room decorated in dark wood and leather. “You know, Gabe, with four kids on the way, you’re going to have to learn to step away from the desk now and

then.”

“I already have plans in place to take more time off,” he said softly. “I’ve hired enough staff that I could retire right now and let them do all the work if I wanted to.”

“If you wanted to, that’s the key phrase,” Ava teased. She looked over at me. “I’ve always told him he’s never going to find a woman if he can’t pull himself away from work sometimes.”

Gabe sighed but didn’t say anything.

“Anyway, I’m off, she’s in your hands now,” Ava said. “Treat her well.”

“I’ll probably have to head out before you get back,” I told her.

“But soon we’ll be roomies and get to spend all the time in the world together,” she said with a smile.

Ava gave me a quick hug before rushing from the office, leaving me alone with Gabe.

“I just need to send a quick email, then I can show you to your room. I have a meeting in about an hour, but I can reschedule,” he said.

“Sounds good, and no need to reschedule, I have a long drive ahead of me this evening,” I replied, perusing the books on the massive shelves around the room. Gabe owned his own security company, offering private security to some of the most influential people in the world.

“Done,” he said, standing up from the desk. “These books are likely pretty boring for you, unless you work in security, but there’s a library on the main floor that might interest you.”

I followed him out of the office and down the hallway, past the stairs that led up to both Ava’s and his room.

“I am giving you a room on the main floor, since stairs will likely become difficult for you as the pregnancy progresses,” he said. “And there’s a room nearby that I plan to stay in, just in case you need me.”

“You don’t have to switch bedrooms because of me,” I said.

“I’d rather be nearby.”

We turned the corner and he opened a door that lead into a large guest suite. There was a king-sized bed in the center of the room and large windows overlooking the same garden that Ava’s did upstairs. Thick, velvet curtains were pulled open, but they could be closed to block out the sun.

“Here you go. If there’s anything you need, we can get it for you,” he said.

There was a walk-in closet that had plenty of drawers and space for my

clothing.

An attached private bathroom with a shower and a large tub that was bigger than my apartment in Chicago capped off the suite. I stood there, just staring at the space when Gabe said, “We’ll get you a chair for the shower, and we can hire a nurse to help you with anything you need.”

“I’m sure I’ll still be able to bathe myself,” I said with a chuckle. “Women have babies all the time and manage just fine.”

“I know, but I just want you to be assured that I will get you anything you need. All you have to do is ask.”

“I appreciate that Gabe, truly.” Ugh. Why did he have to be so damn kind on top of so damn good-looking?

“Well, you’re giving me a pretty amazing gift, Bella. It’s the least I can do.”

I had to turn away from him or I was going to launch myself at him.

“Good thing your place is so big,” I said, mostly to myself.

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing much. I’m just grateful for the large room and bed, considering I’m going to get pretty huge, and probably won’t be able to leave this room for the last few weeks of the pregnancy.”

I walked over to the window, grateful that I would have a beautiful view at least.

“Oh, we can get a TV for this room too,” Gabe said. “And anything else you might want to entertain yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“Harriett is head of housekeeping, and I will introduce the two of you before you leave. Christina is our chef, and she’s absolutely amazing. If you have any dietary preferences or concerns, I can let her know, and if you give me a list of your favorite foods, any snacks you want to have, anything at all, I’ll make sure we can stock it for you.”

Outside the window was a hummingbird feeder and I watched as the tiny birds fluttered around. A smile stretched across my face knowing that I would be able to watch the birds come and go from my bed while on bed rest.

“I can’t thank you enough, Gabe,” I said.

He took a few steps closer to me, standing beside me at the window. “I should be the one thanking you.”

“Well, this is a mutually beneficial arrangement. I’m going to graduate with my master’s debt-free thanks to you.”

“But you’re giving me a family, Bella,” he said.

I turned and caught him looking at me. His dark eyes softened, his chiseled features relaxed. “You’re going to make an amazing father, Gabe.”

I would have never agreed to it if I’d had any doubt about that. Gabe used to be a bit wild, and I knew about his checkered past, but the man he became was protective and loved with a fierceness that I admired. I wished someone had loved me the way he loved his baby sister, the way he cared for her and would do anything for her. I knew he would do the same for his children.

Gabe’s lips pulled back into a smile, but he averted his gaze quickly. “Come on, let me show you the library before I head into my meeting,” he said.

I followed him out of the room, and he pointed to a door one away from mine. “I’ll be staying there,” he said.

“Good to know.”

He meant it when he said he would be close. There was only a bathroom separating his room from mine.

“And I’ll make sure you always have a way to alert the staff, and me, if you need anything, night or day.”

Seeing Gabe’s protective side only intensified the crush I had on him. God, how I hoped to find a man like him one day, a man who would do anything for his family.

As we walked back toward the stairwell, Gabe stopped and pointed out the library. We stepped inside and I was blown away by just how many books he had. Floor to ceiling shelves, in a room that was almost two stories tall, all stocked with books. My eyes went wide. “I think this is bigger than the public library near my home,” I said.

“If you need anything from the upper shelves, please either get me or one of the staff members to help you.”

“I will, thank you.”

Cozy couches and chairs with ottomans, and a chaise lounge situated in a bay window meant that it would be easy to get comfortable and lose hours reading. There was no way I’d get bored while staying there, that was for certain.

Just a quick glance at some of the shelves and I saw everything from Charles Dickens to Stephen King, Russian literature to Shakespeare.

“And if we don’t have a book you want, just let me know and I can order it for you,” he said.

“I have a feeling you already have every book I could ever want, but thank you,” I replied.

He smiled, shoving his hands in his pockets as I looked around.

I would have plenty of time to get acquainted with the library, and I still had the drive back to Chicago, so I reluctantly pulled myself away. I didn’t want to keep Gabe from his meeting, either.

“Well, I better get going.”

“Are you sure you want to drive? I can get you a chauffeur, or even see about getting the jet—”

I held up a hand to stop him. “It’s only about four hours, I’ll be fine,” I said with a laugh. “But did you say jet?”

He shrugged. “I don’t own it outright, but I have access to a private jet to use as needed.”

I blinked, staring up at him. “I think that’s overkill just to go from St. Louis to Chicago but thank you for the offer. I need my car to pack up everything anyway.”

“Oh, about that, I’m going to hire a moving company,” he said. “Don’t lift a thing, please, it’s not worth the risk.”

“Wow, okay then, thank you, Gabe,” I said.

We stared awkwardly at each other. Ava and I would have hugged, but Gabe and I had never been that close. I reached out my hand and Gabe looked down at it for a moment before shaking it. Probably not the smoothest move I could make, but we had made sure to stress that it was strictly a business arrangement, and handshakes were common in business.

“Alright then... I will see you in a week or two,” I said as I headed for the door. Gabe followed me and walked me to my car. Always a gentleman, I thought to myself. Whatever woman he ended up with one day, if he could pull himself from his work long enough to date, would be very lucky.

G A B E

Bella's stuff had arrived, and she would follow shortly. I knew she couldn't be too far behind the movers. She'd denied my offer of a driver, saying that she was still fine to drive. I knew she was right, but I couldn't help but worry about her.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this," I muttered to myself as I stared at the empty nursery. The walls were bare and white, I had no idea what color to paint the room. We still weren't sure of the babies' gender yet. Like Bella had said though, there was a chance we'd have both. The odds were pretty good for that.

"How you're going to do what?" Ava's voice surprised me.

I turned to find my sister in the doorway to the nursery, leaning against the doorframe.

"Four babies... I had planned to have one, maybe two, total. But now I'm going to be a single dad to four babies."

Ava walked into the room and stood beside me, staring at me while I continued looking at the blank wall.

"Well, Dad managed to raise the four of us after Mom died."

"Dad? You're really going to bring up Dad as an example of stellar fatherhood?" I side-eyed my sister.

She shrugged. "I mean, he did what he could."

I scoffed at the very idea that he'd done the best he could.

"He could have done without getting involved with the Mob, that would have made our lives so much less complicated."

"Yeah... I really can't argue with you there, but you know you're not going to do this alone, right? You have me."

“Thanks, sis,” I said. It was hard to believe my little sister was all grown up sometimes. I was ten years older than her, so I remembered her being a baby. I remembered her first day of kindergarten. I practically helped raise her at times after our mom died, since Dad struggled with grief and threw himself into his work. Another reason I wasn’t too keen to think of our father as doing his best to raise all four of us; he hardly had anything to do with Ava’s upbringing. It was my brothers and me that raised her.

My heart sank at the thought of Dante and Roman.

How long had it been since we’d talked? I couldn’t even remember.

Ava, however, was always by my side. We’d always had each other. The two black sheep of a family of criminals because we both decided to live a straight and narrow life. Well, not always in my case, but I came around. Ava, however, was always good, and she had inspired me to be good too.

She seemed to sense my train of thought. “Have you even told Dad or our brothers about the babies?”

I shook my head.

“Do you plan to?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. My first instinct was to say no, I didn’t want anything to do with them, and since we’d gone this long without talking, I figured it would be easy. But part of me yearned to share the news with my family.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to answer. Ava’s phone alerted and she said, “Bella’s here!”

She took off out of the room, and I was right behind her, down the stairs and out the front door where Ava was already embracing Bella. I noticed a few boxes in Bella’s car, so I walked over and grabbed them from the backseat.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t carry those,” Bella said. “My roomie did all the work; I didn’t carry anything.”

“Good,” I said. I had offered to drive up to Chicago and personally help with the moving, but Bella declined. I almost went anyway, but Ava told me that I needed to respect her boundaries and trust Bella, which I did, 100% or else I wouldn’t have asked her to carry my children. But I wanted to help her too.

I lifted the two boxes and headed back toward the house. “Your things are already placed in your room,” I told her.

She was following behind me, she and Ava chatting away excitedly as we

walked toward Bella's room. Ava opened the door and I stepped inside, placing the boxes next to the ones the movers had brought earlier. She didn't really have a lot of stuff; I could have handled it all on my own had she let me.

"Thanks, Gabe," Bella said, beaming back at me.

Her strawberry blonde hair fell in ringlets over her shoulders, and it made me wonder if one of our kids might inherit the red hair gene. I knew it was unlikely, but I smiled at the thought of it. Unlikely, but not impossible, considering that neither of Bella's parents were redheads.

Her eyes were blueish green and reminded me of the sea. Again, unlikely that the babies would inherit her light-colored eyes over my dark brown ones, but a guy could hope. I didn't tell Bella that one of the reasons I was happy to have her as a surrogate was because she was gorgeous and I hoped my babies might have some of her features, but it was true.

"Ooh, you totally need to see the nursery," Ava said as she checked the time, her smile turning upside down. "But I have to head to class. Gabe, you need to show her what you're working on, it's going to be amazing."

"I haven't done much yet," I replied.

Ava said goodbye to Bella and hurried out the door.

"Is she always running around like a chicken with her head cut off?" Bella asked.

"Yeah, pretty much. These days she's always coming and going, she works so damned hard."

"I know she does," Bella said. "She's going to make an amazing lawyer one day."

"That's true." And Bella was going to make an amazing journalist one day. Another reason I chose her was because of her ambition and her brains—more traits I hoped she would pass down to my kids. "So, um, would you like to see the nursery? Like I said, I really haven't done much with it yet."

"I'd love to," Bella answered.

She followed me down the hallway and up the stairs. I made sure she took it slow and walked behind her; I wanted to be able to catch her in case she slipped.

We made it to the top and walked past my bedroom first.

"There's a door connecting my room and the nursery. I wanted them to be close by."

Her smile could light up any room. Standing there in the hallway, just the

two of us, with her looking up at me, I found myself wanting to inch closer to her, to see if her lips were as soft as they looked.

Though as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I scolded myself mentally.

She's your sister's best friend. She's your surrogate. She's not your girlfriend, Gabe.

I cleared my throat and opened the door to the nursery, making sure not to stare too long at Bella.

“Oh, good thing there's plenty of room for four cribs,” she said.

“Yeah, I feared the room would be too big when we thought there was only one of them,” I said. “But now I'm grateful for the space.”

“What are you planning on doing in here?” she asked, glancing over at me.

“I honestly don't know. I had planned to paint the walls a soft green, it's gender neutral and my favorite color.”

“Green would be very nice, and it's a calming color,” she said.

“You think so? Is there anything you'd like to see in here?”

She turned and looked at me, her smile wavering. “Why are you asking me?”

“Well, you're the one carrying them and birthing them, your input is welcomed.”

Her face suddenly turned very serious. “Gabe, I'm really trying not to get too attached or to think of these babies as my own. It's hard enough as it is. I already feel so much love for them. Seeing them on the ultrasound just made everything that much more real... I fear that by helping to design the nursery or giving insight into your life with them, the lines may start to blur even more for me.”

I felt like an idiot for even asking. Tears welled in her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away and turned toward the blank wall. I gave her some space, all the while trying to find the right words. Had I made a mistake asking her to do this for me? It was her idea, and she was a grown woman, but at the same time, neither of us had any idea what pregnancy and childbirth would look like when we'd agreed to it. She was close to my sister; she would be in my life and the babies' lives. So what would that even look like? We had agreed that it would stay professional, but what did that even mean?

I stepped up beside her. “Bella, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked, I—”

Before I could finish, she stopped me. “I think some animals would be cute.”

“Animals?”

She nodded. “Yes, like giraffes and monkeys, a border of them, perhaps? It would look really good with the green walls.”

A lump formed in my throat as I pictured what she was saying. “I agree, that would be adorable.”

“I think so too, and I already call them my little monkeys,” she said softly. “Though I know they aren’t mine.”

Without thinking, I took Bella’s hand in mine and turned her toward me. I lifted her chin up to meet my gaze. “Bella, did I ever tell you why I was happy you offered to be my surrogate?”

She shook her head.

“It’s because I admire you. Your brains, your ambition, everything you’ve become despite your shitty upbringing,” I said. “And I understand that those traits aren’t just magically inherited.”

I wasn’t even sure what I was trying to say. My heart was pounding, and she just stared up at me, almost as if in shock that I had my hands on her. Shit. I let go of her and stepped back, remembering what Ava had told me about respecting Bella’s boundaries. I shouldn’t have touched her, not like that.

“Anyway, what I am trying to say is... I know you’re going to be in our lives, you and Ava have been best friends since kindergarten, and I don’t see you going anywhere once the babies are born. I don’t expect you to just disappear, you know? I’m not sure what the relationship will look like between you and them, but I do hope that you will be in their lives.”

My words seemed to relax Bella. She took a deep breath and seemed to ponder what I was saying.

“Thank you, Gabe. I know that I won’t be able to be their mother, not in a traditional sense, but it means a lot to me that I will still get to be in their lives.”

“Absolutely. Everything I’ve read has said that it’s actually a good idea for the babies to know where they came from, and I want what’s best for them, and for you.”

She smiled again, and it was like someone was doing somersaults in my belly.

Shit. When did she grow into such a gorgeous young woman? I had

always known she was pretty, but looking at her now... I could hardly believe this was the same freckle-faced kid who used to sleep over with my sister and giggle every time I walked into the room.

She was beautiful, and so grown-up. So mature. So smart. Everything I could have wanted in a mother for my future children.

And she'd been in front of me all along.

BELLA

I stared at my phone for a long time, working up the nerve to hit the call button. Finally, after a deep breath and some pacing in my room, I went for it. It rang three times, and I half expected it to go to voicemail when my mom's voice finally came through on the other end of the phone.

"Bella?"

"Yes, Mom," I said. "How are you? I haven't heard from you in a bit."

"Just busy with work," she said, not even bothering to ask how I was doing.

"Yeah, I know things have been hard since Dad, well—"

"Since he got locked up? Yeah, it's been really fucking hard." Her tone was harsh, not that I was surprised. She had every right to be angry at my dad, considering he was going to be in prison for a long time.

"I know, and I'm sorry."

"Have you spoken with him?" Mom asked me.

"Not since the trial, no," I said. That was over a year ago. Considering we didn't really talk much before that, not speaking to him for so long wasn't hard.

"I can't believe that shithead got caught," my mom muttered. "I was always telling him to stop making fake IDs for those high school kids, they don't need to be drinking at sixteen, but he said they paid well and that's why he did it. Not well enough if you ask me, look where it got him."

I knew that my dad was in prison for forging IDs and other legal documents. It's how he'd made a living, apparently. I'd had no idea; my parents had kept it hidden from me growing up. Or they tried to at least. Dad had been selling IDs to my classmates for years and they all told me about it

in high school. It finally caught up to him.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, Mom, I was calling because I have some exciting news to share.”

I waited for some response from her, but I was met with silence, so I continued. “I’m a surrogate for Gabe De Luca, you know Ava’s older brother?”

“You’re what?” she asked.

“A surrogate. I’m carrying his babies.”

“Babies? As in more than one?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m actually having quadruplets.”

Silence, at first. Then a laugh. “You’re fucking with me, right, Isabella?”

“No, I’m not fucking with you, Mom. I mean it. I’m about twelve weeks along, and I’m getting huge already.”

“How much is he paying you to do this?”

“He’s paying me well, don’t you worry about that. Enough so that I can go to grad school and not take on any debt. Considering the journalism field isn’t known for paying a ton, I thought it would be a smart—”

“How much?” she interrupted.

“Mom, that’s personal.”

“I’m your mother,” she said. “I just want to be sure you’re not being stiffed. I never did care for the De Lucas.... Their father was into some shady shit.”

My jaw tightened as I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. “So was Dad, and you, for that matter, and I still turned out okay, didn’t I?”

Mom didn’t answer. “So you’re not going to tell me how much he’s paying to carry his kids?”

“No! I can take care of myself, Mom, and Gabe is paying me very generously. We’ve had lawyers look everything over and never mind, this isn’t why I called.”

As per usual when it came to my mom, my nerves were already shot. Why did I even bother?

My mom was muttering something I couldn’t make out, likely cursing my very existence under her breath. After calming myself down, I decided to try again.

“Mom, I was hoping you might give me some advice or something. Talk me through your pregnancy with me, let me know what to expect, that sort of thing.”

She let out a groan. “I told you before, I don’t remember anything about my pregnancy with you.”

“Nothing? You remember nothing?”

“No,” she said. “I imagine that means it was pretty boring and uneventful.”

Well, that was good, I guess.

“How about childbirth? You’ve never talked to me about that, did you have a c-section?”

“No.”

“So vaginal birth?”

“I didn’t give birth to you out of my ass, now did I, Bella?”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered to myself. My head was aching, and I knew it was from the stress of dealing with my mother. After a momentary pause, I decided it wasn’t worth it to continue. I was supposed to be avoiding stress, after all. “Sorry for bothering you, Mom. I have to go.”

She didn’t even try to stop me from hanging up. No apology, nothing. Not that I should have been surprised. I thought my mom would at least be concerned, not about the money but my well-being.

I fell backward on the bed with a loud groan of disgust. I’m not sure how long I stayed like that, staring at the ceiling and cursing the fact that I didn’t have a normal, loving family like most of the people I knew.

A knock on the door pulled me back to reality.

“Yes?” I called out.

“It’s me,” Ava’s voice responded.

“Come in,” I said.

She stepped inside and joined me on the bed.

“My brother has a beautiful home, but I don’t find the ceilings to be that interesting,” she teased.

“I just got off the phone with my mom.”

“Oh, crap.” Ava knew what that meant. “How’d it go?”

“As badly as you’d expect. I told her about the pregnancy and being a surrogate for Gabe, tried asking her questions about her pregnancy with me.”

“And?”

“And she basically told me she doesn’t remember anything. Nothing at all. She carried me for nine months, birthed me and it’s like I’m asking her what she had for dinner on January 15th, 1985. No recollection whatsoever.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” Ava said, rolling over to face me.

“It’s okay. I don’t know what I expected. She’s always been weird about this sort of thing. It’s like she never wants to talk about me as a baby. Hell, I’ve never even seen photos of me as a baby. It’s like she couldn’t have been bothered to take any.”

“I don’t understand it at all,” Ava said. “Maybe we were right as kids and you were adopted or something.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Knowing my parents, do you think the state would have let them adopt a child?”

“Good point,” Ava muttered.

“No, the reality is my mom couldn’t care less about me. Which is so weird considering all the times I overheard my parents arguing about my mom’s infertility. It always sounded like she wanted more kids, but she couldn’t even love the one she had.”

I rested a hand on my belly. These babies weren’t even going to be raised by me, and yet, I couldn’t imagine turning my back on them. I would remember every detail of their birth story, and I would cherish every second I had with them. It didn’t make sense that my mom could be so callous toward me.

“People are complicated,” I said. “I guess my mom got what she wanted, then realized she didn’t really want me after all.”

“Don’t say that” Ava chided softly.

“It’s true,” I said. “But you know what, it’s fine. I’ve got you, and Gabe is taking care of me. I don’t need her.”

Ava smiled and gave my arm a squeeze. “So would this a bad time to tell you I have a date tonight or—”

“You have a date?” I asked, propping myself up on my side a bit.

“Just some rando I met on Tinder, but he seems nice. But if you want me to cancel, I totally will.”

“No, absolutely not. You need to have some fun with all the studying you’ve done lately.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely, and besides, Gabe is here. It’s not like you’re leaving me alone.”

The idea of just Gabe and I at dinner wasn’t exactly a bad thought either. I would never grow tired of looking at him or watching him get all protective over me and the babies.

“Alright, I promise I won’t be long,” Ava said.

“No, please, stay out as late as you want,” I replied. “Because after dinner, I am likely to go straight to bed, or at least lay around in bed like a potato since I’m exhausted.”

There was a knock on the door and Gabe called out, “Dinner is ready.”

“Go, shoo,” I said, playfully nudging my friend. “Good luck, you deserve to find someone who makes you happy.”

“So do you, Bella.”

“Pssh, one day. Once I’m settled in my career,” I said. “Or at least once I’m not pregnant with your brother’s babies.”

We shared a laugh as Ava opened the door. As I started to peel myself up from the bed, Gabe rushed to my side and offered me a hand. I thanked him as I stared up into his gorgeous eyes.

Gabe and I, alone for dinner. There were definitely worse ways to spend an evening.

I hope you enjoyed the sneak peek, [Click here for full story.](#)