

Operation



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

APRYL BAKER

KINCAID SECURITY & INVESTIGATIONS
BOOK 8



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
APRYL BAKER

Dylan

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Dedication

For every family who's found their happily ever after.

Here is the reading order of the books:

Touch Me Not

The Sinner's Touch

The Healing Touch

Kade (KSI 1)

Viktor (KSI 2)

Forever Your Touch

Mason (KSI 3)

Jasper (KSI 4)

Max (KSI 5)

Gabe (KSI 6)

Sheridan (KSI 7)

Dylan (KSI 8)

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Chapter One



“We need to hire more help,” Gregg Watkins argued. “We’re already running ourselves ragged as it is.”

“We just hired six new people.”

“And we just took on ten more clients.” Gregg shook his head, exasperated. “Can we not hire four more people?”

Dylan sighed. They’d been having this argument for a few months now, and a necessary one. Not only were they getting an influx of new business, they retained the majority of those clients. Kade wanted to be cautious about bringing on new hires while everyone else was adamant they needed more help. He couldn’t count the number of times they’d had to do emergency reshuffling to cover a dangerous situation. If they had more people, that wouldn’t happen.

“What do you think, Dylan?” Viktor Kincaid, one of the two owners of Kincaid Security and Investigations, asked quietly.

“I think if we want to keep taking on new clients, then we have to deal with the problem at hand. We’re severely short staffed. Our only option outside of hiring at least ten more people is to close our doors to new clients. It’s as simple as supply and demand. It’s an age-old concept that still rings true today.”

“Ten?” Kade glowered at him, but he didn’t let the other owner intimidate him. Kade might be a former FBI agent, but Dylan had been in law enforcement before he joined KSI. He wasn’t easily intimidated by a fed.

“Yes, ten. How many times over the last six months have we had to reshuffle people to cover all the assignments? I may not be included in management meetings, but I’ve felt it when people get pulled off my current assignments and I have to do the job of three people. I don’t mind playing bodyguard, but my skills are best utilized elsewhere.”

Dylan was good with information gathering. He was a former police detective, so he *could* do the whole bodyguard thing when necessary. He and Max both preferred not to do bodyguard work. Dylan had his reasons, and Viktor knew them even if Kade didn’t.

“I hate just having people sitting around doing nothing,” Viktor said.

“Then put them to work,” Dylan told him. “Instead of utilizing another company to do our background checks, why not just do them ourselves in house? When there’s nothing for people to do, we can have them do that.”

“That requires a lot of training. If they screw up and misreport a record or miss a record, then we’ll lose clients.”

“Our company employs former police and military. I think we can figure it out. We’re all very meticulous and detail oriented. Nik and Mason can write any program we need to do this. It’s a sound idea, and I’m sure you can find someone to train us on how to complete them.”

Kade’s lips pursed. He knew Dylan made a good point.

“Think of how much money the company will save if we move that aspect of our business in house.”

“It’s a sound idea,” Vik broke in before Kade could argue. “We’ll look at the logistics of it. I think you might be right about closing our doors to new clients for the time being, though. Kade and I need to crunch some numbers on if we can actually afford to hire more people.”

Dylan didn't know what the books looked like, so he couldn't comment on it. No one in this room outside of Viktor and Kade could. The rest of them weren't owners or shareholders.

"Lunch is here!" Lauren, their receptionist, called over the intercom.

His stomach perked up at the mention of food, as did everyone else's.

"What did we get?" Mason rubbed his stomach.

The kid was Kade and Vik's youngest brother and a computer whiz who dabbled in hacking. He was good. Not as good as Max, but Max kept his computer skills to himself for the most part. Mason wasn't exactly thrilled with being roped into a job at KSI, but as the brothers told him, it's better if they could put him to work hacking legally than if he did it on his own and landed in prison.

"Subs and handmade potato chips from Jim's Deli," Kade said. "I've had more pizza the last few weeks than anyone should have in their lifetime."

Kade's wife, Angel, was pregnant, and her cravings for pizza were getting to him. Dylan remembered...

No. He shook his head. He wouldn't go there. That was a rabbit hole he steered clear of if he didn't want to spend the next six months drunk off his ass.

His phone rang, saving him from trying to force memories back under lock and key.

"Jenkins," he answered.

"Dylan? This is Mike Andsley. You got a minute?"

"Yeah, man." He stood and walked out into the hallway. Mike was an old friend of his from his time as LAPD. "You all good? You sound stressed."

"I *am* stressed."

That, he could believe. Being a cop was not the easiest job, given how the country saw police at the moment. There were

still demands to defund the police. Dylan hated that a few bad apples in the force dictated how all police were seen. He wanted the force to get its head out of its ass and actually get rid of the cops who needed getting rid of and work to show the communities they were trying to change. He doubted it would happen in his lifetime, though. Too many good old boys patting each other on the back.

“What’s going on?”

“You remember I transferred down to Carrolton, Georgia?”

“Yeah, your wife wanted the kids to grow up in a safer neighborhood free of gangs.”

They both snorted. Gangs were everywhere, even if they were just small-town hooligans pretending to be a gang. And drugs were everywhere. There was no escaping that reality.

“It’s not a bad town. We have our fair share of crime, but murders are not common.”

Dylan nodded to the three men who came down the hall carrying platters. He opened the conference room door for them to enter. His stomach growled appreciatively.

“That’s good, at least.”

“Yeah, but I’m calling because I need a favor.”

“Sure, man. You know I’ll help if I can.”

“Your company do any kind of pro bono work?”

He frowned. “You in trouble?”

“No, not me. There’s a woman with three kids who needs some help. She’s filed police report after police report, but nothing ever gets done. Her ex-boyfriend is a piece of shit whose family is well connected in our town. All the charges go away. They’re all four in ICU right now, and not one cop is outside their rooms to make sure they’re safe.”

“What happened?”

“We got a call of shots fired at the residence, and when we showed up, we found two of the kids shot in their bedroom and their mother wrapped around her littlest one, beaten half to

death and the baby shot as well. It's a miracle none of them are dead. I'm not sure if they'll all survive. It's bad, Dylan."

"And have they tried to arrest the boyfriend?"

"From the reports I've read so far, they're not looking for him. They're trying to find a suspect."

"The fuck?" I all but roared.

Kade stuck his head out, his expression questioning. I put my finger up, and he nodded.

Mike sighed wearily. "That's what I said. This woman needs help, Dylan. She can't afford a loaf of bread, let alone private security. It's why I asked if you do pro bono work."

Given the meeting they'd just had, he wasn't sure he could offer their services to the woman, but he'd do something himself. The thought of anyone hurting a child did something to him.

"Let me talk with everyone, and I'll call you back. Let me know if their situation changes."

"I will. Thanks."

Dylan hung up and shoved his phone back into his pocket, trying to get his emotions under control. He needed to calm down. If he wanted to convince Kade to at least let him take some time off and deal with this, then he needed to be the emotionless monster they all knew and loved.

The anniversary was coming up. It had him on edge, but at least this year he'd have a job to distract him and maybe an unsub to take his rage out on.

He went back into the conference room where all eyes landed on him. He took a moment to grab a bottle of water and a simple ham-and-cheese sub off the tray of food.

"What was that about?" Kade demanded once he took a seat.

"An old friend of mine called wanting to know if we do pro bono work."

Before Kade could say no, Viktor interceded. “What is the situation?”

“Domestic violence. The boyfriend came in and beat the mother half to death and shot the three children. They’re all in ICU, and they’re expecting not all of them will make it. According to Mike, the boyfriend is well connected, and all the charges she’s filed have been dismissed. They’re currently not even considering him as a suspect.”

“The fuck?” Kade growled.

“That was my reaction, too. She doesn’t have any money, and Mike said there’s not even a uniform outside her door or the kids’ doors to protect them.”

“What kind of fucked-up place is this?” Mason asked around a mouthful of food.

“Someplace in Georgia.”

“I hate the heat in Georgia.” One of their new hires, Greg, shuddered. “Bugs are too big too.”

“Even if we can’t afford to take the case on, I’d like to go down and volunteer my services. I’ll use all the vacation hours I’ve built up and then do a leave of absence if I have to. I can’t abide anyone hurting a kid.”

“None of us can,” Viktor said. “We’ll run the numbers and see what we can do.”

“Mike said she doesn’t have enough money for groceries, so I doubt she can even come up with a few hundred bucks.”

“Fuck,” Kade muttered. “How many people do you think you’ll need?”

“I don’t have a good enough handle on the situation to give you a direct answer. I’d need to go down there and find out more information.”

“You and Jarrod go down.” Kade nodded, making up his mind. “We’ll find the money. No one has the right to hurt a child, let alone a woman. We can’t in good conscience sit here and do nothing, knowing how bad their situation is. I’ll have

Lauren book the first flight out for both of you and reserve a hotel room as well. What was the name of the town?”

“Carrollton, Georgia.”

“I know it. It’s about two hours outside of Atlanta, so you’ll need to rent a car once you get there. Use the company card.”

Kade might be an asshole, but he was a family-oriented asshole who put the safety of children above all else.

“Two isn’t going to be enough.” Dylan turned his head to Cole, who was stuffing his face with a chicken sub. “Not if there’s more than one hospital room. They could have the kids in more than one room, too. We need at least four, minimum. I’ll volunteer. I’m off for the next two weeks anyway. I’ll donate my time after that.”

“Count me in as well.” Gregg raised his hand. “I don’t have an assignment yet, and I can also volunteer my time. Blackhawk was good to me, so I have quite a bit of cushion in the old bank account to tide me over.”

Gregg had been on Gabe and Abbey’s case earlier this year. He’d been so impressed with KSI and their ability to go to bat for each other, he’d had a talk with Viktor about coming on board. Gregg was the only non-police or military hire. He was damn good at his job, though. They were lucky to snatch him up.

“It’s settled, then. Go home, pack a bag, and wait for us to call. Dylan, have your friend send us over all the details he can share so we know what we’re sending you into.”

Dylan stood, collecting his plate, and headed out of the conference room to his office. While he may not be in upper management or a team leader, Dylan was good with information. He deciphered most of the information Max and Mason dug up, and that required peace and quiet. It could be hard to do with all the noise some of the guys created. Plus, he just liked his privacy.

“You good?” Viktor asked from the doorway.

Sneaky bastard. He and his twin brother, Conner, walked on air.

“I’m fine.”

“The anniversary is coming up.”

“That’s exactly why I’m doing this. It’ll keep me focused on something besides the deaths of my family. I need it, Viktor.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t argue either. Viktor was probably banking on having the other three in case he fucked up. He shouldn’t worry. Dylan wasn’t letting his own demons get in the way of protecting a family who, from all accounts, needed help more than most.

“I’m a call away if you need me.”

Dylan watched his friend turn and walk out of his office. It struck him again how lucky he was to find Viktor and this company. It probably saved his life.

The least he could do was return the favor for someone else. In this case, it was a woman and her three children.

Who the fuck shot kids?

Someone depraved, and Dylan was going to make sure they went to jail and never saw the light of day again.

He shot off a quick text to Mike for all the information he could give and then started to pack up everything he’d need.

He had a feeling it was going to be a long few weeks.

Chapter Two



Dylan mopped at his head with the back of his hand. Georgia wasn't just hot. It was a wet heat, the kind of sticky hot that stayed on your skin all day. The kind of heat that suffocated you. He hated it.

"Fuck, is it always this hot?" Gregg complained as they walked from where they'd left their rented SUV in the visitors' parking lot of the hospital.

"Dude, this is nothing. Try the deserts over in the Middle East. I'd rather have wet heat than a dry heat you can't escape from." Jarrod yawned and shouldered his duffle as they walked across the parking lot. It held all their guns.

Jarrold was Gregg's fiancée's cousin who'd gotten out of the Marines last Christmas. He kept his head down and did his work without complaint. Dylan was impressed with him and glad he was here.

"Gun permits are good to go." Cole slipped his cell back in his pocket. "Thank God the people at Delta Air Lines know who we are and what we do, or we wouldn't have been able to bring guns with us."

That was lucky.

"Your cop friend meeting us here?" Jarrod asked.

“I already texted the detective we’re here. He’s supposed to be waiting for us in the lobby.” It irked Dylan how people said cop in reference to everyone in law enforcement. Men and women worked their asses off to climb the ranks and hopefully do some good along the way.

He spotted Mike right away. The man was standing off to the side, his attention glued to the phone in his hand, a deep frown etched below his receding hairline. Dylan hadn’t seen his friend in years, but the years had been kind to the older man. Mike was in his late forties and just a hint of gray was teasing his temples. His face was a little more rugged, but it only added to his air of authority. It also looked like all the southern food he’d been eating hadn’t lengthened his waistline either. He still had a football player’s physique.

“Mike,” he called, and his friend looked up, a real smile gracing his face. He put his phone away and walked over, hauling Dylan in for a hug. Mike had always been a touchy-feely person, not letting someone’s personal space bother him.

“Good to see you, Dylan,” he said after a moment. “Glad you were able to come down.” He glanced at the men behind Dylan. “All of you. Thanks for doing this.”

“Not a problem,” Cole said. “Is there somewhere we can go to get a debrief?”

Mike nodded. “Let’s go upstairs to ICU. I’ve been trying to stay up there as much as I can, just in case.”

“You think our unsub would come to the hospital?”

“I don’t know. He’s laying low. I’ve been trying to find the bastard, but so far, no luck.”

“They’ve actually declared him a suspect?” Dylan fell in line behind Mike as they headed for the elevator.

“Only because I pushed it.” The disgust in Mike’s tone told Dylan a lot.

When they arrived at the ICU, all the nurses looked up, slightly alarmed at the sight of the five of them.

Everyone at KSI was very imposing figures. They had to be in order to do their jobs. Well, all except for Cole. Most days, he looked like he'd just rolled out of bed and was the only one in jeans and a t-shirt. Said his more casual look made his job easier. People ignored him, and he learned more. Cole was ex-police, and he usually liaised with any law enforcement agency on any case he was assigned to.

Mike led them down the hall and stopped at a room. "The kids are in here. I convinced the hospital to put them all in the same room so they wouldn't be as scared."

"Makes it easier to protect them too," Gregg murmured.

"That too," Mike agreed and led them inside. "They're still unconscious. The doctors are keeping them asleep because their injuries are so severe. Honestly, it's a miracle they're alive. All three were shot pointblank."

Dylan took a deep breath and forced his feet forward. His daughter never even made it into a room. She died instantly. At least that was what he told himself. EMS said she was dead when they arrived. The thought of Molly lying there, in pain and dying, calling out for him...it haunted him.

The first bed held a little boy. He, as well as the other two, were hooked up to countless machines. He couldn't be more than three or four and looked so tiny and helpless lying there. White-blond hair stuck up around a bandage spanning his head like a halo of sorts. It was the exact same shade as Dylan's hair. His skin was pale, almost bloodless.

"This is Cash. He's three. The bullet grazed his heart and did a lot of damage. We're not sure he's going to make it. He's a fighter, though. Makes his name a good one. I tell myself Hailey named him after Johnny Cash, who suffered his entire life but fought through it."

"If he was shot in the chest and didn't die instantly, then he's a real fighter. I'm going to call him Rocky." Cole stared down at the child, his expression murderous.

Mike grunted and moved farther into the room, to a crib where a baby of about six months lay. She was so tiny and

fragile. Dylan's heart ached for her.

"Meet Annabelle. They don't have a pediatric ICU here, or she'd be up there. She had the least severe injuries of the three. We think it's because her mother shielded her with her own body. Didn't stop the bastard from shooting through Hailey to hit the baby. She took a bullet wound to her right shoulder. The orthopedic surgeon says he wants her to get a little stronger before he goes in and repairs the damage."

"Is that why her entire right side is bandaged up?" Jarrod asked, his voice quiet, deadly. Jarrod was never dark. He always smiled and fit right in with Gregg and Max, the company's jokesters. Right now, he wasn't giving off any sort of fun vibes. He sounded dangerous without even raising his voice. It was the quiet tone. You always had to be careful of the quiet ones.

"Yes. The doctor told me she can't move. They took the bullet fragments out and stabilized the shoulder as best they could, but she's going to need at least one or two more surgeries to fix everything."

Poor little angel.

They turned to the other bed. "And this is Raine. She's five. She took three bullets to the chest and abdomen. We're lucky one of them didn't hit her heart, but I guess it was the grace of God that saved her that. She lost a kidney, her spleen, and she still has a bullet lodged in her spine from where it ripped through her stomach. We're not sure she's going to be able to walk. At least not until they take the bullet out, but she needs to be stronger before they do that."

Dylan held his breath and forced his emotions down. Her dark hair was fanned out around her, her little face pale and beautiful. She reminded him of his own daughter. They looked nothing alike, but Molly had been six when she died.

Mike watched him warily. "You okay?"

He nodded.

"I hated to call and ask you, especially now, but I was out of options."

“It’s fine, Mike. We’re glad to do it. Is the mother close?”

“She’s two doors down.”

“Has she woken up yet?”

“She had a collapsed lung, so they’ve had her on a ventilator with a tube in her lung to help her breathe while it heals. They’re taking the tube out later today, and then they’ll bring her out of the medically induced coma. She looks bad. Her entire body is a rainbow of bruises. The bastard didn’t leave an inch of her untouched. She’s got a broken arm, ruptured spleen that had to be taken out yesterday, her intestines ruptured from being kicked so hard, and her kidneys are bruised. She also has a fractured skull and a collapsed lung from the gunshot. It’s a miracle all of them are still alive.”

“They fought this hard to stay alive, we’ll fight just as hard to keep them safe,” Cole promised, a haunted look in his eyes.

There was a story there, but Dylan wasn’t sure he wanted to press it. Asking for details would make asking about his past fair game. He wasn’t ready to open up about that. Only Kade and Viktor knew about his family. He preferred it that way.

“Come on, let’s go to Hailey’s room.” Mike led them down the hall to the mother’s room. ICU didn’t normally have more than one bed per room, so they were lucky the hospital agreed to put the children together.

The woman lying in the bed wasn’t just petite; she was *tiny*. She looked dangerously thin, and her dark, midnight hair was matted with what was probably blood. Even with her covered in bruises, a blind man would recognize her beauty. She had a fine, delicate bone structure that ached to be cradled and stroked. His instinct to protect roared to life looking at this tiny, frail woman who’d suffered a beating trying to protect her baby. He wanted to go out and find this bastard and beat him to within an inch of his life.

He wasn’t the police. He didn’t have to worry about police brutality charges.

No one said a word.

But the looks on their faces said it all.

The bastard was going to pay for this.

“This is Hailey Jean Roberts. She worked at the grocery store until Josh had her fired a few months ago. No one would hire her. She had to go on assistance, and she lost her apartment. She and the kids have been living in a shady trailer park.”

“You sound like you know her well.”

“Here in Carrollton, a detective is assigned to all domestic violence claims. I was called to her home almost every single time she reported an incident. I’ve seen every bruise. When she left the bastard for hitting her is when everything got worse. He never stayed away. He cost her a job and had her blackballed here in town.”

“If there’s evidence, then why was he never arrested?”

“I arrested him plenty of times. The charges never stuck. They just went away. Hailey didn’t know what else to do, and honestly, I don’t either. I suggested maybe she move, but she asked me what was the point. He’d only follow her. Josh is angry she left him, that she embarrassed him in front of his family and the town. He’s going to make her life a living hell for as long as he can.”

“You said he’s well connected?”

Mike nodded and pulled out his phone. He swiped a few times and then held it out for us to see the photo of the man he’d pulled up. “Joshua Rivers is the son of the mayor. He has family in the police department, the DA is his cousin, and he has family on the city council as well. Getting charges to stick to him is like getting oil to sink to the bottom of a pot of boiling water...you don’t.”

“I fucking hate when assholes protect abusive bastards because they can.” The vehemence in Cole’s tone brought Dylan’s eyes back to him. The rage on his face overrode any other emotion.

“One question. Is the baby his?”

“No.” Mike looked relieved. “I’d lose my shit if he had the right to waltz in here and demand to see the very child he

shot.”

“Excuse me?”

They all turned to see a nurse standing in the doorway. “You can’t all be in here. Only two at a time, and only immediate family.”

Mike flashed his badge. “I’m Detective Mike Andsley. I’m the chief investigating officer on Ms. Roberts’ and the children’s case. These are her private security. They’ll be protecting her and the children. Someone will be stationed outside their rooms at all times.”

“I’m not sure about that...” She looked over her shoulder. “It’ll need to be cleared with the hospital.”

“It’s already been cleared with the chief of staff.”

“Oh, no one told me.” She glanced over her shoulder again, and something soured in Dylan’s stomach.

“Is there someone waiting to see Ms. Roberts?” he asked, his tone cold.

“I...well...” She glanced back again.

“Is it Joshua Rivers?” Mike demanded.

“Uh...”

Mike pushed past them all and into the hallway, Dylan right on his heels. He saw the doorway to the stairs closing just as he cleared the door.

“There.” He pointed to the stairs. “He went out there.”

Cole and Gregg took off down the stairs right behind Mike, while he and Jarrod stayed on the floor.

“You do know he’s the main suspect for almost killing all four of them?” He kept his tone quiet, but it was just as deadly as Jarrod’s and twice as scary.

“Josh wouldn’t do this. I’ve known him since I was ten.”

“If you let him near Hailey or her children again, I’ll make sure you’re charged as an accomplice. Do you understand?”

Her eyes widened, and she nodded.

“Now, get the hell out before I decide to have you arrested.”

“We need to talk to the charge nurse.”

Dylan agreed, but he looked back into the room instead of searching out the nurse supervisor. The woman lying there pulled emotions out of him that had been dead for so long he wasn't sure what to do with them.

What he was sure of?

She and those kids had to be protected at all costs.

“We may need more men.”

“I was thinking the same. The four of us aren't going to be enough when everyone seems to be on his side.” Jarrod stared after the retreating nurse, his expression as disgusted as Dylan felt.

“I'll make the call to Viktor.”

Dylan would make damn sure she and her kids were safe if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter Three



Pain.

It was something Hailey knew well. She lived in pain daily, but this pain was worse than anything she'd dealt with before. It felt like glass was sawing at her lungs when she tried to breathe. Panic crawled along her limbs as she found herself gasping. She tried to lift her arms, and they felt like they were weighed down by lead.

"Easy," a voice whispered. "Stay calm."

His voice was unfamiliar to her, and it caused even more panic to crowd her.

Soon another voice joined his, this time a female.

"Hailey, honey, just relax. I know it hurts to breathe, but you're okay."

"I don't think she can breathe all that well," the man argued.

"The doctor said..."

"I don't fucking care what the doctor said. Get his ass back in here. She can't breathe."

That was not Josh. Who was it?

She took another breath, and the pain was so bad she actually blacked out.

The next time she woke up, the pain was at least bearable. Her eyes were heavy, though, and didn't want to open, so she listened instead. There was a steady beeping that invaded her senses, and it smelled strongly of cleaning solutions. The TV was on, but she didn't recognize the show. Granted, all she seemed to watch these days was cartoons, but...

Wait.

Her kids.

Something was right there on the edge of her memory, something bad, but her head just hurt worse when she tried to force it.

Where was she, and where were her kids?

She tried to take a deep breath, but it hurt. Not as bad as last time, but it was still painful. This pain she could deal with. She could fight through it.

"Easy, little bird."

She didn't recognize his voice.

"You need to stay still. Moving is only going to aggravate your injuries more."

"Is she awake?"

Another male voice. What was going on?

"Not quite, but she'll probably be awake soon. She's stirring."

"That's a good sign. Means her body is finally healed enough to allow her to wake up."

Healed?

She didn't understand.

"The kids?"

"No change. Annabelle hasn't come out of surgery yet."

Surgery? Her baby was in surgery?

"Who's with her?"

“Cole. He’s stationed outside the operating room so we don’t have any more oopsies.”

“Oopsies? Really?”

The man laughed. “I’ve been hanging out with Max a lot more. Shayna says it a lot when Marcus Jr. does something he shouldn’t.”

The other man grunted.

“Mike’s here. He wanted to see if Hailey was awake. He can’t formally file charges against Josh until she wakes up and names him as the man who shot her and her children.”

Shot her? And her kids?

Panic swelled inside, and she tried to sit up, tried to open her eyes, tried to do anything so she could get to her kids.

“Easy.” Real alarm coated the man’s tongue this time as hands grasped her arms. “Be still. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“I guess she was a little more awake than you thought.”

The man holding her down did nothing but growl. “Make yourself useful and find a nurse or a doctor.”

She heard his footsteps walk away.

“It’s okay, Hailey. You’re safe. Your kids are safe. We’re here with you now, and Josh won’t get near you or them ever again.”

He didn’t understand. He didn’t know who Josh was, who his family was. What he’d done...

A strangled scream escaped her as image after image flooded through her memory. The sounds of her babies crying as gunshots rang through the trailer. The feel of a bullet ripping through her as she tried to shield Annabelle. Oh, God, was that why she was in surgery? Had the bullet hit her, too?

Where were Raine and Cash? She had to get up; she needed to make sure they were okay.

“You’re going to make them put you back into a medically induced coma.” His tone was harsh, but it did break through her panic. “If you want to be able to stay awake and see your kids, you need to stop. Calm down. They’re safe.”

Annabelle wasn’t. Not if she was in surgery.

The thought of her baby in surgery finally forced her eyes open, and she shrank back. The man above her was glaring, his hands gripping her arms to keep her down. His eyes... those icy blue eyes were cold and hard. What new hell had she landed in?

He must have noticed how afraid she was because he let her go and took a step back, his white-blond hair glinting under the lights. He was like some huge Viking raider ready to maim and harm anyone who got in his way. He had to be well over six feet.

“Easy, little bird. Detective Andsley called me in. I’m Dylan Jenkins, a member of Kincaid Security and Investigations. We’re here to protect you. You’re safe.”

Then why didn’t she feel safe?

Maybe because she’d been beaten and shot?

And her baby was in surgery?

She opened her mouth to try to talk, and all that came out was a wheeze.

“Careful. You were on a ventilator for over a week.” He went and got a bottle of water, untwisted the cap, and held it to her mouth so she could sip it.

The lukewarm liquid felt like the best thing ever as it washed away her cotton mouth and eased the fire in her throat.

“It’s going to be a while before your voice comes back to full strength,” he cautioned and pulled the water away. “You were choked, and the bruising was quite severe.”

Josh loved to choke her. He’d done it playfully at first, but as their relationship progressed, he used it as more of a way to exert his control over her. Josh was bigger than she was. Not as big as this man, but it didn’t take much to overpower her

small frame. She hated how tiny she was. It was a weakness Josh loved to exploit.

A nurse rushed in, soon followed by a doctor. The Viking took a step back, but he didn't leave the room. He waited patiently while she was poked, prodded, and asked a thousand and one questions about how she felt. It exhausted her, honestly.

Hailey tried to talk, but her voice was so hoarse, it came out garbled, but thankfully, the Viking understood what she wanted.

"She wants to know about her kids." His tone was gruff, almost harsh.

"All three of them are on this floor," Dr. Mayer told her. The woman was older and her smile kind. "I've been taking care of them tonight as well. As soon as we run a few tests to make sure you can be moved, I'll have you taken to see them."

"I think she wants to know how they're doing." The Viking sighed heavily, almost like he felt her frustration.

She nodded emphatically. Annabelle was in surgery... Hold up. Did she say all three were on this floor? Her eyes widened and swung to the man leaning against the wall. Why were Cash and Raine here?

"Annabelle is in surgery. We had a pediatric orthopedic surgeon come in from Atlanta to repair her shoulder. The bullet shattered her collarbone. We're lucky it didn't do worse, but since it went through you first, it mitigated the damage."

She'd done her best to shield her baby, but her best efforts weren't good enough. He'd tried to kill them both.

"Raine is stable. She underwent surgery yesterday to remove the bullet from her spine. We'll know more in a few days. We have her in a medically induced coma to keep her still."

"They don't know if she'll be able to walk," the Viking clarified.

Tears welled up in her eyes. He must have gone after Raine when she passed out trying to shield Annabelle. Or was it after he beat her the first time and she blacked out? Josh had never hurt the kids before. He'd threatened to, but she assumed it was just an empty threat to keep her obedient.

"Raine also lost a kidney, her spleen, and we've had to do some repair work on her stomach as well. The bullet ripped through it and lodged against her spine. We had to wait a few days before we could remove it. The surgeon wanted her to be a little stronger, but she came through it with no complications."

"C...c..."

"Cash?" The doctor's face turned pale, and it terrified her. "Cash is still touch and go. He was shot in the chest, and the bullet grazed his heart. I would say it hit his heart, but the cardiothoracic surgeon says otherwise. It shredded the left ventricular valve. He's had three surgeries since he was admitted a week ago. He's hanging in there, though. We've all been praying for him."

Her body started to shake, and alarms on the machines went off. She heard the words "blood pressure," and her vision started to blur, tiny black dots floating in front of her.

A solid, warm hand wrapped around hers, and she looked up to see the Viking staring at her.

"You need to stay calm, Hailey. Cash needs his mama more than you need to fall apart right now."

He was right. She closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. It hurt, but the pain centered her like nothing else did, and the alarms slowly died. She couldn't panic.

"Good girl," the Viking said and stepped back, but she held on to his hand for dear life. He looked surprised but said nothing. Just stood there and let her dig her fingernails into the flesh of his hand like it didn't hurt. Maybe it didn't.

"Now, Miss Hailey," Dr. Mayer turned her full attention to her, "I need to go over your injuries with you. They're extensive and severe. Your left arm had a compound fracture.

That's been set by the orthopedic surgeon and casted. You have a skull fracture, which is healing nicely, but you do need to be careful. The concussion you suffered is still a worry. The effects of that can last weeks. Your kidneys were bruised and your spleen ruptured. We thought we'd be able to save it, but we had to take it out a few days ago. Your large and small intestines were also ruptured in several places, but we *were* able to repair them. The bullet went through your left lung, causing it to collapse. We had you on a ventilator while it healed, so it's going to hurt to breathe for a little while. Dr. Hunt took you off the vent a little too early, and we had to re-vent you, but you're good now even if it doesn't feel like it."

She'd never been this injured before. Josh really wanted her dead.

"I'm going to get an x-ray of your lungs before I let you see the children. I need to make sure you're able to breathe without further complications and that no infection has set in. They need to stay infection free. Their surgeons and I agreed on a clean room mandate yesterday. You'll need to be gowned, gloved, and masked before you enter. I'm going to get a scan of your intestines as well. You're fever free and your white blood cell count is normal, which tells me you probably don't have an infection, but we need to take precautions when it comes to Cash. He wouldn't be able to handle one more thing."

Dylan watched the fear run rampant over her face, and it was a fear he knew intimately. He'd felt it the night he'd gotten the call that his wife and daughter were in an accident on the freeway. It was the worst feeling in the world, so if she wanted to hold his hand and cut into his skin with her fingernails, he'd let her. He understood.

Being here, it kept bringing up memories of that night. Every time he looked at Raine, he saw Molly. Only she was lying on a cold metal gurney in the morgue, her small face devoid of color and her limbs broken and bruised. He'd had to step away more times than he liked to admit, as the memories caused him physical pain. It was hard to shove them down when everywhere he looked, he was reminded of that night.

It would get better when they were able to move them from the hospital.

“Jarrod,” he called, and the younger man poked his head through the door.

“Yes, sir?”

“Can you accompany Hailey upstairs? I need to call Viktor.”

He nodded. “I’ll be waiting out here.”

“Hailey.” He squatted in front of her. “Jarrod will go with you to radiology. I need to call our office and give them an update. Detective Andsley is here. He’s going to want to talk to you as soon as you’re able, but I need to ask you one thing.”

Her bright green eyes were wide, and her hand gripped his tighter.

“Did Josh do this? Did he shoot you and your children? All I need is for you to nod.”

She nodded, and tears dripped out of her eyes, splashing onto his hand.

“Jarrod will keep you safe. Cole is with Annabelle, and Gregg is standing guard outside Raine and Cash’s room. You’re all safe. We’re not going to let anything happen to you. I promise.”

He wasn’t sure she believed him, but it was the best he could do. She’d have to learn to trust them.

“I need you to let go of my hand so they can take you to radiology.”

She glanced down, and then slowly, her fingers released their death grip.

“Good girl.”

The doctor smiled at them both, and then the nurse was unhooking Hailey and wheeling her out of the room. Gregg glanced their way, and Dylan held up his phone, pointing toward the stairs. He nodded and went back to watching the floor. He might look bored, but he was anything but. He was laser focused on who did and did not belong. After the debacle

of Josh almost getting into Hailey or the children's rooms, he made sure the hospital was aware of the incident and all of security was on alert. He wasn't sure what happened to the nurse, but he hadn't seen her since.

Outside, it felt like the bowels of Hell itself, but it was better than being inside. Out here, he could push the memories down for a few blessed minutes. It didn't feel like his past was trying to drown him in grief.

He took several deep breaths to steady himself and then placed a call to Viktor, who answered on the second ring.

"News?"

"She woke up. They took her to radiology. Annabelle is still in surgery, but they're afraid Cash may not make it through the night. No one has told Hailey that yet, though."

"Damn." Viktor sighed raggedly. None of them liked hearing that. "Are you sure you're good to be there? I can come down and take your place."

"No, I'm good. I'd rather being doing something productive."

"Today is the day Molly died, Dylan. If Cash dies today... are you sure you can handle it?"

He'd been doing his damndest to not think about that all day.

"I can help her more than anyone if Cash dies, Vik."

"I don't want you to have to do that."

Neither did Dylan, but it was a responsibility he took on when he decided to stay after seeing the children. He'd thought about running back to New York, but he couldn't in good conscience. Not only was he good with computers, but he was a damn good bodyguard as well. This family needed him. He couldn't save his own family, but he could try to help hold this one together.

"She did name Josh as the man who shot her family. Mike can formally obtain an arrest warrant for him instead of calling him a person of interest."

“I had our attorney make a call to a friend of his father’s down in Atlanta. He’s agreed to represent Hailey and her kids pro bono. He should be there later today to talk to her and start the paperwork for an order of protection just in case the bastard gets bail.”

“He’ll get bail. His father is the mayor, and his cousin is the DA.”

“Which says to me there is a conflict of interest. Maybe you should talk to Mr. Darrow about having the AG’s office take over the investigation and the prosecution.”

“That doesn’t help us since his uncle is the presiding judge in the county.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, that sums up Mike’s whole dilemma.”

“Do you think his uncle will let him off since he did shoot three kids?”

“Says Hailey. It’s her word against his.”

“She’s filed numerous DV charges against him.”

“All of which were dropped.”

“I’ll talk to Kade. He might have some creative ideas.”

“How is the bastard, anyway? Still grumbling about having to hire not ten but fifteen new employees?”

“You know it. It was needed, though, and he understands that. We’re growing faster than we can keep up with, and to be able to do these pro bono cases, we need to keep our revenue increasing. Angel told me she’d straighten him out, and he came in the next day agreeing to put out feelers. Most of the background checks came back, and we have training scheduled for them to start next week. I’m waiting on three international searches and one nationwide search before I can bring the other four on board.”

“Gregg said you hired two more women. Nice to see the company realizing women are just as valuable as men are when it comes to our profession.”

Viktor grunted, and for a brief moment, Dylan let himself laugh. Viktor always worried more about his female employees than he did his male ones, but some of those women could kick the ass of every man on staff.

“I’ll be glad to get them trained up. I want to send Kayla down there. I thought she might be a better fit for the kids. If they’ve been abused or seen their mother abused by a man, then they might feel safer around a woman. I can’t, though, until Abel is done with his assignment so I can swap them out.”

Dylan had wanted Kayla here from day one, but she was currently protecting a state senator who had a target on his back, thanks to a very unpopular bill his vote managed to make law. He’d been receiving death threats. Dylan had looked through them himself and saw no real concerns, but they liked to be safer rather than sorry.

“Abel is not going to want that assignment.”

“I know.” Viktor chuckled. “It’s why he’s getting it.”

Abel was their gentle giant. He was a hulk of a man whose very presence inspired intimidation, but a heart of gold rested behind the facade.

“I have to get back. Just wanted to give you an update. Let me know when Kayla is available. I have a feeling we’re going to need all hands on deck.”

Viktor said his goodbyes, and then Dylan went back into the hospital, dreading the moment when Hailey was told her little boy wouldn’t make it through the night.

Chapter Four



Hailey spent the next half hour or so lying still as her body was scanned. Then she had x-rays of her lungs. It still hurt to breathe, but the pain was nothing compared to the pain of knowing she couldn't protect her babies. Josh shot them. Surgeries. Annabelle was still in surgery. Dear God, what kind of mother was she? How had she not seen the kind of person Joshua was before he turned into a monster? Maybe if she'd seen who he really was sooner...

She sighed and welcomed the pain it brought. She deserved it. Her babies were here because of her bad choices in men.

Jarrod walked along beside her bed, his dark eyes watching everything. He was a little older than her, maybe, but she wasn't sure. His brown hair was on the shorter side, but it complimented his overall look. He reminded her of the soldiers she'd seen in movies. Maybe he used to be in the military?

And how did she end up with people protecting her? The Viking said the name of a company earlier, but it escaped her now. She couldn't afford them, so she doubted they'd stick around. She couldn't even afford ramen noodles most days. They were all hungry more than she liked to admit. Especially her. She gave everything she had to the kids and ate only

enough to make sure she didn't starve while she looked for work.

Shot. All three of them. Shoot her, fine, but her kids?

Why hurt innocent little babies?

Annabelle was only five months old.

As they got closer to her room, she looked to see if the children were close. She needed to see them, but at the same time, she didn't want to go in there if she had an infection. She wouldn't be the reason they got sicker, even if all of this was her fault. She should never have brought Joshua into their lives.

But he'd seemed like such a good man.

She shook her head. Now was not the time to try to figure out why her radar was so screwed up when it came to men. She had to focus on her kids.

She cleared her throat, and Jarrod instantly looked at her. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Kids?" She barely managed to get the word out. Her throat was still very swollen. She'd felt it earlier.

He nodded to a room a little farther up. "Why don't we take her to the doorway so she can see them?"

The nurse frowned. "I don't know. It's supposed to stay a clean room."

"I'm not saying take her inside. Just open the door and let her see them." He smiled, and it completely changed his face. He became quite charming. "Do you have kids, miss?"

"Yes."

"How would you feel if they were hurt, and no one would let you see them?"

The nurse's frown deepened. "Maybe just a little peek."

Jarrod grinned. "You on shift all night?"

"Yeah."

“We’ll keep you supplied in Starbucks all night for letting Miss Roberts lay eyes on her little ones.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

Hailey was grateful they went past her room and stopped a few doors down.

“It’ll be a pleasure,” Jarrod purred.

Hailey ignored his flirting and waited until the bed stopped. Another man stood outside the room, but she ignored him. Her entire focus was on the interior of the room. All the ICU rooms here had glass outer walls so it was easy for the nurses to see inside and determine what was going on. She saw a crib and two beds. Her gaze landed on Raine first. It was easy to see her dark hair. She was lying on her stomach, her little face pale and drawn. Her baby.

Her eyes went to the other bed, and her lungs stopped working. Cash was hooked up to more machines than she’d ever seen in her life. His body was frail, and his chest barely moved. He looked lifeless.

“Something’s wrong,” she whispered, forcing the words out. She pointed to Cash. “He...can’t...breathe.”

The nurse pursed her lips, but she saw the flash of pity in them before her features returned to a calm expression. “He’s very sick, Miss Roberts. It’s hard for his little body to keep up with everything.”

“Then put him on a ventilator,” Jarrod said, all his charm gone.

“That’s not my call, sir. I’m just the nurse.”

“Then bring his doctor to talk to Miss Roberts.”

Yes, that. She couldn’t talk very well, but Jarrod seemed to understand what she wanted to say. Thank God.

“What’s going on?”

The Viking was back. He frowned, making his face even harsher than it was before.

“Hailey wanted to see the kids.”

“It’s a clean room.”

“And it still is,” Jarrod said smoothly. “The door wasn’t opened, but she got to lay eyes on them.”

She wasn’t sure what the Viking was thinking, but he simply motioned for them all to get back to where they were supposed to be.

“Mike’s on his way up.”

Hailey pointed to her kids.

And the Viking’s expression softened just a fraction. “I’ll make sure as soon as you’re cleared you can go in and see them, even if you’re in the middle of a police interview.”

She frowned.

“I promise.”

Oddly, she believed him.

“Has Cash’s surgeon spoken with you yet?” he asked, his eyes straying to the small boy lying on the bed.

She shook her head.

“We just got back from radiology,” Jarrod explained.

“I’ll get her down here. She arrived a few hours ago.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“She came from the children’s hospital in Atlanta,” the Viking said. “The children weren’t stable enough to be moved to Atlanta, so pediatric surgeons came to them.”

She was grateful for that.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for Annette.”

A woman in her mid-thirties and dressed very sharply in a steel gray suit approached the nurse’s station.

“She’s on break,” the nurse behind the desk said. “Can I help you?”

“I’m from the mayor’s office. He wanted an update on the Roberts family.”

Her entire body clenched, and sweat broke out across her forehead. The mayor? That was Josh's father.

"Absolutely not." The Viking stood taller and stormed over to the desk. "It violates every HIPPA law on the books to give out medical information without the consent of the person or persons. Especially when it's the mayor's son who is accused of shooting this family."

"He did no such thing," the woman rebuked.

Hailey looked down. Of course no one believed her. She was just some woman who was trying to make Josh's life hard. He was the mayor's son and had never done anything wrong. Everyone loved him. She'd seen it firsthand. She had no hope he'd go to jail for this.

"Either way, this hospital will not be giving information about Hailey Roberts or her children to *anyone* unless she approves it, or I will personally slap a civil lawsuit against everyone involved that will bankrupt this hospital, the doctors, the surgeons, and anyone else involved, including you. Do I make myself clear?"

The charge nurse nodded.

The Viking towered over the representative from the mayor's office. She took a slight step back. Hailey noticed even if no one else did. The man was extremely intimidating.

"Sir, we're simply trying to ascertain if all involved are better."

"Bullshit," the Viking said. "If I see you or anyone on this floor sniffing around, you'll be slapped with a lawsuit. And trust me, I have the money to hire the best sharks around. I'll bring them in from outside of Georgia. You've never dealt with an attorney until you've met ones from LA or New York. Gregg, will you escort this woman from the floor?"

The man she'd been ignoring stepped up and took the woman gently by the arm.

Like the Viking, he was giving off dangerous vibes. The woman's lips pursed, but she didn't argue when she was led away.

“I want to speak to Annette.”

The charge nurse took a deep breath. “Of course, sir. She’s one of our new hires. I had no idea she was giving information out about our patients. It’s not our policy to do so.”

“I understand the media wanted updates, but I’ve spoken with the chief of staff about that. Any information released will come through Detective Mike Andsley or Miss Roberts’ attorney. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s get you back into your room, Hailey.” He motioned to Jarrod and the nurse, and before she knew it, she was being pushed back down the hall. “I know you want to see them, but we need to make sure it’s safe for you to go in there. Cash can’t handle anything else.”

“Vent...” She started coughing, and he looked alarmed.

“Don’t try to talk,” Jarrod warned her. “You gave us all a scare the first time they took you off the vent. Your lung was not ready to breathe on its own. Dylan had to give you CPR until everyone swarmed in and took over. You have to take it easy if you want to be of any use to the kiddos.”

Dylan. He may have told her his name, but everything was still a little fuzzy. He didn’t look like a Dylan. He looked more like a Thor or some other Swedish name.

And he gave her CPR.

No wonder he looked alarmed when she started to hack up her still-healing lung.

She giggled. It was highly inappropriate, but she couldn’t help it. She had a soldier and a Viking as a protection detail. How had her life become so screwed up and ridiculous?

The Viking’s face softened even more. “I know it’s a lot, but just know you’re safe. You and your children. We won’t let the press or anyone else get near any of you.”

She smiled slightly. A wave of dizziness washed over her as exhaustion took hold. She was so tired. Her own ICU room had the same glass exterior, and she watched through sleepy

lids as a girl was brought over to Dylan and the man he'd called Gregg. She looked terrified.

It made her uncomfortable and slightly afraid. She didn't want anyone scared. These men could hurt people. They probably had, at one point or another. If she did something they didn't like, would they turn their size against her? Would they leave her and her children alone to fend for themselves? She couldn't pay them. If they left, how could she protect her babies?

She was jumbled up in the rabbit hole of what-ifs when Detective Andsley came into her room. He smiled when he saw her, and she found herself returning it, even if her own looked more like a grimace.

"You scared us good, young lady." His kindness and the way he seemed to care always left her feeling gutted. Why couldn't any of the men she'd dated care as much as this man?

She pointed to her throat and shook her head, telling him it was hard for her to talk.

"I know." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small notebook. "We always carry these things even though we use our phones to take notes and things now. It comes in handy from time to time." He handed it to her along with a pen. "You just write down everything for me, okay?"

She nodded.

"First, who shot you?"

If she named him to the detective, it would start a whole new world of pain for her. If he'd done this because he felt embarrassed she left him, what would he do if she told the truth?

"It's okay, Hailey. Dylan and his team are here to make sure nothing happens to you. I know him. He and I worked together at LAPD, and now he works for one of the best security firms in the US."

She wrote down one word. *How?*

“I asked him if his company did any pro bono work, and they do. It’s a family-oriented firm, and they don’t take too kindly to assholes shooting women and children. Dylan’s one of the best people I know. He’ll stand by you through this entire process.”

One of the best people he knew? Dylan scared her, so how could she fully trust him? Then again, most people scared her these days.

“Hailey, I can’t formally charge him until you give me his name. Trust me, we’ll keep you safe.”

He didn’t understand. None of them did. They couldn’t keep her safe forever. Once this was done and everyone left, then she’d be vulnerable to his father and the rest of his family. Josh once told her if he wanted to take her kids from her, all it would take is a phone call. Social services would swoop in and take them. If she did this, if she named him, what stopped that phone call?

“Miss Roberts?”

She glanced up to see a man wearing scrubs and one of those funny little hats they wore in the operating room standing in the doorway.

“I’m Dr. Cline. I’m Annabelle’s surgeon. She’s in recovery now. I wanted to update you since you’re awake.”

She sat up eagerly, ignoring the pain it caused.

“She did just fine. I was able to go in and rebuild her collarbone. I did have to put a few screws and a metal plate in. We’ll be able to take those out later, but it was necessary to stabilize the shoulder so the bone could heal. She’ll make a full recovery, and children bounce back faster than adults do. In a few months, you’ll never know how injured she was.”

Tears welled and spilled over. Thank God. Her baby was okay. She’d be fine.

“If anything changes, I’ll come speak to you.” He glanced over at Mike. “Detective.”

“Thank you for letting us know, Doctor.”

He nodded and left the room. Dylan walked in and sat in a chair facing the door. He didn't say anything, so she turned back to Mike.

And his question was the same.

If she did nothing, they might be safe for a little while. Or at least until Josh decided to torture her more. If she did nothing, it would teach her kids that it was okay for them to be shot and terrorized. No one would be punished for hurting them.

But what if he came for them, only legally this time?

She scribbled her concerns on the pad of paper and handed it to Mike.

“Hailey, you're a good mother. He won't be able to get your kids yanked.”

Dylan stood so suddenly it made her shrink back against the pillow. He was so big.

He seemed to understand what he'd done to frighten her, but he came over to stand by Mike. “They're not going to be able to take your children, Hailey. We have an attorney driving up from Atlanta who agreed to represent you pro bono. We'll discuss your concerns with him, and I'm sure if he needs to find someone who specializes in family court, he can. KSI will pay for the attorney if we need to.”

Why?

He looked at the word on her notebook, and everything about him softened.

“No one has the right to terrorize a woman, let alone a child. We take that personally, as all of us have families and people we care about. KSI can afford it, and we try to help where we can. We're taking this case personally, and trust me when I say this, you're going to be fine. You're going to get through this. It may be hard. You'll feel some days like you want to give up, but we're here to help you. Anything you need, we'll do our best to give it to you.”

That last bit sounded almost ominous. She frowned up at him. Did he know something she didn't?

Mike tapped the notebook to remind her she needed to focus.

“Tell me who shot you, Hailey.”

“You can tell him, little bird. We’ll make sure it’s safe for you.”

He’d called her that since she woke up.

A man she thought was good and kind put her in this hospital bed, and a man whose very presence inspired fear was telling her he’d keep her safe. He didn’t try to be something he wasn’t, but could she trust him? She’d trusted so many people in the past who only ended up hurting her.

“Hailey,” Mike prompted after she said nothing.

She glanced back toward the Viking. His gaze was strong and steady.

She wrote down Josh’s name.

“That’s all I need for right now. The judge wouldn’t sign the arrest warrant until I heard it from you, but now he can’t deny it.”

See? They were all in the Rivers’ pocket or related to them. This wasn’t going to go anywhere except sideways for her.

“I’ll be back later,” Mike promised. “I’ll need a formal statement, but that can wait until you can talk a little better. If you feel up to it, then write down everything you remember about that day. As soon as I have him in custody, I’ll call Dylan and let him know.”

“Thank you,” she mouthed.

“You’re very welcome, Hailey.” He took out of the room like his heels were on fire. She didn’t hold out any hope that this would go anywhere, but at least she’d show her kids that what happened to them wasn’t right.

“Hailey.”

The Viking’s deep voice rumbled over her, and she shrank further against the flat hospital pillow. Why was he so big?

“I need to talk to you about Cash.”

That got her attention.

He came over and sat in the chair by the bed. “His cardiologist will be in shortly, but I want to prepare you.”

This was bad. She knew something was wrong. Felt it in her bones when she looked at her son.

“The bullet did a lot of damage, and he’s had three surgeries to repair the repairs. It’s more than his little body can handle. I think he’s been waiting for you.”

No. Her mind refused to understand what he was trying to tell her.

She shook her head mulishly.

He took her hand and squeezed it. “I never got to hold my daughter before she died. I didn’t get to kiss her and tell her it was okay. I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

Her gaze whipped up to his, and the stark pain in them broke her heart. She saw his suffering. Felt it like a breath that brushed over her skin.

“Molly was six. A little older than Raine. She died in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry,” she choked out.

“I’m telling you this so you don’t waste the time you have with Cash. Tell him you love him, kiss his forehead, and let him know you’re there with him.”

“He can’t...” Her body refused to allow her to say the words as a sob worked its way up her throat. Her baby couldn’t die. He couldn’t. Her little angel. He was the sweetest little boy.

“We’ll all be here for you. For Cash. Anything you need, just ask.”

She stopped listening when another man dressed in scrubs came in and introduced himself as one of her son’s surgeons. He droned on and on, basically telling her the same thing that Dylan said.

Her baby couldn't die. He couldn't.

"Hailey?"

She jumped when Dylan spoke her name right by her ear.

"I...what?"

"Do you want to see him now?"

They wanted her to go say goodbye to her little angel.

She didn't want to go anywhere near that room.

But she couldn't not, either.

He was her baby.

She nodded, and Dylan moved while a nurse helped her into a wheelchair. They made her scrub her hands at the sink while the nurse held her upright. Then she was gloved, masked, and gowned.

She looked over to see Dylan going through the same protocol. He wasn't going to leave her to face this alone. He understood what was happening.

Scary Viking or not, he wasn't going to leave her alone.

And she was thankful for that as they left her room.

Chapter Five



Her body shook as she was wheeled into her children's room. The crib remained empty, but she saw Raine first. They had her lying on her stomach, her little face smooth and pain-free in sleep. She looked peaceful. If it wasn't for all the wires and tubes hooked to her, Hailey would think she was just asleep.

But she knew better. Her baby had been shot and might never walk again.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep, steadying breath when the wheelchair stopped. A hand dropped down on her shoulder, and she flinched, but it was just the nurse offering her support.

“Here we are, Hailey.”

Why did nurses always sound so cheerful even when the situation was anything but?

She slowly opened her eyes and looked at her son. He was still, his little chest rising and falling, but she saw how he struggled to breathe. His white-blond hair was streaked with pink. Blood. It was blood in his hair. Someone had attempted to wash it out, but without a full bath, it would be hard to erase the evidence of the evil visited upon her little boy.

She remembered the day he was born. It was snowing outside, and the storm was so bad her father didn't think they'd make it to the hospital without crashing the car, but they'd gotten there. It hadn't been a long, drawn-out event like Raine. She'd been in labor with her daughter for three days, while Cash made his appearance in a little over three hours from the time she'd felt the first contractions. He'd always been her easy child, even during his birth.

She reached up and traced his cheek. It felt cold to the touch. Why was he cold? Her eyes strayed to the machine that showed his heartbeat, and she assured herself it was still beating. Thank God.

"Why...cold?" she asked softly.

"It's the temperature in here. We keep it colder to help with the fever he and Raine have had."

"Blanket."

"Of course," the nurse murmured and walked out of the room.

The Viking came closer, but he didn't touch her. Maybe he'd seen her flinch before.

"Screaming," Hailey whispered, forcing the garbled words out slowly. "All I hear is screaming. I tried, but Josh..." Her voice broke as a sob built. "Why would he do this?"

"I don't know, Miss Roberts." His voice was deep and strong. "Sometimes people are just evil."

She sure knew how to pick them. She brought Josh into their lives, and it was a regret she'd live with for eternity.

The nurse came back in and spread a blanket over both Cash and Raine.

"Have their fevers broken?" Dylan asked.

"Raine's has. It's why they were able to take her back into surgery to remove the bullet and repair the damage it did around her spine."

“Will her doctor be in soon? I’m sure Hailey is eager to talk to him.”

“You’ve missed his rounds this morning, but I can let him know you’re awake and would like to talk to him.”

Hailey nodded. “Thank you.”

“Dylan?” The man who had gone with her to radiology pulled Dylan’s attention away from her.

Jarrold. His name was Jarrold.

“Yeah?”

“Kade wants you to call him.”

“I will as soon as we’re done here.”

Jarrold glanced her way, and his eyes softened. “Of course. Take your time. I’ll let Kade know what’s going on.”

They were giving her as much time as she needed to say her goodbyes.

The thing was, she couldn’t say goodbye to her son. She wouldn’t.

“Why has no one tried to help him breathe?” she asked, one word at a time and slowly. “You put me on a ventilator. Why not Cash?”

“I don’t have that answer for you, Miss Roberts. Only his doctor can answer that.”

“Then get her down here now. I’m not going to sit here and just let him die.”

There was pity in her eyes, but she left the room to call the doctor. The woman could pity her all she wanted, but if there was a singular chance to save her baby, she’d do it.

“Am I being selfish?” she asked a few minutes later when she couldn’t take the silence anymore.

“No.” He moved to within inches of her. “If it was Molly, I’d have done everything possible to save her.”

The doctor came in then. He was an older man in his late fifties, his gray hair streaked with brown. He was wearing

slacks and a dress shirt under that white coat doctors wore. His face was impassive, and she worried about the kind of man her son's surgeon was.

But did it matter if he saved his life?

"Miss Roberts, I'm Dr. Edmonds. I'm the cardiologist who has been taking care of your son."

"You did his surgeries?" Her voice sounded like gravel, but at least it was understandable. When she'd first woken up, she'd only been able manage a few words.

"No. That would have been Dr. Susan Ellis. She was here earlier, but she had to turn around and head right back to Atlanta. One of her patients who's been waiting for a heart got one, and she had to return to do the surgery."

"Oh. Can you explain why he's not on a ventilator to help him breathe?"

"He was on a ventilator," the doctor said. "Dr. Ellis put him on one after his first surgery, but he started to breathe better, and she took him off of it. Then he had to go back into surgery twice, but his breathing was doing well. He started to struggle to breathe today."

"Then why not put him back on the ventilator?" she demanded and then started to cough. Dylan poured her a cup of water and handed it to her. She took several sips to try to soothe her throat.

"He's struggling, Miss Roberts. I'm not sure he'll survive another surgery. It might be kinder..."

"Kinder?" she raged, her anger allowing her to push up out of the wheelchair. "Your job is not to be kinder. Your job is to do everything in your power to save the life of your patient!"

Strong hands gripped her, and her entire body flinched, but he didn't let go. She understood he was only keeping her from falling, but her body didn't know that. It didn't help that she was coughing and her throat felt like it was on fire.

"Of course we'll do everything we can." How could he sound offended when he literally was doing nothing to help

her baby breathe?

“Then why isn’t he on the ventilator?”

“I’ll order it now.”

“You do that.” It was odd to hear the contempt in the Viking’s voice when there was also so much steel in it.

She glared at his back when he beat a hasty retreat out of the room, the sliding glass doors opening and closing automatically. Dylan helped her sit back down, and then he stepped away, giving her the space she needed. He picked up the cup that had fallen from her hand when she stood up and water spilled everywhere. He poured her more water and handed it to her.

“Will you be okay for a moment? I need to have the nurse call Dr. Ellis so she can speak with you directly. I’m unsure of if she’s in surgery or not, as we were unaware that she wasn’t here.”

“Thank you.”

She watched him step out of the room and go directly to the nurse’s station before turning her attention back to Cash.

Maybe it would be kinder to tell him it would be okay to just let go and drift off, but it wasn’t in her to do it. She couldn’t lose him, and if he wasn’t strong enough to fight for himself, she’d do it for him. That was a parent’s job.

She leaned over and brushed her lips against the cold skin of his cheek. “Mama’s here, baby. It’s going to be okay. I’m going to make it all okay. You just keep breathing, okay? Just breathe, baby.”

Ripping the glove off her hand, she took his and squeezed it to let him know she was here and hoped he’d recognize her touch even in his unconscious state. The nurse was going to pitch a fit, but she couldn’t give two shits, as her dad used to say.

“I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. Mama’s here,” she whispered and kissed his forehead. “I’m right here with you.”

Dylan came back in, and she flinched when he moved too close, but it didn't deter him from shielding her ungloved hand with the blanket. The nurse was right behind him.

He understood.

The nurse tapped her tablet a few times and made some notes before smiling at her. "His fever isn't nearly as bad as it was, so that's a good sign."

"Really?"

"Yes. We've all been worried about his breathing, and our head nurse spoke with the doctor earlier about the possibility of putting him back on the ventilator, but he didn't seem to think it was necessary. If we'd have known he was thinking along the lines of 'it would be kinder,' we would have gone to the head of cardiology and the head of pediatrics. I'm so sorry he said that you."

At least the nursing staff was competent, Dylan thought as the nurse spoke. It had been a very long time since he'd felt that blush of rage at any human being as when that doctor suggested to Hailey it might be kinder to let Cash go. He'd been under the impression there was nothing left they could do for the child. He had no idea the doctor was a hack.

Hailey thanked her, and the nurse left them alone again. Dylan took up a stance near the door, but close enough he could help her if she needed it. He'd seen her flinch every single time someone touched her, and it fanned the flames of his rage. She didn't deserve what had happened to her or her children. What kind of person shot a child?

He did try to contain his rage, though. It would only scare her, and she was terrified enough right now without worrying he might hurt her if he was angry.

"Miss Roberts?"

They both looked up when another woman came in wearing Halloween-themed scrubs. He'd forgotten Halloween was only three weeks away.

"I'm Dr. Atwell. I'm the head of pediatrics. Nancy called me. She's the head nurse in ICU. I wanted to come personally

and apologize to you for Dr. Edmonds.”

“I hope you’re not trying to say what he said wasn’t meant the way he said it?” Dylan kept a tight rein on his temper when he asked the question, but he let her see the contempt in his expression.

“No. He’s been a fixture in our cardiology department for a long time, and trust me when I say I will be speaking to the head of the department as well as our chief of surgery. That was unacceptable. I’ll be taking over Cash’s care, and I’ve asked Dr. Carla Stevens to replace Dr. Edmonds as his cardiologist. Dr. Ellis will remain his surgeon, but she’s in a transplant surgery at the moment. I checked before I came down, and I’ve left her a voicemail to call me as soon as she gets out of surgery. Should Cash need surgery before she’s able to return, Dr. Stevens and I will be his surgeons.”

“What can you tell me about his injuries?”

“The bullet shredded part of his left ventricle and the upper left chamber of his heart. Dr. Ellis was able to repair the damage, but some of the stitches didn’t hold, so we’ve had to take him back into surgery twice, but they’ve been holding for two days now. Every hour they hold, his chances improve.”

“Why is his breathing so bad?”

“His heart is healing, but the blood flow in his body has slowed because the heart is not pumping as hard as it should. His lungs aren’t getting the right amount of blood flow, which is causing them try to work harder, and it’s putting more pressure on his heart. He should have been on a ventilator as soon as his lungs started to struggle. I’m going to put him on the ventilator myself. I hate to ask you to move, Miss Roberts, but we need room to work.”

Dylan went to move her wheelchair out of the way, and he and Hailey both looked at the doctor when she saw her ungloved hand, but the woman said not a word.

“What are his chances?”

“I don’t like to give percentages,” Dr. Atwell said as she moved to allow the nurse to start prepping Cash for the

ventilator. “I prefer to take it day by day and hour by hour. I’m confident that as soon as his breathing improves, all his other stats will improve. Then we rely on prayer and using everything in our arsenal to help his body get stronger.”

“You believe praying will help?” she asked.

“It can’t hurt.”

Dylan wasn’t sure about that. He’d spent the entire ride to the hospital praying, and his daughter was still dead upon arrival. Then his wife couldn’t get past the guilt of living when Molly died. All the prayers in the world didn’t help her, but he wasn’t going to scoff at the idea of prayer either. If it made Hailey feel better, then he’d keep his thoughts to himself.

“I’ve prayed a lot in my life, and it never seemed to do a bit of good,” she said softly, almost to herself. “But if there’s a chance, I’ll start praying again.”

Perhaps if there was a God, he’d hear her after everything they’d been through. Taking her child seemed cruel. His mother dragged him and his sisters to church religiously every Sunday. The God they’d taught him about was supposedly kind and benevolent. He was also wrathful and vengeful. Dylan didn’t know which version was the right version. He hoped for Hailey’s sake, if God was really there, He’d be the kinder version when it came to her children.

It took only a few minutes for them to install the ventilator, and Cash’s oxygen levels improved and his breathing was markedly better withing a short span of time. His chest rose and fell without the struggle of before, and that horrible raspy sound was gone as well.

“There, that is going to help him immeasurably.” The doctor smiled. “I’ll be back down in a few hours to check on him. Dr. Stevens was on her way into surgery, but she promised she’d read over his chart when she was done and come straight down to speak with you. I’ll have Dr. Ellis call as well.”

“Thank you so much.” Hailey took the doctor’s hand and squeezed it. “I thought he was going to die.”

“Not if we can help it,” Dr. Atwell promised her before taking her leave.

Dylan wheeled her back over to Cash’s bed, and she took his hand again, this time pulling the blanket up to cover it herself.

Dylan stepped over to Raine’s bed and glanced at her vitals, as was his habit since he’d met the children. They looked good, and he turned around to see Hailey watching him. He gave her a half-smile. “Force of habit. We’ve all been with them for the last week.”

“Thank you for all of this. I don’t know how I’m going to pay for it, but thank you.”

“It’s taken care of. You just worry about getting better and being here for the kids. We’ll worry about everything else.”

He stepped out of the room and leaned his head against the wall. He hated hospitals. Hated being here. Hated the memories it brought up, and hated the feelings of helplessness this place inspired.

But he’d grit his teeth and bear it.

Hailey and the kids needed KSI to be on their A game, and he’d be damned if let her or the children down.

Chapter Six



“Here.”

She took the coffee cup shoved in her face and barely muttered a thank-you. Four days, and Cash still looked like death warmed over, but he was breathing and his heartbeat wasn't as slow as it had been. Hailey would count that as a win.

“They're moving Raine out of ICU as soon as she's awake and they can verify she's fine.”

They were moving her? She glanced at her daughter's bed briefly and then went back to watching Cash's stats.

“Did you hear me, Miss Roberts?”

“Yes.”

“Jarrod will be with her. We have more guards coming in from New York to help cover all the rooms. Cole has stayed with Annabelle while Gregg and I stagger our shifts. We'll need the extra manpower to cover three rooms.”

“Thank you.”

He was still breathing.

Her baby's heart was beating.

What if she took her eyes off him for a minute and he slipped away while she wasn't with him?

"Hailey."

"What?" she muttered.

The Viking squatted beside her, his white-blond hair glinting under the florescent lights. It was the exact same shade as her son's. Neither she nor his father had that color hair. Cash inherited it from Hailey's great-grandmother, who immigrated from Sweden. She had a cousin somewhere who had the same shade as well. But it wasn't prevalent within her family. Odd that this man showed up with her son's hair color.

"Raine is going to need you when she wakes up as much as Cash does. As much as Annabelle does."

"I can't leave him. What if he stops breathing while I'm gone?"

"He's on a ventilator. It's breathing for him. He's not going to stop breathing. I promise."

"You can't promise me that."

"I can." He pointed to the ventilator. "That's why I can. The machine is doing all the work for him."

"What if his heart stops beating?"

"Look at the monitor. It's gotten stronger and stronger every hour. His stitches are holding. The cardiologist moved his chances dramatically."

"But only to a seventy percent chance."

"That's better than the ten percent chance he had a few days ago, Hailey. He's getting better. You just have to latch on to that and let it feed your hope. If I thought he was going to die, I'd tell you. I don't believe in giving people false hopes. It's cruel to do that."

It was, but that was all a parent could do, pray and hope.

"I..." She glanced to where Raine lay, still on her stomach. Raine was the clingy one. When she was sick, she stuck to Hailey like glue, wanting her mama whether she was throwing

up or just sneezing. How was she going to be there for all three of her kids? And Annabelle...

She'd only gone to see Annabelle once in the last three days. Once. She felt like shit about it, but her little one was okay. They were controlling her pain, and she wasn't in danger of dying.

Nor was Raine, but Cash was. How was she supposed to move herself out of this room? The fear of him dying while she wasn't with him was debilitating. She couldn't move.

"I'll be here with him, and if something happens, I'll get you immediately. I swear it."

"I..."

He took her hand, and she couldn't stop the reaction. She flinched. He let go as soon as he saw it. Hailey felt bad, but it was hardwired into her at this point to flinch at a man's touch. Months of beatings had worn her down. The funny thing was, Josh only hit her once in the five months they were together, and it was the same day she left him. He kept coming back and beating on her after that. He'd been so angry and promised she'd regret it.

Dear God, how she regretted it now.

Her children were all three shot because of her poor choices. How had she gotten so far off the radar? Her boyfriend, Raine and Cash's father, had been a decent man. He worked and provided for them until he'd died from a heart attack. It had been such a shock because he'd only been twenty-five at the time. No one knew he'd had a heart condition.

And then there was Annabelle's father. Ronnie Browning was and still is a very good-looking man who wanted absolutely nothing to do with kids. He also had an Oxy addiction she didn't know about until the last week of their relationship. Even if he'd wanted anything to do with his daughter, she'd not have allowed him around her while he was an addict not in recovery.

While she hated that her daughter wouldn't know her father, she was also exceptionally glad she'd never know what it

meant to be the child of an addict who refused to get help. Her brother had died of a drug overdose at the age of seventeen. She understood better than anyone else what drugs did to a family.

“Hailey.”

The bite of the command in his voice pulled her out of her thoughts. He wasn't glaring at her like she'd half expected. He looked concerned.

“I know this is hard, probably more than anyone else, but I also know Annabelle and Raine need you too.”

“Miss Roberts?”

Hailey turned her head to see Dr. Atwell come in along with another doctor. She didn't really remember him, but he looked familiar.

“This is Dr. Dennizen. He's the head of our neuro department, and he did the surgery to remove the bullet from Raine's spine. We've been slowly weaning her off the medication that's kept her asleep. We're hoping she wakes up in the next half hour or so. Once we make sure she can wiggle her toes and fingers, and that there's no neuro deficits, then we'll be moving her up to pediatrics. I've made sure we can put her and Annabelle in the same room, as per Mr. Jenkins' request.”

“Neuro deficits? Why would she have that?”

“No one told you she hit her head when she fell?”

“Fell? I thought she was shot in her bed.”

Dr. Atkins frowned. “She was barely conscious when she came in. I was on call, and she told me she hit her head. We did a CT scan, and she had a nasty concussion. We've basically kept her asleep since then, so we've been unable to do any sort of neuro checks.”

She had to worry about that now too? Not only could Raine be paralyzed, but she could have damage to her brain as well? What more could her little ones take? What more could *she* take?

“I...I’m not sure what to say.”

“I know it’s overwhelming.” This from Dr. Dennizen. “I think she’ll be fine. It wasn’t a severe concussion. She did lose consciousness, but that could have been from blood loss or shock. We have to give you all the different scenarios we could potentially be dealing with, but I’m less concerned with the concussion than I am with her spine. The bullet didn’t just lodge, it did some damage. I repaired what I saw, but the swelling was massive. Waiting any longer could have been detrimental to her ever walking again.”

“So what does all that mean?”

“It means we’ll know more when she’s awake.”

Of course it did. Doctors never spoke in anything but hypotheticals until they had solid evidence.

Dr. Atwell walked over and looked at Cash’s stats on the machines. She made a few notes on her iPad while Dr. Dennizen went to check on Raine.

“How is he?”

“Everything is looking good. If his labs come back good and cardio signs off, we’ll take him off the vent tomorrow and see how it goes. If his stats start to tank again, we’ll put him back on the vent.”

“Rinse and repeat.”

“Exactly,” Dr. Atwell said. “His heart is healing every day, and we’ll give him everything he needs to ensure it continues to heal. He’s not out of the woods yet, but he’s getting there.”

Thank God.

“I’m going to send Raine to radiology for some films and another scan.” Dr. Dennizen walked back over and continued to talk in a low, calming voice. “I want to check and see if the internal swelling is going down as well. Everything looks good so far. I don’t want you to be alarmed if she doesn’t have feeling in her legs or her toes. It’s almost always the swelling. That’s normal, given the type of spinal injury she has.”

Easy for him to say.

“I’ll be back when she wakes up. Hang in there, Miss Roberts. We’re doing everything we can for all of your children.”

Dylan nodded to the doctors as they left. Some of the heaviness in his chest eased when he heard the doctor’s positive update on Cash. They were all still worried about the possible long-term effects for Raine if the bullet left her paralyzed, but knowing Cash wasn’t at death’s door had relieved them all.

And maybe Hailey would stop looking ready to fall apart any second. It bothered him. He remembered watching his wife like that after Molly’s funeral, wondering if she was going to shatter when he went back to work. He’d had her family and his staying with her while he went to work. Even with all that, Allison still found a way to take her own life. The guilt was too much.

He understood everything she was going through right now. However, it was bringing back painful memories that threatened to swallow him every five seconds. It was honestly a miracle he was still standing here.

“Dylan?”

His head swiveled toward the door, and Jarrod motioned him outside. He glanced at the woman holding her son’s hand and then walked out of the room.

“What’s going on?”

“Gregg found supposed reporters hanging out in the lobby.”

“Supposed?”

“They were wearing black jeans, black shoes, and black long-sleeved shirts.”

“In this fucking heat?”

“That’s what I asked.”

“Did they have press credentials?”

“No. Gregg called the head of security and asked they be escorted off the property and not allowed back inside. He put

us all on alert while he goes to the airport to pick up the team.”

“I’ll be glad when Kayla is here to sit with the girls when Raine gets transferred out of ICU. I don’t think having a man around them right now is going to be good for them. At least not at first.”

“After being shot by a man, I doubt they’ll want us anywhere near them. They’re all going to need a lot of therapy.”

Dylan agreed wholeheartedly. Without therapy, he might not be where he was now. Just because he didn’t like to think about those dark memories didn’t mean he didn’t confront them. He was in therapy for a long time learning to not blame himself for Allison’s death.

“Call Mike and let him know about the dodgy reporters. If the ex is trying to get in here again or sends someone to finish the job, he needs to know about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dylan nodded and stepped back into the room. His eyes went to Hailey and Cash first before moving to Raine. He walked closer when he thought he saw her fingers twitch. And sure enough, they were. She was waking up. He hoped they got her in and out of radiology before she was fully awake.

“Hailey, she’s starting to come out of it.”

Hailey’s wheelchair turned toward him, and he saw her grimace. She was still healing from major surgery. They wanted her in her own bed, but none of them were willing to drag her away from Cash when no one knew if he’d live or die.

Dylan went over and rolled her toward Raine’s bed, turning her so she could keep an eye on Cash as well.

“Thank you,” she murmured and leaned over to whisper something in her daughter’s ear. He didn’t hear it, but he didn’t need to. He was a parent, or at least he had been. It didn’t matter what she said, only that Raine heard it and knew she was there.

“One more thing,” Jarrod said, leaning through the doorway. “Gregg is picking up food. What do you and Hailey want? It’ll be a while, since he has to drive into Atlanta, but I can ask him to get food locally first if either of you are hungry. Gregg will probably eat everything, otherwise. He’ll be complaining about being starved after the plane ride.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

Dylan frowned. She’d barely eaten anything.

“I doubt she’s going to eat any time soon, so just ask him to pick food up locally when he gets back, or we can use DoorDash or Uber Eats if we get hungry.”

“Sure thing.”

“I can speak for myself, you know,” Hailey muttered when Jarrod left.

“Yes, I know you can. Right now, you just focus on your kids. We’ll take care of everything else, including food.”

“I’m really not hungry.”

“I know that too, but if you don’t eat, you’re going to end up back in your room from exhaustion. So let us feed you. We want to.”

She barely nodded. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“You heard what the doc said. Let’s not borrow trouble before we have all the facts.”

“Your little girl was about Raine’s age.”

“A year older.”

“If staying in here is too hard...”

Dylan cut her off before she could finish. “It’s fine. I’d rather be doing something useful than not. You all need us, and that’s what’s important.”

“Y’all,” she murmured.

“What?”

“It’s y’all, not you all.”

He gave her a half smile. "I didn't grow up down here. I'm from LA. We say you all."

"Don't let the locals hear you say that. They'll give you the stink eye or say, 'Bless your heart.'"

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Bless your heart? God, no. That's an actual insult. Means we think you're too stupid or dumb for your own good."

"Noted."

"I'm worried about neural deficits. They didn't say anything about that before."

He'd been a little pissed over that himself. It should have been mentioned when they went over Raine's injuries, but then all the children had so many maybe it slipped the doctor's mind. He doubted he'd be able to keep them all straight either.

Dr. Atkins was at least competent and kind. That soothed Hailey more than anything else, it seemed. So he'd keep his mouth shut about his irritation unless he thought she was doing something not in the children's best interest.

"I'm not going to tell you that won't happen, but again, even the doctor isn't concerned about it, which is probably why it wasn't mentioned to you when they were more concerned with her other injuries. We'll take everything one day at a time and deal with it as it comes."

"She loves to run. I always thought she'd run track or something. What happens if she can't run anymore?"

"Kids are resilient. She'll find something else she loves just as much."

"Do you really think that?"

"I do. It'll be hard for her at first, but with enough love and care, she'll bounce back and be the determined little girl only kids can be."

She gave Dylan a grateful smile, and she went back to whispering into her daughter's ear while he stepped back and leaned against the wall. Her voice was getting better, but her

doctor told her to rest it as much as possible. He'd rather she whisper, but she needed to speak to all the doctors about the children and their chances, especially Cash.

He hoped the kids would be fine.

But he couldn't promise it.

Chapter Seven



Gregg hummed while they drove through the city and then out into the countryside. He and Gregg were headed to Hailey's home to do a threat assessment and determine what would be needed to protect it. Now that they had more guards here, he felt comfortable enough to leave the hospital. It was the first time since he'd arrived that he breathed just a little easier. Being out of the hospital did that for him.

His hopes sank the farther out they drove. Gregg stopped humming when they turned down a dirt road that led to a trailer park. Dodgy didn't even begin to describe it. The whole place had that rundown, poor-as-shit vibe to it. He didn't fault anyone for having to live here. Not everyone could afford better, but it was going to make their job a lot harder.

"I don't like this." Gregg's tone fell flat.

"You and me both."

Hailey lived at the very back of the trailer park. There was police tape around it, and from the looks of it, her front door was wide open. Did the police not make sure the place was locked before they left? He snorted. Given what he knew of the local PD, probably not.

Gregg parked in front of the trailer next to an old Honda Civic that had seen better years. They both got out and

approached the trailer cautiously, keeping an eye on all the people watching them. He heard the car doors lock, and Gregg shrugged.

“Can’t hurt,” he agreed and stopped at the door. Inside was a complete mess. There was blood everywhere, and it looked like someone tossed the whole place. Broken furniture lay scattered around, and there were several items, like the TV, missing.

“They didn’t just trash the place. It looks like Hailey got cleaned out as well.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure this place is defensible anyway. The walls are too thin, and there are way too many little kids hanging around outside. I wouldn’t feel comfortable shooting if we had to.”

“So what do we do?”

“We find a safe house and rent it.”

“Kade gonna sign off on that?”

“I’ll rent it. I have more money than I need, and this is as good of a reason as any to use some of it. Those three kids deserve somewhere safe to come back to.”

“You sure?”

He nodded and walked inside. “I’m sure. Let’s see if we can salvage anything Hailey might want, like photos.”

“And clothes.”

“If there’s any left.”

“Dude, why would they steal from her after she and her kids got shot?”

“Takes all kinds.” He pulled out his phone. “I’m calling Viktor to update him. Try to see if there’s any photos and collect them. When I’m done, I’ll come back in and help you pack up what we can for them.”

Gregg nodded and pulled on a pair of gloves. The white surgical gloves were part of the uniform for a security detail. You never knew when they might come in handy. Given all the

blood, they were necessary here, even if all of the blood belonged to Hailey and her children.

He walked back over to stand beside the blacked-out KSI SUV. Several members of the team had driven them down three of the specialized vehicles and then flown back to New York. He was grateful to have them since they were bulletproof and had several handy modifications. He'd feel safer transporting everyone in one of them as opposed to a rented one.

There were three guys eyeballing him, and he very subtly turned so they could see his gun strapped to his waist. He wasn't in a mood to be fucked with today, not after spending almost two weeks in a hospital around the anniversary of his daughter's death.

Viktor picked up almost as soon as it started ringing.

"Something wrong?"

"No. Well, yeah."

"Which is it, motherfucker?"

He smiled. The Kincaids cursed more than anyone he'd ever met, but Viktor was the only one who tried to watch his mouth around women and children. The asshole almost always failed, but it was funny as shit to watch him try.

"Hailey, Annabelle, and Raine are all getting better. Cash is off the ventilator, but they haven't woken him up yet. They don't want him to be scared and have it cause his blood pressure to shoot up and undo all the repairs they've made to his heart and the blood vessels."

"He's going to live, though?"

"Yes. The cardiologist and the head of pediatric surgery came in this morning and said barring any complications he should make a full recovery. We are worried about complications, however. He's had several since surgery."

"How old is he again?"

"Three."

“Fuck.” Viktor sighed heavily into the phone.

“What I’m concerned about is the fact they’re going to be releasing Annabelle tomorrow, and possibly Raine next week. She’s going to need physical therapy, which means trips back and forth between home and the hospital or physical therapy center. Cash does not have an ETA on when they’re going to release him since he’s not even awake yet.”

“You and Jay do an inspection of the house yet?”

“Fuck, that’s why I’m calling. She lives in a trailer park that is not safe. Even if we could adequately defend it, there are kids everywhere. I’m not sure we want to risk getting one shot if it comes down to a gunfight. I don’t think the asshole will do it himself again, but I can’t count out the possibility of hired guns.”

“We looked into his and his family’s assets. He wouldn’t have an issue farming out the job. I’ve got Mason setting up honey pots on all of their accounts, and Kade’s pulled in a few friends from the FBI who are monitoring their phone and email accounts. Now, what do we do about the house? We can’t let them come home to an indefensible position, let alone put other children in danger.”

“I’m going to find a safe house for them. And before you start bitching about Kade bitching, I’m paying for it. I have more money than I need, so I can use it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Gregg asked the same question. I haven’t touched a dime of the life insurance money, and I think it’s something Allison would approve of. These kids deserve to feel safe after everything they’ve been through.”

Viktor was silent, and Dylan felt his hesitation even over the phone.

“Just ask.”

“You still good?”

“I’m fine. I even called my therapist and did a phone session with her when it got to be too much a few days ago. Once

we're able to get out of that damn hospital, I'll be better."

"Gregg make assignments for everyone yet?"

"Cole is Annabelle's main guard, and Jarrod will stay with Raine. Kayla and Lucien will be assigned to them as well, so Jarrod and Cole can sleep."

"What about Cash and Hailey?"

"Gregg will be handling Cash, and I'm still watching Hailey."

"Do you have a backup for Hailey so you can sleep?"

"I was going to ask if we can spare anyone else who can watch her while I sleep."

"You either have me or Kade."

"Kade'll bitch if he's here, but I think he's more valuable there where he can get shit done behind the scenes. Is Sara going to be fine with two small kids and being pregnant?"

"Trust me, there are enough women and Uncle Mason who can help her. I've seen the reports on this family, and I don't want you or any of our team down there without me."

"That bad?"

"Yeah, that bad. I've spoken with the attorneys, and they still haven't managed to get a TPO against the man. I think there's a meeting set up with the attorney general's office."

"What if the safe house we find isn't in this county? Would it matter if we went two or three counties over as long as we have access to medical for the kids?"

"I'll check with the attorneys and then let you know. I'll also get you the name of a real estate agent as well. I'd rather it be someone who's not bought and paid for by that family."

"And you can do that? None of us are from Georgia, Vik."

"I'll get it done before I book a flight down. I need to go say goodbye to the family and then pack a bag. Anything you need?"

“Full-fledged security system with motion detectors. We’ll need Mason to come down and set everything up once I rent the house. He’s the only one besides Abel I’d trust with that shit.”

“Done. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Vik hung up, and Dylan slid the phone back into his pocket. The guys had moved closer, and he nodded to them.

“You guys see what happened here the night Hailey and her kids got shot?”

“You a cop?” the oldest one of the group asked. He couldn’t be more than twenty.

“Nah, man. I’m private security. We’re here to protect her and her kids.”

“Ain’t nobody protected her so far.”

“True enough. We got the call after the shooting and flew down from New York.”

“She’s good people. Helped my mama out when she fell and I was out of town.”

“Yeah, she seems to be. You seen who trashed her place?”

“Cops did that.”

“They steal all her shit too?”

They shrugged.

“You boys think if anyone comes sniffing around you can give me a call? I’ll make sure you’re rewarded.”

“How rewarded?”

“Depends on the information and if there’s video involved.” With camera phones everywhere, it made hiding evidence a lot harder these days.

“If there’s video?”

“There will be three zeros involved if it’s verified information.”

Their eyes narrowed, and he gave them his lazy, dangerous smile. The one that scared more than a few suspects when he was on the force.

“You and I both know things can be faked. We trust but verify. Once it’s verified, you get paid.”

“You got digits?”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his wallet and then handed the guy one of the business cards he kept in it. “That has my cell on it as well as the KSI office number.”

“We see anything, we’ll call. What happened to Miss Hailey wasn’t right.”

“We know. That’s why we’re here.”

“How is she paying for all this?” The shortest of the three glared at me.

“She’s not. We’re doing it for free.”

“Free?” the kid scoffed, not believing it. “Nobody does shit for free.”

“My boss does. We have money set aside to cover salaries and other expenses for people who really need our help but couldn’t otherwise afford it.”

Dylan wasn’t sure if they believed him or not, but it was the best he could do to get some eyes in the neighborhood. Green spoke louder than anything else in areas like this simply because people needed the money.

He handed them a hundred-dollar bill and asked them to keep an eye on his ride while he went back inside to help Gregg. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Chapter Eight



Hailey glanced around the room, oddly unsettled. The Viking hadn't been here for two days now. She'd gotten used to him being here, and now she felt almost bereft. But then again, being here must be hard for him. It probably reminded him of his daughter's death.

And they'd started weaning Cash off the medicine that kept him asleep last night. He'd begun to move around about half an hour or so ago. The nurse assured her it wouldn't be long before he woke up.

She'd been sitting here for hours just waiting for him to open his eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes that always startled her because they were so light and yet so expressive. In fact, they reminded her of Dylan's eyes. Dylan's were a shade or two lighter, but they were similar enough to Cash's to be eerie.

She stroked his cheek, and he turned his head toward her, his breath whispering across the inside of her arm.

"Cash? Sweetie, it's Mama. Can you open your eyes for Mama?"

The room was quiet, the only sounds that of the machines. She leaned closer and brushed her lips over his forehead. She was terrified for him to wake up and relieved all at the same time. It meant he was getting better, but what if he woke up so scared it ran his blood pressure through the roof and caused his

stitches to tear? Or had the stitches holding his arteries together already dissolved? She hadn't thought to ask. She should probably ask.

The cardiologist had just been in here and assured her everything was fine. Why didn't she ask about his internal stitches? She should have asked.

"Here."

She reared back, startled when a Starbucks coffee cup was shoved in her face. Well, not shoved. It was placed in front of her. She looked up to see the Viking standing over her. How had she not heard him come in? How could someone so big move so quietly?

"Where have you been?" she asked before she could stop herself. Inwardly, she cringed. She hadn't meant to let him know she'd gotten used to him being here.

"Looking for a safe place to move everyone."

"My house..."

"Is trashed. Someone broke in and stole everything of any value, including all of your clothes and the kids' toys."

"No," she whispered, horrified. She didn't have the money to replace all of that. Maybe she'd be able to scrape together enough to find clothes at the Goodwill for the kids and maybe an outfit or two for her. But furniture? No shot.

What the hell was she going to do?

"I'm sorry." He sat in the other chair across from her. "Gregg and I saved all the photos we could find for you, but everything else is a wash."

"What am I going to do?"

"Right now, nothing. We've secured a safe house to take you and the children to. We've installed a top-notch security system, and it's off by itself, where neighborhood children won't get caught in any crossfire should a shootout occur."

"I hate this."

“I know, but we have everything covered. They’re talking about releasing both Raine and Annabelle soon, so we wanted to make sure they had a safe place to go. Kayla, one of our female guards, will be with them at all times. Cole and Jarrod will remain their primary guards, but we thought it might be easier for them to have a woman around since I’m assuming you’re not leaving the hospital until Cash does.”

She sipped the coffee he brought her. Caramel. She wasn’t overly fond of caramel, but she also recognized that she needed sugar. She was running on fumes. Honestly, her stomach had been cramping since yesterday, and she was dizzy. She hadn’t eaten in a while. She probably needed food, but it tasted like ash in her mouth.

“How is he?”

“Waking up.”

“That’s a good thing, Hailey.”

He always called her Hailey when they were alone, but Miss Roberts to everyone else.

“Is it, though? What if he wakes up and gets scared and it causes his blood pressure to spike and then the stitches rip...”

“Calm down.” He turned to fully face her. “Take deep, even breaths. You look like you’re going to pass out yourself.”

“I’m dizzy.”

Real alarm crossed his face. “When was the last time you ate?”

“I don’t remember. Yesterday, the day before?”

He let out a string of curse words and stood to step outside the door. He was gone for moments, and she kept looking toward the glass where he stood talking to one of the other guards who glanced toward her, his face set in a grim line.

She’d bet her entire income tax return he was getting blessed out for not making sure she ate.

When Dylan came back in, his face was calm, but there was an anger she sensed brimming just under the surface. It made

her cautious. She understood anger in a man better than most and how dangerous it made them. How much that anger could hurt her.

Realistically, she knew he wasn't here to hurt her. That his goal was to protect her, that he had been protecting her and her children. But she was still afraid. Yes, she'd gotten used to him being here and maybe even missed his presence a little, but it didn't stop her fear from trying to choke her when he got mad.

"You have to eat or you're going to be no good to anyone, including yourself. You'll wind up unconscious and be forced back into your own room. We're lucky the doctors haven't made you leave."

"I'd like to see them try."

He smiled slightly. "So would I, but that's beside the point. If you pass out from hunger and exhaustion, then who will be here for Cash when he wakes up? You have to eat. I've ordered food, nothing heavy. Just a simple soup and sandwich for you. You have to keep your strength up for the kids."

"I know, it's just..."

"Everything taste likes dust in your mouth, and you have no desire to eat or drink?"

Hailey nodded.

"I know that feeling. If it wasn't for my mother, I most likely would have starved to death, but she stayed with me after my wife died. Made sure I ate even when I didn't want to and that there was a bottle of water close at all times. She kept me alive."

"And you're trying to do that for me?"

"For all four of you."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"That's not an answer."

"No, but it's the only one I have right now."

Cash's hand twitched, and she reached for it. "Easy there, baby boy. Mama's right here. Everything's okay."

Dylan wished he could tell her everything would be okay. They still hadn't been able to secure her a protective order. Too many judges were friends here in Georgia. They'd even thought of moving them to Atlanta and trying, but the lawyer said it wouldn't do a bit of good. The Rivers family was too connected throughout the entire state.

"Knock, knock."

A grin spread across his face as he stood. The man himself had finally dragged his ass down here. Viktor was supposed to take a flight out yesterday, but he'd decided they needed more vehicles, so he'd driven down.

What he didn't expect was the man who stepped in behind him. Viktor's twin brother, Conner, came in. He shifted, shielding Hailey. Conner had that dark expression on his face, and it would terrify her. The man seemed to understand immediately. His entire expression shifted, and Dylan blinked. Gone was the hard, angry man, and in his place stood someone who looked almost boyish. It was unsettling.

"Hailey, let me introduce you to one of the owners of KSI, Viktor Kincaid, and this is his twin, Conner." He stepped aside, and Viktor came forward.

He stopped a few feet from her. "Miss Roberts, I'd say it's good to meet you, but that would be a lie. Most people who need us aren't all that happy to meet me."

"I wouldn't say that," she said softly. "I'm grateful that you're watching over my kids. I couldn't afford any of this, and I'm so thankful for you."

"It's what we do." He looked around for a chair, and without having to say anything, Conner stepped outside and brought back two chairs. Twinning. At least that was the term he'd heard before. They understood what each other wanted without having to say a word.

"Dylan's told you we've secured housing for everyone when you get out, *da?*"

“*Da*?”

“He’s Russian,” Dylan explained. “*Da* means yes.”

“Oh. Yes, he told me.”

“Annabelle is getting released later today...”

“Wait, what? I thought that wasn’t until next week.”

“No,” Dylan said. “Raine will be released next week, but Annabelle will be going home today. Cole is going with her. No one will get near her. He’s one of the best guards we have on staff, and he’s grown very fond of her, so he’s especially dedicated to keeping her safe.”

“I...did I know that?”

“Yes, but given everything, I’m not surprised you forgot. Especially since you haven’t eaten in two days.”

“What?” Conner spoke for the first time since he’d come in. His voice was similar to Viktor’s, but there was a difference to it. His accent wasn’t nearly as thick, and it was a lot easier to understand him.

“I haven’t been here since I was out trying to secure a safe house and getting approval for the security system we need to install. Andrews was watching her and didn’t notice she hadn’t been eating.”

“May I?” Conner asked.

“Yes, but go around the corner.”

Conner’s black gaze swept back to Hailey, and they softened. “Has food been ordered?”

“I only ordered food for her so if you’re hungry...”

“Did you eat?”

“No, I just got back. I was going to grab something from the cafeteria.”

Both Conner and Viktor grimaced.

“Can you?”

Conner nodded. “Chinese good for everyone?”

They all nodded, and Dylan sat back down beside Hailey. Viktor wouldn't do a damn thing to upset her since his own wife, Sara, had an ex-husband who beat her on the regular. Conner, though, might need to be reminded not to scare her unintentionally. He'd already had a talk with every guard on this detail not only in regard to Hailey, but the children as well. They'd need to be handled with kid gloves.

"How is your little boy?" Viktor sat once Conner left. "Dylan said they had taken him off the sedation."

"We're waiting for him to wake up."

"Should be soon." Dylan pointed to the little boy lying in the bed that was way too big for him. "He's moving around a lot more."

"I'll step outside so he's not terrified." Viktor stood. "I'm a scary motherfucker... Shit, I shouldn't have said that..."

Dylan laughed. "Stop before it gets worse."

Viktor grimaced. "Sorry. I try to watch my mouth, but I forget sometimes."

Hailey didn't say anything. She was too focused on Cash, and Viktor's entire being softened, much as Conner's had earlier. Viktor pointed to the door and stepped out to take up the post Andrews had left when Conner dragged him away.

A soft whimper filled the room, and Dylan turned fully toward the bed where the little boy's eyes started to flutter.

"Mama's right here, baby boy. Mama's here."

Another cry filled the room as Cash's eyes opened and then closed just as fast, but not so fast Dylan didn't see the light blue color. They were that translucent shade not many people had. His own were lighter, but not by much.

He stepped toward the door to get a nurse when he felt her fingers clutch his hand. He looked down to see her staring at him, fear in her eyes. He wasn't sure if it was fear of him, fear of something being wrong with Cash, or fear of herself for reaching out to him. Either way, she was afraid, and it pulled at something long dead inside him.

“Don’t go.”

“I was just going to the door to get a nurse. They need to check him. I’ll be right back. I promise.”

“You were gone for two days, and I was alone.”

“I promise, Hailey, I’m not leaving again. I’ll be right here. But we need to get the nurse so she can make sure he’s okay.”

Her fingers slowly unfurled, and true to his word, he just stepped to the door and asked a nurse to come in before heading back to stand behind Hailey’s wheelchair. How she sat in that thing almost twenty-four-seven, he didn’t know. Those things were extremely uncomfortable.

“Can you dim the lights?” Hailey didn’t turn from her son, trusting either Dylan or the nurse to do as she asked. He reached over and dimmed the light over the bed while the nurse cut the main lights. There was still sunshine filtering into the room, but it wasn’t near the bed.

“All done,” the nurse said. “How is our little man? You waking up, sweetie?”

Hailey stroked her son’s cheek. “Come on, baby boy. Open your eyes for Mama. I’m right here. The nurse just needs to check you. It’s okay.”

Another whimper came from him.

“Is he in pain?” Dylan asked.

“We have him on pain medicine, but if he’s in a lot of pain, we can increase the dose. While he was in a medically induced coma, we were better able to keep his pain under control. I’m not sure how much Dr. Atwell will allow us to increase his meds, given his age, though.”

“Please call her, then.”

“Let me check his stats and I’ll call her.” The nurse busied herself on her tablet, noting down numbers from all the machines Cash was hooked to, all the while speaking softly to him. She kept her tone cheerful and full of sunshine, something Hailey was very appreciative of.

Cash opened his eyes again, and he looked around, his breathing picking up.

“Easy. Mama’s here. Mama’s here.” She took his face in her hands. “I’m right here.”

He calmed down, but his eyes were wide and filled with pain.

“I know it hurts, but you’re okay now, baby boy. Everything’s going to be okay.”

She’d heard the doctors and nurses call him a miracle boy. The bullet damaged his heart and his arteries so much he should have bled out before he even got to the hospital. But he didn’t.

She could hear her grandmother whispering in her ear that miracles are real and God uses them every day. He decided that Cash was worth one.

Maybe her grandma was right. She didn’t know.

But she was grateful either way.

The doctor came in and gently moved her aside as they worked with Cash. They asked him questions he didn’t answer. He looked for her. She smiled at him and kept reassuring him everything was fine.

“Well, everything appears to be good,” Dr. Atwell said. “I’m sure Dr. Stevens will have her own barrage of tests to run, but I think I can safely say he’s out of the woods. His stats are good, his heartbeat is strong, and he’s awake.”

“Can you do something for his pain?” Hailey asked, watching her little one, hearing him whimper again.

“I can increase his meds for a little while, but we don’t want to get him addicted to it, and his body can’t handle high doses, anyway.”

“I understand. I just hate to see him hurting.”

“We’ll do everything we can.”

“Thank you.”

Dr. Atwell gave her a smile and said goodbye to Cash before leaving. As soon as the nurses left, Dylan wheeled her back to Cash without having to be asked.

“Sweetheart, this is Dylan.” She waved to the man standing behind her. “He’s been here keeping us safe. He and all his friends are helping to keep the bad man away.”

She watched her son shift his gaze to Dylan. He studied him as only a child could—with an open curiosity. She saw the fear there as well. Josh put that fear in his eyes, and she hated the man for it.

“I call him the Viking because he looks like one of those Vikings out of a story. It’s silly, but that’s who he looks like. Can you say hi to Dylan?”

He said nothing.

“It’s okay. If you’re tired, just sleep. Mama will be right here.”

He closed his eyes, and soon his breathing evened out. They told her he’d sleep for hours when he came out of sedation.

“Should I be concerned he’s not talking?”

“He could just be tired. Let him get some rest, and if he’s still not talking tomorrow, then ask Dr. Atwell about it and maybe she can recommend a therapist for him. All of you are going to need therapy.”

“I don’t know...”

“I still see a therapist because it’s hard some days when I think of Molly and Allison. Therapy helps if you actually give it a chance. I fought going, but my mother was the persistent gnat chewing on me until I went. I’m so grateful she continued to push for therapy. It works.”

Hailey’s parents were never big on therapy. They thought it was all mumbo jumbo, but if it would help Cash, Annabelle, and Raine deal with what happened, she was willing to try.

“And now you can get some sleep. The nurse agreed to bring a cot in for you. Cash is awake, and the doctor said he’s

out of the woods. You sleep, and when Annabelle gets discharged, I'll wake you up."

"You won't leave him alone?"

"I promise. I'll be right here the whole time."

"I thought you got me food?"

"It can wait. I can heat the soup and sandwich in a microwave. Sleep, Hailey. You're both safe with me."

She nodded, and when they did bring in the cot, she let the nurse help her out of the wheelchair and onto the cot.

She looked at her son and then at the man leaning against the wall, staring out at the nurses' station. As much as he scared her, she knew he spoke the truth. He'd keep them all safe.

So she closed her eyes, and for the first time in weeks, she let herself fall into a deep sleep, knowing she and her kids were safe.

Chapter Nine



Cole walked into the room carrying Annabelle, whose arm was trapped against her body. She was being very fussy, but the man who held her rocked her gently as he walked. It was odd to see him with a little one in his arms. He never picked up infants, or at least none Dylan had ever seen. The baby quieted as he walked closer to them.

“She likes you.” Dylan laughed softly when Cole glared at him.

“She just went to sleep, asshole.”

“How long ago did she eat?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes. Why?”

“She’ll shit her diaper soon enough. Then she’ll wake up screaming, and you’ll learn to never let one fall asleep until you’ve changed their diaper after they’ve eaten.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Dylan just shrugged. Not all babies did that, but enough did, so he was comfortable making Cole nervous as a cat.

“Let me wake up her mama. Who all is going with you to the house?” Dylan leaned over and called softly to Hailey. He didn’t want to touch her since every time he did, she flinched.

He knew better than to do that, but it seemed his hands wanted to touch her. It was a need that gnawed at him and one he fought. He didn't want her any more afraid of him than she already was.

She blinked her eyes open. "What's wrong? Is he okay?"

"Cash is fine. Cole brought Annabelle to see you before he takes her to the safe house."

She sat straight up, and they both saw her wince. Cole frowned but brought Annabelle over to her. "She fell asleep a few minutes ago."

Hailey reached up and took her from Cole, cuddling the baby close.

"Cole and I are going to step outside so you can have some time with her."

"Thank you," she murmured, sleep making her voice husky.

He and Cole turned and walked out, staying close so that if she looked up, she'd see them.

"What are the plans?"

"Andrews is driving us. He may not notice when someone's hungry, but he sure as shit notices when someone's following him. I trust him to take us there. Conner is going to be staying at the house with me while I deal with Annabelle. Viktor will rotate in and out so we can get some sleep."

"How about her follow-up appointments? I'm sure she's going to have a lot."

Cole nodded. "I have papers Hailey needs to sign so I can take her to those appointments while she, Cash, and Raine are still in here."

"Good idea."

"The family lawyer thought of it and drew up the papers today. We're afraid the Rivers family might try something with Annabelle's father."

"What do you mean?"

“Cash and Raine’s father died of a heart attack, but Annabelle’s dad is one of those men who wants nothing to do with kids. If he’s paid enough, however, he might try something like suing for custody and getting an emergency order for temporary custody.”

“Can the fucker do that?”

“He can, and since Hailey’s on assistance and living in an unsafe home and her ex allegedly shot them...”

“Fuck.”

“That’s what I said.”

“What can we do?”

“The lawyer is coming by the house tomorrow to talk to me since Annabelle is my primary charge, and then she wants to come and talk to Hailey. She didn’t sound optimistic.”

“Fuck that. Call Viktor. He might have some ideas.”

“Already did that. He’s looking into it. You look like shit, bro.”

“Sleep is optional at this point. Once we get everyone to the safe house, I think I’m going to sleep for twenty-four hours straight.”

“I feel that. I don’t think I’ve slept much either the last few days.”

“She keeping you awake?”

Cole laughed. “Yeah, Annabelle’s the most demanding female I’ve ever met.”

“Babies always are.”

“My ex-girlfriend told me she’s pregnant.”

“What?”

“She phoned me the day we landed in Georgia. I’m...”

“Terrified?”

Cole nodded. “Yeah. How do I do this?”

“Same as everyone else—one day at a time.”

“She and I didn’t end things well. It was a pretty nasty breakup.”

“What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Found her chatting in an online sex chat with a bunch of guys. I thought if she was doing that shit, what else might she be doing? I broke it off, and she hit me in the back of the head with a cast-iron skillet.”

“That around the time you called in with a concussion that kept you out for two weeks?”

“Yeah.”

“So no hope of getting back together with her?”

“Fuck, no. She and I might have been good in some things—well, mainly one thing—but we sucked ass everywhere else. She’s a little too crazy for me, honestly.”

“You sure it’s your baby?”

“First thing I asked her. She acted like I’d slapped her, but given what I caught her doing, I don’t think it was a strange question to ask.”

“Have a paternity test done.”

“I already talked to a lawyer about it. She’s drawing up some papers. They can do paternity tests a lot earlier than they used to. If the baby’s mine, I’ll support it and make sure it never wants for anything. I’m away a lot, but I’ll be there as much as I can.”

Cole was a good guy. Dylan had known this from the time he met him. He’d be a good dad, given how protective he was of Annabelle. It explained why he’d wanted to be her primary guard as well.

“We’ll help you any way we can. You know that, right?”

“I’ve been putting off telling Viktor.”

“Why?”

“I don’t honestly know, but every time I try, the words get stuck in my throat. I can’t get them out.”

“You want me to sit down and talk to him with you?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. I don’t even know why I told you.”

“Probably because holding it in was getting the best of you.”

“Maybe.” His gaze did a rotation of the hallway.
“Where’s...who’s on duty with you?”

“Lucien, but he’s on his lunch break.”

“Isn’t he on Raine’s detail?”

“Mostly, but he’s floating today.”

“I’m going to go downstairs if you’ve got this. I want to make sure our exit is secure.”

“You going out the front?”

“No. Through the kitchen in the back. I already cleared it with administration.”

“Go on, I’ve got this.”

Dylan watched Cole disappear and then turned his attention back to the floor. They’d give Hailey as much time as they could with Annabelle before Cole needed to leave. They wanted to make sure there was plenty of light left. With fall in full swing, it got darker a lot faster.

Angel and Sara sent them tons of clothes for the kids, so that was one worry he didn’t need to stress over. Gregg went out earlier and bought bottles, diapers, wipes, and formula for Annabelle. He wasn’t sure if she ate baby food yet, but they were covered for at least tonight until they could find out from her mama if she was on baby food or anything a little more solid, like cereal.

“Coffee?” the nurse at the desk asked.

“I’m good but thank you.” He took up his position and leaned back, letting his attention focus on his surroundings so no one got up here that wasn’t allowed. It was the best he could do if he couldn’t be in there with them.

Cash yawned in his sleep, and Hailey shifted her focus from the baby snuggled tight against her, sound asleep. As soon as she'd taken her from Cole, Annabelle had stopped fussing and fell into a deep slumber. Poor thing.

This was the first time in a week she'd actually been able to hold Annabelle, and she'd have to let her go soon. Part of her screamed, "No, don't let her go with literal strangers, strangers who were men," but what choice did she have? She was still a patient herself, as were Raine and Cash. She couldn't keep her here. She was out of options.

Cash turned his face, and she saw his eyes were open. He was watching her.

"Hey, baby boy. Are you feeling better?"

He shook his head.

"No. Where does it hurt?"

He patted his chest, the IV line wrapped in tape on his small hand.

"Your heart had a boo boo, and the doctors had to make it better."

He frowned, his eyebrows drawing down.

"It's okay, sweetheart. It'll feel better soon."

She'd already seen the large cut where they'd had to crack open his chest to get to his heart. They changed the bandage several times a day, and every time she saw the stitched-up cut, she nearly lost it. She'd come so close to losing all her babies. She supposed she should thank God for sparing them, but she was still so angry with Him for the situation she found herself in. It might be a while before she could pray without feeling the hurt and anger she held toward Him.

"Miss Roberts, Miss Fowler is here to see you."

Dylan escorted the family attorney in, and she waved her to sit down in the seat next to her. Dylan usually sat there.

“What can you tell me about Annabelle’s father?”

Well, right down to business, but that was what she’d discovered Ms. Fowler always did. She was dressed today in a sharp gray business suit, and her dark red hair was put up in some kind of fancy knot. Her demeanor always screamed she was tough and to not mess with her.

“He’s an asshole.”

Ms. Fowler’s lips quirked slightly. “Besides that.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Social services called me today, and apparently he’s asking about Annabelle.”

“No.” She hugged the baby tighter to her, careful of her and Annabelle’s broken arms.

“Yes, and I need to know *everything*. Has he paid child support in any form? Money, clothes, diapers, anything?”

“Never. As soon as I told him I was pregnant, he walked, stating he didn’t ‘do’ kids and wanted nothing to do with it. I haven’t seen him since. I did call him when she was born, but he never returned my call.”

“Does he have a job?”

“Of course. He works construction.”

“Anything that would make him unfit?”

“He has an oxy addiction. I found out about it, and that’s why I broke up with him. My brother died from a drug overdose. I won’t let that around my kids.”

“You left?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, that’s good. We can demand a drug test if he tries to get custody. Now, as I understand it, you live in a trailer in a somewhat questionable area?”

“She’s moving into a house. I can give you the address. It’s in a nice, crime-free area and has more than enough bedrooms for all her children.”

“Please. That would be helpful. I can go and take photos. Is it furnished yet? Do the kids have beds there?”

“We can make that happen today.”

She glanced to Dylan, astonishment her only emotion.

“I’ll call the wives. They’ll get everything sorted out by tomorrow.”

“The wives?” Ms. Foster asked.

“The wives of all the men at KSI. They’re a very tight-knit group and consider family the most important thing in a person’s life. They’ll descend and make sure the place is furnished and the bedrooms decorated for the kids.”

She didn’t have the money for all of this. He shook his head slightly when she tried to say that. His eyes strayed to the lawyer, and she closed her lips. He must know something she didn’t.

“Are you employed, Miss Roberts?”

“No. I was fired from my job at the grocery store, and thanks to Josh, no one will hire me.”

“Did anyone say that to you?”

“Sure, but if asked, they’d never admit it.”

“You’re probably right about that. I know you’re going to be unable to work for a while due to your own injuries and having to take care of the children, but we need to get you a job sooner rather than later. Being employed will make you a better custodial parent.”

She felt helpless. How was she supposed to get a job when Josh had gone to every business in town and told them she was unhireable?

“I’ll do my best,” she said after a moment.

“Good, that’s all anyone can ask for.” She opened her briefcase and took out a tablet. “Was your relationship with any of your previous boyfriends abusive?”

“No. Raine and Cash’s father was a good man who died of a heart attack. Annabelle’s father wasn’t abusive. As soon as I found out about his drug habit, I left. Even Josh wasn’t abusive in the beginning. He said some pretty horrible things, but when he hit me, I told him to leave and never come back. I’m not that woman who stays when someone hits her. That’s not who I am.”

“Good, good.” Ms. Foster used a stylus and made some notes on her tablet. “Are you seeing anyone currently? Someone with a good job and a clean record?”

“Is that important?” Dylan asked before she could say anything.

“Very much so. If we can prove she’s in a stable relationship, that will go a long way in showing she’s not prone to making bad decisions when it comes to her partners.”

“And that matters, why?”

“Because if Mr. Browning decides to challenge her custody, he’ll have to prove she’s unfit. Her decision making will come into play. We have to be able to show she doesn’t allow bad influences to come around the children, and that includes her relationships with her partners.”

“How is this happening?” she whispered, mostly to herself. “We were the victims, and now Josh is going to try to take my kids. He warned me he would.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Dylan declared. “Hailey and I have been dating for a few weeks. We got together maybe a week before Josh tried to murder her and her kids.”

Ms. Foster smiled like a shark. “How did you meet?”

“I was down here scouting for a vacation home and met her at Walmart. We got to talking, and I asked her out.”

“Are there any phone records?”

“No. The only thing I had was my work phone, and we don’t take personal calls on that. I was going to get her number on our next date.” He pulled out two phones. “Unfortunately, Mr. Rivers shot them before I could.”

“So it’s new, and you’re not leaving after all this?”

“Of course not. If anything, it just makes me more determined to keep her and the kids safe. As you can see, I called in my own security company to protect her.”

“Perfect.” Ms. Foster made a few notes on her tablet and then put it back in her briefcase before standing. “I’ll contact the social worker and let her know all of this. If you can text me the address of the house, I’ll put it in the file. When it’s furnished, the social worker will want to come and take photos.”

“I’ll make the call right away for the wives and girlfriends to come and put it together.”

Hailey didn’t know what to say. She wanted to argue and tell Ms. Foster it was a lie, but she was afraid as well. What if Josh could get her babies taken away? What if this little lie protected them? She didn’t know what to do.

“Please forward everything as soon as you can.” Ms. Foster smiled widely. “I’ll see you soon, Ms. Roberts, and hopefully with better news.”

“What the hell?” she asked once the woman was out of the room.

“If it keeps you out of court, the lie is worth it.”

“But what about later? When you leave and I have to go back to the trailer?”

“You’re not going back there. I rented the place, and you can stay there until you find a job and save enough money for a decent place.”

“Why? Why would you do that?”

“Because...hell.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Because you’re a good person who’s had a bad hand dealt to her. You and those kids deserve better. I want to help you. Can we leave it at that?”

“I know I should say thank you, but...”

“But you don’t trust me or my intentions toward you and your kids,” he finished for her. “That’s okay. You’ll learn to trust me. I know I’m standoffish and sometimes cold, but that’s not directed toward you. I hope you understand that.”

She did. He’d lost his family. That had to have an effect on him. Maybe it was how he dealt with the world after that. Keep everything and everyone at a distance and you couldn’t get hurt.

“Don’t worry about saying thank you. Just spend some time with Annabelle and let us worry about everything else.”

“I…”

“Shh.” He pressed a finger to her lips. “Let me take care of you. Just focus on the kids.”

He pulled away before she had a chance to respond and walked out, taking up his position by the nurse’s station.

She hadn’t flinched when he touched her. It wasn’t lost on her that her response to him had changed. Maybe it was because she’d gotten used to him being here. Maybe it was because she’d started to trust him ever so slightly.

There were a million and one maybes, but none of them gave her the answers she wanted.

So instead of letting everything that happened overwhelm her, she pushed it down and focused on Cash and Annabelle.

Only his touch wouldn’t be pushed down, but she didn’t let herself contemplate that with a ten-foot pole.

She started to hum to Annabelle and closed her eyes. She’d let herself worry about everything else tomorrow.

Chapter Ten



“I think I did something really stupid.”

“And what was that?” Viktor arched a brow.

“The family court lawyer came by today and said social services called her. Annabelle’s father is inquiring about her and her safety.”

“Cole informed me. Does this stupid thing anything to do with that?”

“Yeah. She asked Hailey if she was dating anyone, someone who’s basically not a piece of shit.”

“And you lied and said the two of you were dating, *da*?”

“*Da*,” he replied. “It was a heat of the moment thing. I was just trying to protect them.”

“You like her.”

Dylan stayed quiet.

“And it scares you.”

It terrified him. It was the first time since Allison he’d really felt anything for anyone. He’d been walking around cold and numb until he’d seen Hailey. He wasn’t sure what it was, exactly, but it made his entire being soften and start to want

again. He'd give anything for her to look at him with something other than fear.

"I get it."

"Do you, Viktor? You've never lost a wife and your only child within months of each other."

"No, I haven't, but I know what it means to be afraid of losing your wife and child."

Dylan let out a sigh and looked into the room where Hailey was talking quietly to her kids. He had no idea if they were awake or if she was just murmuring softly to them.

"What do I do?"

"You do what the rest of us have done. You take it slowly, one day at a time. Show her you're not like the abusive asshat. Give her reasons to trust you. Be kind and gentle with them all. It's just not her you have to win over, but the kids too."

"They're all so little. What kind of man would actually take a gun and shoot a child in cold blood? A baby?"

"People who deserve to go to the deepest pits of Hell," Conner said as he rocked up. "People like that don't deserve any kind of mercy."

"What are you doing here?" Viktor asked.

"I'm taking Cole and Annabelle home. I heard about social services calling, and it made me think there might be trouble brewing. I'm a better driver than Andrews, and I have experience with babies. I can help out."

Dylan stared at him in disbelief. Conner was going to help take care of Annabelle? Did he even know how?

"My nieces and nephews love me."

"But have you ever babysat for them?"

"Well, no, but I help out when I'm around."

Uh huh. "Change a diaper?"

"God, no."

Viktor laughed and slapped his twin on the back. “Get ready to learn. If you go, then you’re on baby duty, too.”

True horror overwhelmed every other expression on Conner’s face. It made him appear younger than he usually seemed. He reminded Dylan of Mason in this one moment.

“Why do you want to do me like that?” he asked after a long, drawn-out minute. “I don’t do diapers.”

“Mr. Jenkins?”

He turned to see the head nurse standing to the side of them. She was an older woman in her late fifties, and she seemed to be one of the few in charge with common sense. He liked her.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“They just cleared Cash to be moved out of ICU. He’ll be going to a room on the pediatric floor. Miss Roberts has been cleared for a few days, but given Cash’s condition, we let her stay here. She does have a room on the third floor, but...”

“I’ll see if I can get her to go to her own room, but chances are she’ll be with her kids more than she’s in her room.”

“Is there a way to make sure Cash and Raine are in the same room?” Viktor asked. “It’ll be easier not only for the family, but for those of us on guard duty. If we only have to monitor one room, then you’ll have fewer of us cluttering up your hallways.”

“I’ve already requested that since I know Raine doesn’t have anyone else in her room.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Aida.” Conner winked at her, and the woman actually blushed. Viktor’s twin had more charm in his pinkie than most people had in their entire body. Of course he already knew her name.

“When do you want to move them?” Viktor asked.

“As soon as I hear back from the charge nurse on the pediatric floor.”

Cole came around the corner, and his demeanor tensed, his eyes sweeping everything.

“Something happen?”

“No. They’ve cleared Cash to go to a normal room.”

“Fuck, I saw all of you standing here and worried someone got up here.”

“No, everything’s fine. You set to take Annabelle home?”

“Yeah, I picked up one of those playpen things that can turn into a mobile crib, so we have something to put her in.”

“You get diapers, wipes, and food?” Viktor asked.

“I...no. Shit. Where do I get that?”

“Walmart,” everyone, including the nurse, answered at the same time. It made them all laugh.

“We’ll get a list of things from Hailey, and you can have Conner go inside and get everything. I really don’t want you or the baby out of one of our armored vehicles.”

“I hate to go in there and tell her we need to take the baby.” Cole glanced in the room. “They all look so peaceful.”

Dylan knew exactly how he felt. “We have to, though. We need to get her home before it gets dark.”

“I’ll go in and let her know it’s time.” Cole turned and then looked behind him at us. “D, you coming in with me?”

“No. I still have something urgent to talk to Viktor about. Conner, can you go pull the car to the back?”

“Sure, I was waiting for Cole to give the go-ahead.”

Even though Conner wasn’t employed by KSI, he still did a fair amount of work for them. Dylan didn’t know if he was paid or if he did it to pass the time. Either way, Conner Kincaid was damn good at being a bodyguard or a tracker.

Once everyone was out of earshot, Dylan kept his voice low. “Social services are up her ass. We need to get the house decorated with beds and things for the kids asap. Do you think Sara or Angel could do some online shopping and get it delivered to the house?”

Viktor snorted. “Do you think Angel is going to hear about abused kids needing a bed and not come rushing down here? Sara will want to, but she’s pregnant. I don’t want her traveling.”

“It’s a dangerous situation. Kade isn’t going to let her come.”

“She’ll drag his ass down here with her. I’ll see if Sloane, Lily, and Jo are free. They might come and help as well. I’m not sure how Becca would feel given her fear of crowds, but her eye for design is amazing.”

“You’re telling me you’re going to drag the entire Kincaid clan down here?”

“Potentially. Not the kids, though. It is too dangerous for them to be here, but we should be able to find sitters for a few days.”

“And they have school.”

“That too,” Viktor said. “Delia will try to weasel her way out of class to come down here.”

“She still not liking school?”

“She hates it, but I can’t get her to tell me why.”

“She will eventually. You have to give her time.”

“Mason said he’d talk to her about it. She loves her Uncle Mason, so maybe he’ll be able to get the truth out of her.”

“Well, whoever comes, I’m grateful. I’ll give them my card to go shopping with.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Money well spent. Even after all this, they can’t go back to that trailer park. I told her she can stay there for as long as she needs to.”

“You’re a good man, Dylan.” Viktor slapped him on the back. “I’ll go call Sara and get it organized. Find out what kind of rooms the kids want.”

Dylan stood there a long time after Viktor disappeared around the corner toward the elevators. He wasn't so sure he was a good man. He hadn't been enough for Allison. She killed herself. If he was truly a good man, he'd have been able to help her instead of losing himself in his own grief over Molly.

He wasn't going to do that again. He would keep Hailey and the kids safe. Maybe he'd forgive himself if he could do that and let go of some of his own guilt in the process.

Resolved, he went back to Hailey's room. It was going to be a long day, and he wasn't looking forward to trying to convince her to go to her own room for a little while, but she needed to. She needed rest, and the doctors needed to assess her and make sure she was healing properly.

She was going to fight it, but she wasn't going to win this one. The kids were out of the woods, and if she wanted to be of use to them, she needed to rest.

And she would.

Chapter Eleven



Hailey yawned and nodded to the nurse who was checking her vitals. She wanted out of this bed and back in the room with her kids, but they told her if she didn't come and rest, they'd ban her from visiting them. She needed to be checked out by her doctor, and it was difficult for them when she refused to leave Cash's bedside.

"How is she?" Dylan asked from where he stood like a sentinel against the wall.

The nurse glanced to Hailey for permission since Dylan wasn't related to her. She nodded.

"Well, her stitches aren't great. The doctor prescribed IV antibiotics to try to get the infection under control. Had she been in her room like she was supposed to be, we'd have seen it sooner."

"Weren't you changing her bandages?"

"She refused."

His glare landed on me, and my first instinct was to shrink away from him, but I'd come to understand his anger was never really directed at me, but toward the situation itself.

"You have to let them do their jobs."

"I'm here now, aren't I?"

“Only because they threatened to block you from seeing the kids.”

He wasn't wrong.

“If that infection had gotten worse, it could have caused sepsis which could kill you.”

The nurse nodded emphatically. “Exactly.”

“They're safe right now. Kayla is in there with them both. Jarrod is posted up outside, and we have people at various points watching. Take a few hours for yourself and rest. If you want to be there for them, you have to take care of yourself. Getting sepsis isn't helping any of them.”

“Listen to this one,” the nurse told her sternly.

“Before you go, do you think you can unhook her from that IV long enough for her to change into something besides that hospital gown? Pajamas were dropped off for her while the children were being moved.”

Pajamas? Who would have dropped clothes off her?

“Of course.” The nurse smiled and started adjusting something on the machine before disconnecting the line from the needle in her hand.

Dylan handed the nurse a Kohl's bag, and then she helped Hailey into the bathroom. Walking was still a little painful, but it was getting better. The nurse helped her change into a pair of the softest pajamas she'd ever worn. She'd been inside a Kohl's before but never bought anything. It was super expensive, at least for her. She was a solid Walmart girl.

The pajamas were long sleeved and slightly too big, but that was fine. The sleeves fell down past her fingers. She'd be warm. Even though they were in the south and it was hotter than the north, the hospital stayed cold. She froze more often than not.

She took the opportunity to relieve her bladder, wash her hands, and then open the door. The nurse was waiting there, talking to Dylan, a flirty smile on her face. It bothered Hailey. It shouldn't, but it did. More than a little.

“I’m done,” she announced with more ire in her tone than she’d thought she was capable of.

The nurse looked back, startled, but she schooled her features into a pleasant expression. “Let’s get you back into bed. You need to sleep for a few hours. When you sleep, it helps your body heal itself.”

“Is that true, though? Why would it be able to heal itself more in sleep than when I’m awake?”

“Because when you rest, you slow down, and nothing has to work as hard as when you’re awake. Sleep does a body good. Is there anything I can get you?”

“No, I’m fine.”

She smiled and left the room, telling the Viking goodbye as well.

He came and sat in the chair that was way too small for him. “Are you really fine?”

“No, but I’m better than I was.”

“Feel up to answering some questions?”

“What kind of questions?”

“We’ve put off asking you anything about Rivers, your relationship, and what led up to the night you were all shot. But we need to know everything you can tell us.”

“I’m not sure I can talk about it.”

“I know it’s hard, but in order to protect you, these are things we need to know.”

She sighed heavily and pulled the blanket around her. Could she tell him when her entire body shuddered whenever she tried to think about it? Why did he need to know everything, anyway? Wasn’t it enough that Josh shot them?

“Why do you want to know everything?”

“Because we need to understand who Rivers is. In telling me your story, it’ll help me come to know him, his methods, and hopefully give us information to help us track him.”

“The police still haven’t found him, have they?”

“No, but with some information, *we* might. KSI has one of the best trackers I’ve ever worked with on our team. Max always finds who he’s looking for, but we can help speed that up if we can provide him with as much information as possible.”

“His family has lots of money and is very connected. I’m sure they’re protecting him.”

“As are we. Do you think he’d escape to another country?”

“Why would he? Nothing ever happens to him here because he’s protected. These charges will eventually get thrown out too.”

“Actually, they won’t. We’ve been in talks with the state attorney general’s office. Our firm vetted the AG and all the people we’ve been speaking with. They have no ties to Rivers or anyone in his family. They plan on bringing charges against him. You named him as the man who shot you and the kids. That was good enough for them to move forward. They convened a grand jury yesterday and secured an indictment. The police are looking for him.”

She laughed bitterly. “The police around here won’t do shit.”

“We have that covered as well. The state police sent officers down from the capital, and they’re the ones handling the investigation and the manhunt for Rivers.”

“Detective Andsley isn’t in charge?”

“He is, but he’s part of the state police task force.”

“I trust him.”

“So do I,” he said. “He and I worked together back in California when I was still on the force.”

“You used to be a police officer?”

“I was until Allison died. I escaped California and all its bad memories. I ended up in New York and took a position at KSI.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes. But I get to help people more in this job than I ever did as an officer.”

“Why do you say that?”

“There were rules that said we could only act if we had evidence. Even if we knew something was wrong, as the police, we had to follow the rules. In this job, I get to make the rules as long as we stay within the lines of the law. We don’t do illegal shit, but we make sure people are safe. And sometimes we manage to find evidence police miss.”

“And me telling you about my life will help?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think that. I know memories can be painful.”

Hailey sighed. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Where you think the story begins.”

“I guess it started a few weeks after my dad died. He was the only family I had left.”

“You were feeling vulnerable.”

He said it as more of a statement than a question, and it was true enough. She’d been depressed, sad, and grieving.

“I guess. I’d seen Josh when he came into the store from time to time, but I had no idea who he was. After Dad died, I remember him telling me how sorry he was, and I thought, how does he know my dad died? It was later I learned his cousin owned the grocery store I worked in and had told him. After that, every time he came in, he’d go out of his way to talk to me.”

“I bet he was very charming and courteous.”

“Yeah. It was nice, you know? Especially after Ronnie. That was a disaster and a half, but I can’t regret him because I got Annabelle out of it.”

Dylan smiled slightly. He echoed that sentiment. Even knowing the pain he’d experience, he’d do it all over again for the six years he got to spend with his little girl.

Hailey looked over toward the window and huddled into the blankets. He knew talking about this would be hard for her, but it really was necessary.

“I remember when he asked me out, I was gobsmacked. I mean, here was this nice guy who could literally ask out any woman he wanted, and he chose me. I wasn’t anything special, and I was a single mother. A pregnant single mother. I’d taken a pregnancy test the morning he asked me out. I said no at first, but he kept coming back every single day for two weeks, and he’d ask me the same question, even when I told him I was pregnant. It didn’t matter to him.”

Of course it didn’t. That was how abusers worked. They found vulnerable people and used that to break them down without the person even realizing that was what was happening.

“I finally gave in and went out with him. He asked me all about me and wanted to know about my kids. He asked about Ronnie and if he was going to be involved with the pregnancy and then the baby when she came. He seemed genuinely interested in everything I had to say. It was something I hadn’t had in a very long time. Raine and Cash’s father, he was a good man who did his best for us, but he was more concerned with his supper, a beer, and whatever football game was on than sitting down and asking me about my day or how I was feeling. It was just really nice to have someone to pay attention to me for once.”

“Everyone wants to feel appreciated and taken care of.”

“Yeah, but for me, it was more than that. I felt so alone, and here he was, and suddenly, I didn’t feel so alone anymore. I could text, and he’d always answer me back. Even when things were starting to get bad, he’d always answer my texts.”

That was about control. He made her feel like he was the only one she could turn to because he always answered her. If she ran to him first, then it was easier for him to cut her off from everyone else.

“We started dating, and he was so sweet. He took me out to dinner, to movies, but more than that, he did things with the

kids. We'd take them to the early show on Sunday if there was a new cartoon or something playing, and then we'd go to dinner later. He took them to get ice cream, or we'd go to the park. He was just so kind to them."

Again, he wasn't surprised. It would be easier to control Hailey if her kids loved him. If he could do no wrong, then it was hard for her to tell him to fuck off and explain to the kids why the person they adored wasn't around anymore.

"Things started to change ever so slightly about three months after we started dating. If my shift at work ran late, he'd be upset, but he'd do it in a way that made me feel bad. For instance, he'd have to cancel reservations he'd made weeks ago, and I'd feel like crap because it felt like it was my fault. But then the next day, he'd be so doting and understanding when I was tired or felt sick due to the pregnancy. It kept me confused and feeling out of sorts."

"Most abusers do that. It's not unusual behavior."

"I wish I'd known more about the red flags. But I'd never been in that type of relationship before. Everyone I'd ever dated had been decent human beings, even Ronnie, to an extent. I feel so dumb now."

"No, don't do that to yourself. It wasn't your fault. He saw a vulnerability and took advantage of it. None of this is your fault."

"I wish I believed that, but I brought that man into our lives. That was all on me."

He pursed his lips. He hoped one day he could help her understand it wasn't her fault. But until she was willing to allow for that possibility, it was useless trying to argue with her.

"Things went on like that for a while. We'd play the Jekyll and Hyde dance, and I'd think about ending things because part of me knew what was happening wasn't right. Even if I was confused, my dad taught me better than to let someone make me feel bad on the regular. Things took a turn for the worse about a week after Annabelle was born. I was supposed

to go to a charity event with him, but the baby was fussy, and I didn't want to leave her, even though I had a sitter I trusted. He was so mad. He blew up and hit me. Slapped me so hard I staggered back and lost my balance. I ended up on the floor, looking up into his expression. It was devoid of everything except rage. I kept thinking how had I not seen that in him before? How did I miss all the anger?"

"What happened?"

"I stood up and walked to the apartment door and asked him politely to leave. He tried to shut the door, but I told him if he didn't leave, I'd scream. My neighbor was home, and she was the apartment gossip. He knew as well as I did that the news of my bruised cheek and my screaming would be all over town within a matter of hours. So he left."

"But he came back."

"He did, but I wouldn't let him in. I told him it was over and not to come back. He called and called, sent me text after text, trying his best to gaslight me. He hit me, though, and that's all I needed to snap me out of my confusion. My dad told me if a man ever hit me, then I was to wait until he was asleep and beat him with a steel baseball bat until he couldn't walk."

"That'll land you in jail."

"I figured Josh would go straight to the police if I did that, so I just cut him out. And that, more than anything, embarrassed him. A week later, I received a call from my supervisor at work, telling me they were letting me go. I asked them why, and they really wouldn't give me a good reason. I knew it had something to do with Josh, but if I fought it, I was afraid of what else he might do. I still had three kids to take care of and a hospital bill. My insurance paid eighty percent of it, but I was left with the rest. I wanted to be able to take at least a month off for maternity leave because my job paid for that, but since I was fired, I had no income. I put in application after application, but no callbacks. I went in and tried to talk to managers, but I was told they weren't hiring. Even with a help wanted sign up."

She closed her eyes, and Dylan itched to reach for her hand, but he didn't want to scare her.

“Josh called and asked how I was liking the unemployment line. That's when I knew he'd had me blackballed from working anywhere in town. He laughed when I asked him about it. He said I'd learn one way or another that no one embarrassed him and got away with it. If I wanted to apologize and take him back, then everything could go back to normal.”

“And you said no.”

“Of course I did. Two days later, I got a notice my rent was going up by five hundred dollars starting at the beginning of the month, which was in three days. I couldn't pay that and have enough to buy food and everything the baby needed. So I had to find somewhere else to live. I moved into the trailer park and was forced to go on assistance. The WIC program was a game changer for us, but I still had to buy extra formula and diapers. Good Lord, did she go through some diapers.”

“Mike said he had to go to several domestic violence calls you made. When did that start?”

“The day I moved into the trailer. He showed up at around two in the morning.”

“Why did you let him in?”

“I didn't. He busted down the door. The kids were asleep, and I didn't want to scare them, so when he slapped me, I didn't make a sound. The slap spiraled into a black eye and a broken nose. I called the cops when he left. They took a report, but nothing ever came of it.”

“Was it Mike who showed up?”

“No. He came on the third incident. He took my statement and arrested Josh, only the judge dismissed it since there were no witnesses and Josh had an alibi. For the next four months, we did that dance. He'd beat me, they'd arrest him, and the charges would be dismissed.”

“Until the last time.”

“The kids were sleeping, and he unlocked my door. I don’t know how he got a key, but he had one.”

“Are you sure you didn’t leave it unlocked?”

She looked at him like he was dense. “You’ve seen where I live. Would you leave your door unlocked?”

“I had to ask.”

“No, Mr. Viking, I didn’t leave my door unlocked. I checked it several times that night, as was my habit in case one of the kids had managed to unlock it. I had just finished feeding Annabelle when I heard the first gunshot. Then a scream. It was Cash. I got up and ran, thinking someone had broken in looking for money or anything else of value. Only I didn’t make it that far. I’d been in my bedroom and ran. The kids were at the other end of the trailer, and I had to go through the living room to get there.”

Dylan took a chance and reached for her hand. She looked terrified, and he only wanted to comfort her in any way he could. Her hand was ice cold and shaking. She didn’t pull it back or cringe. He’d count it as a win.

“He was there smiling, the gun pointed not at me, but at Annabelle. There was blood splattered on his shirt and my kids were quiet. No more screams echoed against the walls. He told me I’d learn what it meant to lose everything. I heard the click of the trigger and turned, trying to shield Annabelle. I felt the bullet go into me, and I fell. Annabelle was so quiet. She wasn’t crying, and I tried to check her, but he yanked me up and started to beat me, screaming things I can’t even remember. I blacked out, and the next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital.”

“I’m so sorry that happened to all of you.”

“Y’all,” she said absently.

“We’re going to find him, and he’s going to go away for a very long time.”

“Not if the judges around here have anything to say about it.”

“The AG’s office has already put in a motion to move the case out of this county. They’ve cited the numerous conflicts of interests the judges, the DA’s office, and the police have when it comes to the Rivers family. If he has to, the AG has said he’ll do what’s necessary to get the case moved. In other words, he’s going to spread it all over social media and the news outlets. Even the idiots in this county can’t discount public opinion if they want to be re-elected.”

“You would be surprised.”

“I know.” He gently rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand in slow, soothing circles to try to keep her calm. “Now, did Josh ever tell you about places he liked to visit or vacation homes he frequented?”

“Maybe, but I don’t know. His family owns a lake house, but I don’t know which lake. They have property all over the state and in Alabama as well. He didn’t really tell me too much about his personal life. I only met his parents once, and they didn’t seem too happy he was dating a single mother. We didn’t go to their house again after that. I thought at the time he did it for me, you know? Like he was standing up for me, but I guess he didn’t want to feel embarrassed.”

“Not your fault, Hailey.”

She shrugged, and he wanted so badly to hug her, but he didn’t want to push his luck.

“Are there any routines he’d do even if he was behind on everything else?”

“The gym. He went religiously twice a day. Sometimes he’d be late for our dates because he was at the gym.”

He filed that away for Max to look into.

“I’m tired, Viking. Can I rest now?”

“Why do you call me that?”

“You look like a Viking warrior of old.”

“Do I still scare you?”

“A little.”

“Do you think I’d hurt you or the children?”

“No, but the part of me that took beatings for months and then got shot by a man is telling me to be cautious.”

“I know my words don’t mean shit, but I swear to you, I will never raise a hand against you or those kids. I’ll protect all four of you with my life. I’ll prove it to you through actions. I may get angry and I might raise my voice, but it will never be directed at you.”

“You’re mad at the situation.”

“Yes, but if I scare you, just tell me, and I’ll do my best to calm down.”

“Okay.”

“Good. I’m going to sit here the rest of the night, so you just sleep. Everyone is safe. Cole texted a photo of a sleeping Annabelle.” He took his phone out and showed it to her. “Cash and Raine are both sound asleep. It’s okay to sleep now. You’re all safe.”

She nodded and closed her eyes.

He kept rubbing those slow circles over the back of her hand. Her breathing evened out after a few minutes, and he was grateful she’d trusted him enough to not flinch away from him.

It was more than he’d hoped for.

And it was everything he hoped for.

He was determined to show her he could be trusted. She’d understand he meant what he said soon enough. After a little while, he laid her hand down and pulled the blanket up and tucked it around her. Then he closed his own eyes and let himself sleep, trusting the man outside to be his eyes while he too got a couple hours of rest.

Chapter Twelve



Hailey woke up to the smell of bacon. Her stomach actually cramped. It seemed some sleep had brought her appetite back as well. At least somewhat.

She yawned and opened her eyes to see three women staring at her expectantly. They weren't dressed like nurses either. Who were they? Had Josh managed to get someone in here to kill her? What about Cash and Raine? She looked around, but the Viking wasn't here. Where was he? Her heartrate picked up, and she reached for something, anything to protect herself with long enough to get out of here and find her babies.

The redhead seemed to understand almost instantly what was going on in her head. She smiled, which didn't reassure Hailey at all. She threw the nurses' call button at her head.

The woman ducked, and Hailey screamed.

Dylan burst through the door before she could blink, and he looked around, his gun out, ready for any threat. Only he looked confused after a minute.

"Sorry, Dylan. We scared her. I should have thought of that. Sara said not to crowd her, and we were just chatting for a few minutes. I didn't think she'd wake up so soon."

"Angel, that nearly took ten years off my life. Here I thought not only was Hailey in danger, but so were the three of

you.”

“Sorry,” she apologized again, her cat eyes full of remorse.

Dylan walked over to the bed, and Hailey didn’t exactly relax, but she did calm down.

“Hailey Roberts, this is Angel Kincaid, Sloane Watkins, and Josephine Maxwell, soon to be Kincaid.” He gestured to the ladies and pointed as he spoke. “Kade’s wife, Gregg’s wife, and Mason Kincaid’s fiancée. Mason is who installed the security at the safe house.”

“I’m sorry we scared you. Sara told us what we should and shouldn’t do, but I guess we got too involved in our conversation.”

What did she mean, what she should and shouldn’t do?

“In a perfect world, we’d have had Sara and possibly Shayna come because they both had abusive assholes as exes. They understand how better to handle you...”

“Handle me?” she asked softly, her fear starting to take a whole other turn. She was so sick and tired of being “handled” by everyone, from Josh to the police to even the people here trying to help her. She had no control, and these people reminding her of it only served to fan the flames of anger kindling inside.

“Ah, Angel, why don’t you three step out into the hall? Gregg’s out there shoveling food so fast, I doubt there will be any left if you don’t.”

She nodded, and the ladies took their leave. He sank down in the chair beside the bed, running a hand through his hair. He mussed it to the point it looked like bedhead.

“You okay?”

“You trying to handle me, too?”

His response was swift and emphatic. “No. I was just worried about you. I’d walked over to the nurse’s station for a cup of nasty coffee when I heard you scream, and it scared the shit out of me.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

“Did you get your coffee?”

He sighed. “It’s nasty coffee, anyway. The ladies brought you cheesy grits, bacon, and waffles for breakfast. They thought you might like something besides hospital food. God knows they’ve been in one enough to know how bad that shit is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Angel was taken by a serial killer and tortured. Sloane was hunted by mobsters because she’d seen something she shouldn’t have and got hurt. And Jo? She was taken by a stalker. He starved her, and then she was badly injured when she got the chance to run for it. They’ve spent their fair share of time in a hospital bed.”

Dear God. She wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“Remember I told you I’d call them to help get the house furnished?”

Well, she remembered now.

He smiled ruefully. “I should have woken you, but you looked so peaceful, and you really did need the sleep.”

And all her anger deflated with those words. He was looking out for her, and she’d taken her anger out on him. He didn’t deserve it. None of them did. Joshua and his family deserved her anger.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I reacted like that.”

“Never apologize for how you feel. Not to me.”

Why was he so sweet? She’d noticed how kind and caring he was over the last few weeks. Not just to her, but to her children as well. Did he have an angle? She wasn’t sure, and so she didn’t trust herself when it came to him. How could she after Josh had fooled her so completely?

“What are you thinking?” He got up out of the chair and went over to the small table to bring her back two Styrofoam

containers and a large drink of some kind. “It’s orange juice.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank the girls. Angel is a foodie same as Gregg and finds the best places to eat wherever she is. She’s a complete pizza snob, though. If it’s not from an Italian place that’s passed the recipes down from generation to generation, it’s worthless.”

“She’s not wrong.”

“Not you too,” another man said as he came through the door. She’d met him yesterday, but her brain was too tired to try to remember his name. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with Papa Johns.”

“Says the man who tries to visit every place he’s seen on *Diners, Drive-Ins & Dives*,” Dylan said sarcastically.

The other man only grinned.

“Tell the girls not to drink the coffee on the floor. It’s rank.” Dylan handed her the silverware from the hospital breakfast tray. She saw toast and runny eggs on the plate. Her containers smelled better. She set aside the grits and opened the waffles instead. She was a sugar junkie. Thankfully, she had a high metabolism, and she could indulge in her sugar addiction.

“How are Raine and Cash?” She poured the syrup over the giant-sized waffle and inhaled deeply.

“They ate breakfast about an hour ago, and Raine is complaining because she can’t watch cartoons,” Dylan reported.

“Why?”

“Her room doesn’t have a TV.” The other man sat, but he stayed across the room. “Do you remember me?”

“Yes, but I can’t remember your name.”

“I’m Viktor. I asked my brother to run out and get them a TV, DVD player, and a bunch of cartoons they can watch. Kayla is aware that she’s going to have to endure hours and hours of possibly the same cartoon.”

“You didn’t...”

“I know, but I have small kids at home, too. They do love their cartoons. And I thought it might help to keep them calm.”

It would definitely help.

“Thank you.”

“No worries.” He waved aside her thanks. “Dylan has filled us all in on the details you provided around Rivers, and Max has started to track his movements beginning the day of the attack. Unlike the police, we don’t need all the subpoenas they do to track him through bank records, credit cards, and cameras. We’ve got boots on the ground investigating the places you made us aware of, as well as several properties we found buried in shell corporations his family has set up. As soon as we find him, we’ll let Detective Andsley know. He’s the only man we’ll give the information to.”

“The rest of them will just bury it.” Suddenly, her waffle wasn’t all that appealing anymore. She doubted Josh would go to trial. He’d probably cut some crap deal that gave him probation for trying to kill them. That was the power of his family.

“We’re not going to let them.”

Viktor could promise all he wanted, but he didn’t know them. He didn’t understand the power the Rivers family held in Georgia. In the entire south, really. Maybe she needed to bite the bullet and just move. But how or where? She couldn’t afford to move.

“Hailey?” Viktor called her name, and she glanced up, glad he’d pulled her out of her spiral.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You disappeared there for a minute.”

“Sorry.”

“I was just asking if you know where your phone is or if you can let us access your voicemail. I want to see if there’s anything there we can use.”

“I haven’t seen it since I woke up here.”

“Your service provider...”

“It’s a prepaid cell. That’s all I could afford. You’d need the phone to access the voicemail.”

“The police probably have it. I’ll call Mike and ask him if he can get us a recording of all her voicemails.”

“Do you think he will?”

Dylan nodded. He was more than sure of it. Considering Mike had called him personally to help Hailey, he knew his friend was invested in bringing Rivers to justice for what he’d done to her family.

He was worried about Hailey. She’d been hungry before, and now she wasn’t touching her food.

“Make the call. When you’re finished eating, just have Dylan text Angel so they can rush in here and apologize for upsetting you. She’s out there wringing her hands right now.”

“I’ll text her when Hailey’s up to talking so the girls can go shopping and get the house put together. Cole is already complaining about sleeping on the floor.”

“Mason’s worse.” Viktor laughed. “He’s already said nope, they’re staying in a hotel. He’s too pretty to be grumpy.”

“He’s the vain one of the group,” Dylan told her, but he didn’t like how shellshocked she was starting to look. Where was her head? “Vik, why don’t you check with Conner to make sure he knows what cartoons to buy, and I’ll text Angel as soon as Hailey is ready to talk?”

He nodded toward Hailey, and Viktor understood he needed to get the hell out.

“Sure, is there anything you need?”

“Headphones. Not those in-ear pieces of shit, but actual headphones.”

Vik arched a brow, and he just stared. Truthfully, the headphones were for Hailey in case she wanted to watch a movie or something on his laptop. All his emails and work programs required passwords to get into, so he wasn’t worried

about her snooping through files. He hoped watching some mundane movie or TV show might help her pass the time or keep her from spiraling down rabbit holes.

“Good talk. I’ll see you both later. Have a good day, Hailey.”

She nodded absently, and when Viktor left, Dylan debated, but he took her hand and squeezed. She glanced down at his hand, but she didn’t pull away like he expected her to. He’d count it as another win.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked over at the window and stared outside. “Everyone thinks they’re going to make him pay, but they’re not. Even if they manage to get a guilty verdict, his family will make sure he gets probation or goes to some cushy place where he can be protected. He’s going to win even if he loses.”

“His family may have money, but we’re good at what we do. KSI knows a lot of people, people who owe us favors. Trust me when I say this. He’s going to go to jail for a long time, and it won’t be somewhere protected. He’ll go to gen pop, and people there will know he tried to murder kids.”

“His family...”

“We have a Conner.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. Just know we got you.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“I never say things I don’t mean. You’ll learn to trust me in time.”

Her gaze swung back to his. “I don’t know if I’ll ever trust another man.”

“I’m patient, sweetheart, and I don’t give up. And I never break my word. You can count on that.”

“Why do you care so much?”

She wasn't ready to hear the why, but she would be, and as he said, he was a patient man.

"You just eat your grits before they get cold."

"I don't like grits."

"Isn't that a blasphemous thing to say in the south?"

She nodded. "I'd be shunned if anyone heard me say that."

"You don't want these?"

"No."

"Mind if I hand them off to Gregg? He's our human disposal system when it comes to food."

"Might as well. I don't want them."

Dylan had tried grits before, and he despised them as well, but Gregg would eat anything. He stood and walked to the door, looking for the food whore. He was stuffing his face with what he assumed was some kind of breakfast sandwich.

"You still hungry?"

Gregg nodded and reached for the container.

"It's grits," he warned.

Gregg shrugged and kept eating.

"Did I upset her?" Angel asked. Sure enough, she was wringing her hands.

"I think she was surprised to see strangers standing over her when she'd only woken up. Her first thoughts most likely went to you were there to kill her."

Angel made a distressed sound. "Can I go in and talk to her? Just me? Sloane and Jo will stay out here."

"I'll ask." He went back into the room and cleared his throat so she'd know he was there. He saw the stress on her face when she turned her attention to him. He wanted to march outside and tell Angel no, but he wasn't a controlling asshole. "Angel asked if she could come in and talk to you. Just the two of you. The other ladies will wait outside."

Hailey didn't want to, she really didn't, but these women had come here to help her keep custody of her kids. She owed them a conversation.

"Sure."

"Are you feeling up to it? I can ask her to come back later."

"No, I want to go upstairs and see the kids later. I'd rather get this done and over with now."

"At any time if you get tired, tell her, and she'll let you rest."

Dylan seemed to care, and while it was odd that he did, and her brain was screaming to not trust it, she let her battered heart take just a small moment of respite in his care.

"You'll be okay if I make a coffee run? Gregg will be right outside."

"I'll be fine." She didn't want him to see her as weak. Even if she was.

"Do you want anything from Starbucks?"

"I've never had anything from Starbucks."

Now, that shocked him. She almost laughed at his incredulous expression.

"How is that possible?" he asked after a long pause.

"I didn't waste money on overpriced drinks when I barely make enough to cover my rent, food, and the rest the bills. Regular old coffee is fine for me."

He didn't seem to like that answer, and she waited for her muscles to tense, to anticipate his anger, but it never came. Internally, a small worry niggled at the back of her mind, but her body didn't react to it. Maybe it knew she was safe with Dylan even if her mind didn't.

"I'll bring you back something. Do you like caramel?"

"No, it's way too sweet."

"Do you like pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin pie is good."

He nodded. "I'll bring you back a pumpkin spice latte."

"I've heard of those."

"I'm going to go let Angel know she can come in. Just shout if you get scared at any point, and Gregg will be right in. I'll be back as soon as I can. I need coffee."

"Go get your caffeine fix. I'll be fine."

He debated but finally left. It boggled her mind that he was so concerned.

"Hi." The redhead from before entered, her expression contrite. "I'm so sorry about before. We should know better, especially me. I still have nightmares."

"Dylan said you'd been through some things."

She snorted. "That's the understatement of the year. But we're all very sorry. I hope you can accept our apology."

"Sure." She just wanted to get this over and done with.

"I feel pretty shit right now. I remember that tone. I had it when I just wanted to get something over and done with. We did that to you, and I am so, so sorry."

"It's fine, but you're right. I do want this over and done with because I want to go see my kids."

"May I sit?"

She nodded, and Angel took the seat Dylan had vacated. She took out her phone.

"I'm using my notes app so I can get what you guys need. Is there any particular style you like when it comes to furniture?"

"Not really. I just do comfortable stuff when I can."

"Comfortable, got it. And Raine, does she like princess stuff with lots of pink and purple?"

She laughed and then winced. Her lungs were still sore. "Raine is a tomboy. She hates pink and purple. Even when she was little-little, she'd take her clothes off if I tried to dress her in those colors."

"So what does she like?"

“She loves fairies. She doesn’t love all the frilly dressy stuff, but she does love castles and fairies and fairytales.”

“Got it, girly, but not frilly girly. Can I go ham on the pink in Annabelle’s room?”

“Sure. She doesn’t know what she does and doesn’t like yet.”

“And what about Cash?”

“He’s big on Matchbox cars and the movie *Cars*. I think he’s watched that movie fifty times.”

“My son loves it, too.” She smiled. “Little boys and their cars. It’s a universal language for them.”

“If you’re shopping, can you get him a Matchbox car? We’re all worried about him. He hasn’t said a word since he woke up.”

“I will. Maybe having something familiar will help him. I can’t even imagine what he’s going through.”

“I hate seeing him just stare and not say a word. I sat by his bed for days praying his heart would keep beating, and now all I want is to hear him say mama. Or anything, really, as long as he starts talking again.”

“He will. It’ll take some time. We all process trauma in our own ways. He’s breathing, and that’s all you can ask for at the present.”

Hailey nodded. She was so very grateful to see his chest rise and fall and watch his heartbeat get stronger and stronger every single day.

“Dylan said all their toys were lost. Is there a particular toy we can get Raine and Annabelle?”

“Raine had a stuffed bunny, and there was a little white stuffed dog Annabelle chewed on.”

“I’ll look for one and bring everything back as soon as we can.”

“Thank you. I’m not in a good state of mind right now, but my daddy taught me better manners than I’ve used. I’m sorry,

and sincerely, thank you.”

“It’s fine. I understand more than you think. I’m going to go grab the girls and get to shopping. We’ll get things that are in stock so the house can be furnished by tonight and Cole will stop yapping about his back.”

“How...”

“Viktor, Conner, Mason, and Dimitri are all here. They’re going to rent a U-Haul for all the furniture. I’ll work on bedrooms first and then get the rest of the house put together. Is there anything Raine and Cash like to eat? We can bring them back treats when we bring the toys.”

“They love ice cream.”

“Do you think the hospital would let us bring them some Chicken McNuggets from McDonald’s?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. Raine was shot through the stomach and the bullet lodged near her spine. She’s on a liquid diet until gastro clears her.”

“Bringing Cash something she likes will only upset her, then. I’ll bring them back ice cream when I come. I’ll get out of your hair. Try to eat your waffles. You’re going to need all the strength you can get to take care of those babies.”

Hailey nodded and watched Angel leave. She looked at her waffles, and her stomach didn’t even grumble. She’d lost her appetite, but she knew Angel was right. So she picked up her fork and forced food into her mouth. She had to stay strong for the kids, and that meant eating.

It was all she could do.

Chapter Thirteen



“It’s going to be fine.”

Everyone kept telling her that, but how could it be fine? It had been over a week since Cash woke up, and he wasn’t talking. Raine was in a wheelchair and cried every time anyone tried to get her to walk. Annabelle was home, and she hadn’t seen her since the day Cole left with her. Nothing was fine.

Hailey felt like curling up into a ball and crying her eyes out, only she couldn’t. Mothers had to soldier through for their children. She had to do her best to smile and keep reassuring them it was going to be okay. She didn’t tell them everything was fine because that was a big, fat lie, but she could say things would get better. They had to.

“Come on, I’ll wheel you up to the children’s room and we can all go out together.”

She looked up at Dylan, and he seemed confident. The hospital said they could all go home. She had a feeling they only kept her for the kids because she wouldn’t have left anyway, not while two of her babies were still in the hospital.

“You’re sure it’s safe to go outside?”

“I have men posted up at every single exit. We’re leaving through the back. There are no reporters back there, and I’ve had men scouting the area for the last half an hour. It’s safe.”

“And the car? You’re sure they can’t shoot us in the car?”

“The car is bulletproof. They can shoot, but as long as we’re mobile, we’re safe.”

“What happens in they shoot out the tires?”

“Then any of the other four vehicles will work to take out the shooter. I’ve got it covered.”

She was still terrified to step foot outside this hospital. The what-ifs kept running round and round through her head.

“We got Annabelle out safely, so trust us to get the rest of you out safely.”

“Are we ready to go?” The nurse walked in, smiling cheerfully and not reading the room. How could she smile when they were potentially walking into a death trap?

“Yes. We’re heading upstairs to collect the children, and we’ll all go out together.”

“Sounds like a plan. You have your discharge papers, and they’ve gone over everything to watch for with you and the children?”

“They have,” Dylan answered when she didn’t.

“Good.” She went to grab the handles on Hailey’s wheelchair, and Dylan stopped her.

“I’ll do that. You walk ahead and hold the elevator for us.”

“That’s not policy...”

“It is today.”

She looked like she was ready to argue and then changed her mind. She walked out of the room, and Dylan took hold of her wheelchair.

“Here we go, sweetheart. We’re fine here.”

Here, yes, they were fine. But out there? Where Josh could get to them? She wouldn’t be fine until she knew he was in custody.

Dylan kept up his chit chat as they boarded the elevator and when they got off on the pediatric floor. She didn’t really hear

any of it, but that wasn't the point. His voice kept her from spiraling.

The kids were sitting up and dressed. Cash had on a warm blue sweater and jeans while Raine was wearing a dark green sweatshirt and black joggers. Her incisions were still healing, and jeans were not her friend just yet.

"You guys ready to go?" Dylan asked, parking her chair beside Cash's bed.

Raine, her dark hair braided in pigtails, nodded. Cash didn't say anything. He just stared at her, his blue eyes clear and unemotional. It was like he was numb and didn't feel anything. She was really worried about him. The therapist at the hospital talked to him every day and said to give it time. He had to deal with his trauma in his own way. When he was ready to talk, he would.

Gregg came in whistling a tune only he knew. He reminded her so much of a pirate that she shook her head. It was the beard. It looked almost painted on, and his hair was cut short on the sides, but it was longer on the top and pushed to one side. He could literally step onto the screen with Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and he'd look like he belonged.

He grinned at Cash. "You ready to go home, little man?"

Cash only stared, but Gregg didn't let it deter him.

"I heard from a little birdie that you like the movie *Cars*. My nephew loves it, too, and he sent me something special to give to you. It's his own personal Lightning McQueen. He said he hoped it made you feel better." Gregg laid the red car in Cash's lap and then took his little hand and put it on the car.

Hailey watched from the corner of her eye and saw his fingers close around the car and clutch it tight. That was the first sign of any kind of interest he'd shown since he woke up. Thank God. Her little boy was still in there somewhere, just afraid. Maybe his own Lightning McQueen would give him the courage he needed to come out of his silence.

"Jarrod is on his way up. As soon as..."

"I'm here."

He strode over to Raine and squatted in front of her wheelchair. “Rainy, my little lady, are you ready to go see your new room?”

“New room?” Her brown eyes were open and curious.

“We’re going to go live somewhere else for a little while,” Hailey explained. “You get your own room.”

“Really?”

Jarrood nodded. “I heard you liked fairies.”

“Yeah. Tinkerbell is my favorite.”

“From *Peter Pan*?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, there might be some fairy magic in your new room.”

Her eyes got really wide and looked to Hailey. “Really, Mama?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen your room yet.”

“Let’s go!” she demanded, and Jarrood laughed.

“Your wish is our command, Rainy girl.” He stood and took her wheelchair handles. “We’re geared up and ready to go outside.”

Dylan came and sat next to Cash. The little boy looked up, his gaze cautious. “I’m going to pick you up and put you in your mama’s lap. Is that okay?”

The little boy only stared at him. Dylan gently picked him up and sat him in her lap. Her arms wrapped around him automatically.

“We’re moving out,” Dylan said, and that was when she noticed he had some kind of earpiece in. Must be one of those fancy Bluetooth radios.

“Hold on tight, baby boy.” Dylan handed her a soft throw, and she draped it over Cash. She didn’t want him to look and worry. Raine seemed to have gotten over any trace of fear in the moment with her excitement over fairy magic. It was a

blessing, but Hailey had heard her wake up screaming enough to know the fear would come back.

“When we get downstairs, Jarrod, you pick up Raine and move out first. Lucien is outside the door waiting, and Viktor is holding open the SUV doors.”

“Who’s driving?” Dylan asked Gregg.

“Conner.”

Hailey noticed how relieved Dylan looked. She remembered the name Conner, but she couldn’t place him. She’d probably met him over the last few weeks.

Gregg gave the order, and they all filed out, Jarrod first, then Dylan, and Gregg took up the rear. They followed the same order when they got off the elevator and through the kitchen. The sunlight was harsh, and she blinked, but before she could do much more than that, she was picked up and bundled into the car. The doors closed, and she blinked again. Dylan sat beside her. The back doors closed, and she saw Raine and Jarrod in the back, Jarrod buckling her into a car seat. Raine might be five, but she was tiny and still fit into one of the larger car seats.

“Hailey, we need to put Cash into his seat.” Dylan motioned to the car seat. “If something happens, he’ll be safer strapped in.”

She nodded and pulled the blanket back. Her little one’s face was pale and blank, sweat beading his forehead. Dylan noticed and leaned over. “Cash, you’re safe. No one is going to hurt you, your mama, or your sister. I promise. I’m not letting anyone hurt you again.”

His whole body shook, and Dylan cursed. “Conner...”

“I see it. Just make sure you’re ready to catch him.”

Dylan sighed heavily and leaned over, pulling the seatbelt across both her and Cash. “We’ve got a long ride ahead of us, so the best thing everyone can do is try to take a nap.”

“How long?”

“A couple of hours. We wanted you out of this county and in a place where police might respond a little differently than the ones here. We’ve already spoken with both the local PD and the state police. Everything is sorted.”

A couple of hours. That actually made her feel better knowing they wouldn’t be anywhere near this police department. Outside of Detective Andsley, she didn’t trust any of them.

The vehicle pulled out, and she tried to keep herself from tensing up because it would only scare Cash more. He had the car Gregg gave him in a death grip. Raine was chatting away with Jarrod about fairies and how they lived in flower gardens. She took several deep breaths and tried her best to control her emotions from spilling over. Neither of her kids needed to see her panicking. Bulletproof. The car was bulletproof. They were going to be okay.

Minutes slipped away, and soon she felt Cash relax. She looked down to see him sleeping. Thank God. Hopefully, he’d sleep through the entire ride and wouldn’t have to worry about moving out of the car and into the house.

It wasn’t long before the lull of the car ride sniped Raine, and she fell asleep mid-sentence. Jarrod grinned and pulled a light blanket over her.

“She’s good at talking.”

“She’s usually very quiet. She must like you.”

“Eh, I’ve spent the last few weeks trying to cheer her up. She’s just used to me.”

“You’ve all been very kind to us.”

“No one here takes kindly to any man laying hands on a person, be it a man, woman, or child. We got you.”

“That’s what the Viking keeps saying.”

“The Viking?” Conner asked from the driver’s seat.

“This one.” Hailey pointed to Dylan. “He reminds me of a Viking.”

“Hmm...” Conner hummed. “Do you mind if I turn some music on? I’ll keep it low. It helps me concentrate.”

“No, please do.”

“When did you start listening to country music?” Gregg went to change the channel, and Conner caught his hand without ever looking away from the road.

“Since Becca blares it constantly. It’s hard to not get used to. I blame Mason too. She converted him, and he’s determined to convert the rest of us. Don’t touch my radio.”

“Fine. Can we get food?”

“You just ate.”

“I’m still hungry.”

“You’ll live until we get there. I’m not stopping this vehicle until we arrive at our drop-off.”

Hailey had never listened to much country music before, but she soon found her eyes drooping to the slow, soulful sounds, and before long, she too drifted to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen



Dylan got out of the SUV and stretched his legs. They'd been in the car for a little over three hours. Hailey and the kids were still sound asleep, and all the guys had been careful when getting out of the vehicles so as not to wake them. Even though they'd gotten out of the hospital, they still needed to rest as much as possible.

"Is everything ready?" Dylan nodded toward the house when Cole came out to greet them.

"Yeah. We actually rented the house next door for the rest of us as well."

"Kade approved that?"

"Fuck, no. I rented it myself. I don't want us to be too far away in case some shit goes down. And we need the bedrooms. This is a five-bedroom house, so there's only one extra bedroom for whoever is catching some Zs when not on duty. The house next door has five as well, so I just rented it for us. I have the money, so it's no big deal."

Dylan was grateful he'd found this company to work for. All the men and women he'd gotten to know had good hearts and morals that matched his own. They were all going out of their way with little to no pay to protect this family. KSI was built around good people.

“That place was furnished, since I just rented it from the family who lived there. I explained what we were doing, leaving out most details and names. They agreed to help out.”

Cole used to be a Miami-Dade detective down in Florida. He knew exactly what he could and couldn't say, so Dylan trusted anything he would have said to the family.

“Good man, Cole.”

He just shrugged. “Wade is inside with Annabelle. He is not her favorite person, so I'm going to head back inside. I just wanted to come out and let you know about the security house. Mason set up a command center for us in there before he left.”

“Why isn't Wade her favorite person?”

“He's uncomfortable around babies. Said he was afraid of dropping one on its head. I left her in the playpen surrounded by toys, but I don't want to leave her alone for long. Wade will have a heart attack if she falls over.”

Dylan laughed, remembering the first time Molly had fallen over when she was sitting up. He was sure she'd hit her head and raced her to the ER. The doctor there had been ever so kind, but she'd basically told him he'd overreacted. It was easy to do that when you knew next to nothing about babies, so he felt Wade's pain.

“Area is secure.” Gregg walked over, listening to whatever the person on the other side of the earpiece was saying. “Perimeter is set, and we're good to move the subjects.”

“Let me wake her so she doesn't freak out like she did with the ladies.”

“I heard about that. Angel felt so bad.”

“I talked to her before she went back to New York. She understands it wasn't about her, but about the situation Hailey was in.”

“I appreciate you did that.” Viktor slapped him on the back. “Kade was beside himself with how she was feeling.”

“She understood. Let me wake them, and then we'll get them settled.”

Dylan opened the back door and climbed in, closing the door behind him. He didn't want to wake her or the kids with the sun shining into an open door. It might make them feel unsafe.

"Hailey." He spoke softly, but he didn't touch her. "Hailey, we're here. It's time to wake up."

It wasn't Hailey who woke up, but Cash. He rubbed his eyes and looked around, frowning. Then he saw his mom and his gaze moved to Dylan.

"Hey, little man. We're at your new home. You'll be safe here."

The kid stared at him, his gaze solemn, and it broke Dylan's heart. No child should ever know what it felt like to have someone hurt them with the intent of killing them.

"I know you don't trust me yet, but I promise I'm going to take care of you, your mama, and your sisters."

He gave him a slight smile and gently nudged Hailey since she seemed to be in a sound sleep. It wasn't enough of a nudge to cause alarm, but it would hopefully wake her up.

Her eyes fluttered, and she came awake slowly. Her dark brown eyes were sleepy and slightly confused as she looked around. He waited for her to realize where she was before saying anything else. Her gaze hit Cash first and then Raine before turning to him.

"We're here," he said softly. "The guys are waiting outside to help everyone inside. And no, you can't carry Cash. You're not supposed to pick up anything heavier than five pounds until the doctor says you can."

"He knows me, and he knows Jarrod. One of us will take him inside with you right beside us. It's getting late, so I want to get us out of the SUV and inside so the kids can see their new rooms and get settled."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but he put a finger against her lips. She glared.

“Cash, I’m told your bed is a Lightning McQueen bed and your walls are decorated with a big race track and pictures of all your favorite characters from the movie. And there’s a big old racetrack set up with lots and lots of cars to play with.”

His eyes were wide, and it was the first hint of excitement Dylan had seen since he woke up. If the expense of creating a fun room did this for Cash, he’d eat it and never say a word.

“I want to see my fairy magic,” Raine mumbled around a yawn.

“I’m going to get out and set up your wheelchair, munchkin. Then either me or Jarrod will wheel you inside. You okay with that?”

“Can’t Mama do it?”

“Mama is still healing like you are. She can’t lift anything or push anything right now.”

“Okay.”

He reached over and tweaked her nose. “So do you want me or Jarrod to race inside with you?”

“Jarrod! He knows how to do wheelies!”

Hailey rolled her eyes, but she was smiling, which was all Dylan could ask for. He got out and went to the back of the SUV to unload the child-sized wheelchair.

“Jarrod, you’re up since you know how to do wheelies.”

Jarrod grinned and took the chair from him as Dylan shut the trunk.

“You’re attached.”

Dylan blinked but didn’t deny Viktor’s statement.

“Is this going to be a problem?” Conner asked, coming to stand beside his brother. The two of them looked uncannily similar today. Usually, Conner gave off dangerous vibes, but whenever he was around Hailey and the kids, that side of him disappeared. Viktor told him it reminded him of the old Conner, the person he’d been before that last tour of duty. Dylan wasn’t sure if this was an act or if that person still

existed, but he didn't want to bust Viktor's bubble of hope either.

"I'm keeping her."

Both men blinked.

"You sure?" Viktor asked after a moment.

Dylan nodded. "More sure than I've ever been of anything. I just need to convince them that they want to keep me."

"Well, you best make use of the time we have here. Show them the man who's not the ice king you show to everyone and be the man who's hiding underneath that cold-ass exterior."

"Pot, kettle, black?" he asked Conner.

"I am a cold motherfucker. That isn't an exterior. It's just fact."

And that right there was why he was worried Conner was going to disappoint his brother. He was colder inside than Dylan.

He waved it off. "Let's get everyone inside. Then we need to worry about food. Gregg's been complaining since we left the hospital and claimed I'm starving him."

"According to Gregg, we're always starving him." Viktor rolled his shoulders. "Do we do takeout, or do we cook? The house is fully stocked with groceries and snacks."

"I'll cook," Conner offered. "Raine's still on a limited diet, isn't she?"

"Soft foods only," Dylan agreed. "Nothing really solid like meat. Mashed potatoes, things like that."

"I'll get dinner started as soon as we get everyone inside. Gregg can go order takeout for the crew at the other house. I don't want to overwhelm Cash. He needs things to be quiet and calm right now."

Dylan had a feeling Conner knew more about Cash's shell-shocked demeanor because of whatever it was that happened to him during his last tour of duty with the Marines. Viktor

never talked about it except to say his brother came back a different man.

“Thanks. I know Hailey will appreciate it.”

He walked around to the other side of the SUV and opened the door. He was afraid Cash wouldn't let him carry him, and he didn't want to traumatize the kids further, but Hailey literally couldn't pack him.

They both blinked at him when the sunlight hit their faces, and he moved so he blocked the sun. “Okay, little man. Mama can't pack you, so I'm going to. I know it's scary, but I'm not going to hurt you.”

Hailey started to say something but closed her mouth when Cash reached for Dylan. He didn't say anything, but he reached for him. It shocked her to her core. Cash had flinched against anyone touching him but her, and now here he was not only letting the Viking carry him, but he *reached* for him.

Dylan looked just as shocked as she felt, but he wisely said nothing either. He stepped back and held out his hand to her. She stared at it for a long minute, very aware that not only Dylan waited, but that Cash was watching. It came down to if she trusted him. Part of her screamed run, but the part that had watched him take care of them all for the last few weeks said take his hand.

She took his hand.

“Good girl.”

He helped her out of the vehicle, and it took a moment to steady herself. She wasn't as strong as she liked and her legs were wobbly, but he waited patiently for her to get her bearings. He was always so patient.

When she was able to stand on her own, she looked past Dylan to where Jarrod was running and pushing Raine, doing wheelies in the street with her. Her little girl was giggling like a fool. It was such a good sound to hear.

When she turned around to thank Dylan, her gaze hit the house and she blinked. And blinked again. It was a two-story structure with a gabled roof. The wood and stone exterior

blended in naturally with the area around it. It was quite possibly one of the most beautiful houses she'd ever seen.

"We're in a gated community," Dylan said as his hand settled on her back, and he urged her toward the house. "It's an extra layer of protection. The home next door has been rented out as well to house all the guards. They've set up a mobile command center for the security system."

"There's cameras inside?" She wasn't sure she liked the idea of people watching her. It felt so invasive.

"No. The homeowners wouldn't give us permission to do a full system. The doors and windows are wired to the security system so if someone breaks in, we'll know about it. There are cameras outside, and we've also tapped into the community cams to give us a broader view of the neighborhood."

"So no one will be watching me inside?"

"We'll be inside with you."

"I..." She fumbled trying to explain what she wanted to say and not sound ungrateful.

"What is it?" he asked, slowing his walk to match hers as she made it to the front porch steps.

"I...I'm not sure having so many people around all the time inside is a good idea. I don't want the kids feel like they're in danger every second."

"That's fine. We can post up outside and no one will disturb you inside. We'd planned on having at least one guard with you at all times, but if it makes you uncomfortable, we can adjust our plans."

"You're not staying inside with us?"

She watched her little boy stiffen and look up at Dylan, his eyes wide and alarmed. Maybe he wanted Dylan inside as much as she did.

"I can. It's up to you."

"I'd rather you be inside. We're used to you."

“Then I’ll stay inside.” He caught her when she stumbled going up the steps. “Be careful.”

She opened the door into a big entryway that led to a massive, open-concept living space. Conner stood at the stove, his back turned to them while his brother was chopping vegetables. A large table sat to the side, with a highchair against one wall. A Pack ‘n Play had been set up in the living room, and her eyes went there looking for Annabelle. Only she wasn’t there.

“Is Annabelle asleep?”

“No.” Viktor looked up. “She took a huge shit...crap, dammit. I’m sorry.”

Hailey smiled. “Is she getting her diaper changed?”

“Cole tried to talk me into it, but I said I’d changed my fair share. He convinced me to play a game of rock, paper, scissors for it, but there’s no beating the master.”

“Why don’t we go show Cash his room?” Dylan suggested and turned toward the stairs, waiting for her. He stayed behind her as they walked up the stairs, and she knew it wasn’t because he was ogling her ass. He didn’t want her to fall. A small, hidden-away part of her actually wanted him to admire her peach. She had a decent figure even after giving birth to three kids.

Dylan started opening doors. The first one was Raine’s room. There was a giant tree painted on the wall surrounded by a garden full of fairies with a castle in the distance. She was going to love it.

The next door was open. Cole was laughing at Annabelle as he tried to put her tights back on. It was adorable.

“Hey,” she said, going into the room. The second Annabelle heard her, she started babbling and reaching for her.

“I see how it is,” Cole told the giggling baby. “You hear Mommy, and Uncle Cole just gets shoved to the curb.” He wrangled her tights and then handed her to Hailey. “She’s fresh and clean. I even put her in a new dress since her snack ended up all over her.”

“Thank you.” Hailey took her baby and hugged her tight. “Mama missed you, buggy.” She nuzzled her nose into baby soft hair. “You smell good.”

“That would be thanks to this cornstarch baby powder. Viktor said not to get regular.”

“The regular can get in her lungs, and it’ll kill her.”

“What?” His horrified expression mimicked how she felt when the pediatrician told her that. She’d thrown it out as soon as she’d gotten home.

“It coats their lungs and there is no getting it off.”

“Why hasn’t it been banned?”

“They have the cornstarch version.”

“I fucking need a notebook to keep track of this shit.”

“Language,” she reminded him, stepping back even as she did so.

“Sorry.” He looked up and noticed her backing away from him. Understanding dawned, and he sighed. “I’m not going to hit you, Miss Roberts. I’d rather cut off my own arm than hurt a woman or child. My mother taught me better.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s going to take me a little while to get used to having you around. What happened to me is not your fault, and I am getting better every single day.”

“I’ll go on downstairs and leave you to it.” As he passed Dylan, he reached out to ruffle Cash’s hair, but the little boy hid his face in Dylan’s neck. Cole’s expression saddened ever so slightly, but then he walked out, and they heard his footsteps going down the stairs.

Annabelle started babbling, and Dylan pointed to the rocking chair. “You’re not supposed to be carrying her. She’s too heavy for you.”

“But…”

“No buts. You won’t be any good to any of them if you strain any of the internal injuries that are still healing.”

“I want to show Cash his room.”

He opened his mouth, and she knew his first instinct was to yell for Cole to come back, but he thought better of it. “Little man, if I put you down, can you walk? I need to hold Annabelle so your mama doesn’t hurt herself. Can you do that?”

Cash nodded, and Dylan gently put him down. He took Annabelle and motioned for Hailey to go out and start opening doors. The room right across the hall was Cash’s.

As soon as he saw it, he ran inside, his eyes wide. A huge racetrack was set up on a table with bins full of Matchbox cars and other toys. Every character from *Cars* was stickered on the walls amid the racetrack that had been painted at the perfect height for Cash. There was a table with chairs, a bookcase full to bursting with books, a chest, and a small TV stand with a TV. A DVD player was hooked up to the TV with a brand-new copy of *Cars* beside it. He ran over to it and hugged it to his chest.

“You like it?” she asked.

He nodded and held the DVD out to her, then plopped into the big bean bag in front of the TV.

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” Dylan said when they’d gotten Cash settled and watching his favorite cartoon.

“*Cars* is his thing. If anything can settle him, it’s that.”

“I guess. Let’s go downstairs and see what is keeping Raine from seeing her fairy room.”

They walked back down the stairs to hear Raine telling Jarrod, Viktor, and Conner all about fairies and why you could only see them at night in the garden when they would glow because of the fairy dust their wings shed.

All three men were cooking and nodding like she was telling them a state secret. They were all very good with her kids, and she appreciated that.

“Raine.”

Raine turned to look at Hailey, and she grinned. “Mama, did you know there is a big garden in the back yard? I just saw it. Do you think fairies live there?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Do you want to see your room? I peeked at it, and there’s so much fairy magic.”

Her eyes grew as big as saucers, and her voice dropped so low it was hard to hear. “Do you think fairies live in my room now?”

Hailey squatted down in front of her. “Maybe. There’s this big tree painted on the wall. I bet you it might draw them up there while you sleep.”

“Let’s go!”

“Hold up there, munchkin.” Jarrod reached down and scooped her up. “Viktor, can you bring her wheelchair up?”

Hailey glanced between Dylan and Jarrod.

“Go on up,” he told her. “We’ll keep this one out of trouble.”

Hailey nodded, thankful that everyone here was so kind. Her kids would heal faster and learn to trust men again thanks to all these guys who appeared out of nowhere.

She followed Jarrod and Viktor up the stairs and realized for the first time in six months, she felt safe.

It was a feeling she wouldn’t take for granted.

Chapter Fifteen



The next three days passed in a little bit of a blur for Hailey as they all settled into the house. The kids mostly stayed in their rooms except for Annabelle. She rolled around downstairs with Hailey. Everyone stayed out of her way, and while Dylan remained in the house, he was in the office saying he was catching up on work.

Whenever the guards changed shift, they'd always call to let her know where they were on the street watching the house. They'd arranged for physical therapy to come to Raine, who still cried when they asked her to try to walk. Jarrod told her to leave it to him. She had no idea what he had up his sleeve, but she hoped it was better than PT trying to cajole her daughter.

It was late, and she'd just put all the kids to bed, and instead of going to her room, she went back downstairs. The day had been long, and she was exhausted, but her mind was too busy to sleep.

The social worker had been by to check the house, and they'd been assured it would be their house until she got on her feet. The rent had been paid for a year, which impressed the social worker. The older woman took one look at all of them, and she'd seen the clinical expression crack slightly. They'd had a long talk about what brought her here. Hailey thought the woman had been impressed she left the second she'd been hit. She told Hailey it took real strength to walk

away, considering who the Rivers family was. Even here, four counties away, they knew who Josh was.

But her home visit had passed, and she saw no reason she'd lose custody if pressed. A job would come when she healed enough to get back out there. It settled some of Hailey's nerves.

"Can't sleep?"

Startled, she saw Dylan on the couch, looking back at her as she stepped off the staircase.

"I'm tired, but I'm too tired to sleep, if that makes sense."

"More than you know." He gestured to the couch. "I was getting ready to find something to watch. You're welcome to join me if you like."

"I'd like that, but let me grab something to drink."

"Viktor brought over his famous strawberry cheesecake. It's in the fridge if you're hungry."

"Do you want a piece?"

"I was thinking about it, but I thought you might want to save it for dessert for tomorrow night."

"Nah. If there's sugar in the house, Gregg will ferret it out."

"You're learning," Dylan said. "Unfortunately, there is no hiding food from Gregg. He has a nose like a bloodhound when it comes to sugar."

She took out some plates and silverware and then cut them both a generous slice of the delicious-looking dessert. He was right about one thing. If Gregg saw this, it would be gone before anyone was the wiser. She could eat, but Gregg out-ate her at every turn. The man inhaled food like he was a human waste disposal.

Dylan thanked her, taking his plate as she joined him on the couch. "What are we watching?"

"Have you seen *The Lincoln Lawyer*? Gabe recommended it. Said it's the perfect mix of suspense, mystery, and legal drama."

“Like *Law And Order*? I love that show.”

“Then you’ll probably like this.” She watched as he navigated to Netflix and pulled up the show. It did sound interesting based on the little snippet on the details page.

“Fuck, this is good.”

She looked over to see him shoving another bite of the cheesecake in his mouth. His tongue shot out and licked the strawberry syrup off his lip. Her hormones flared to life, and she looked away, feeling her cheeks heat. Agreeing to watch a movie with him had been a bad idea. She should be worried about getting her life together and not wondering how soft his lips might be or if they were as hard as the muscles she’d glimpsed when he came in from his run most mornings.

Look, she might not trust her judgment, but she wasn’t blind. The Viking was gorgeous with an athlete’s physique.

“Do you feel up to talking?”

If it distracted her from her dangerous thoughts, then she was all for it. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything you want to share, really.”

She frowned. Why did this feel about so much more than what he was asking for?

“I don’t know what to say. I’m not a very interesting person.”

“Sure you are. But let’s go simple. Do you have any brothers or sisters aside from the one you told me about before?”

“No. It was just me and Harvey growing up. Mom died when I was about seven. She was in an accident. Icy road, and she skidded and crashed headfirst into the concrete dividers on the interstate. Harvey and I were close when we were little, but then he got hooked on drugs and all that went away.”

“Drugs are a battle none of us are equipped to force a person to fight. They have to want to get clean.”

“I know. Dad and I tried so hard, wasted so much money on private rehabs that were supposed to be better than the state-run places, but it never stuck. The drugs were more important to him than his family was.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Then tell me a little more about growing up as the only girl in the family.”

She snorted. “Ever have a five-hundred-pound gorilla following you around on dates?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“That’s what it felt like every time I left the house. Dad usually followed to make sure I wasn’t getting into something I couldn’t handle. Didn’t really matter, since I got pregnant at seventeen. All the spying in the world doesn’t prevent a teenager who thinks they know more than the adult from getting into things way over their heads.”

“How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Don’t have that in your files?”

“I’m sure we do. I just never looked.”

“I’m twenty-three, soon to be twenty-four.”

“How soon?”

“My birthday is in November.”

“So, you had Raine when you were eighteen?”

“Yeah. Dad insisted I finish school, so he hired our neighbor to watch her until he got off work or I came home. Her daddy, Stevie Canton, he was a decent person. Once I graduated, we moved in together in the apartment I got kicked out of. Cash came along, and we were talking about getting married, but...”

“But?” he prompted when she didn’t say anything.

“But I didn’t want to marry him. He was a great guy, worked hard, and loved his kids. But that was all. I liked him well enough, but I didn’t love him. I didn’t know if that was

enough to get married, you know? Sure, we had two kids, but should you marry someone just because of the kids?"

"Typically, that doesn't work out so well," Dylan said. "Most marriages where people stayed for the kids ended up with more damage done to the kids than if they'd just gotten divorced. All the fighting, it can be hard."

"That's the thing. We never fought. Not ever. I'd gripe and try to start an argument, but he never took the bait. He was, in all honesty, one of the best men I knew."

"He loved you."

"He did, but I didn't love him back."

"You said he died of a heart attack?"

"No one knew he had a heart condition. He had a massive heart attack at work, and he died before the ambulance even arrived at the worksite. Annabelle was three and Cash barely a year old. Buggy cried for her daddy for weeks, but Cash didn't really understand. He was too little. Eventually things got better and the kids stopped looking for him and Buggy stopped asking."

"That had to be hard."

"As hard as the day I had to tell her that her daddy went to Heaven, and he wouldn't be coming home."

"When did you meet Annabelle's father?"

"My friend, Josie, talked me into going out. I'd been doing nothing but working and taking care of the kids. Stevie had been gone for almost a year at this point. Dad told me to go out, and I wanted to have a little fun, so I did. We went down to the local bar, and I met him there. He was lots of fun. A goofball, and I needed to laugh at that point. I may not have loved Stevie, but we were good friends, and his passing hurt."

"Understandable."

"There was one night where the condom broke. I thought it would be fine. But everyone's right, it only takes one time for accidents to happen. And he wanted nothing to do with any baby. So I told him it was fine and he didn't need to do

anything. He left and never looked back. I did text him when she was born, and nothing. I found out later he saw my text since he was at the bar. One of my friends was there, and she saw him looking at the text. He went home with his new girlfriend. I haven't heard a peep from him since the night I told him I was pregnant."

"I remember."

"I told you that?"

He nodded. "Don't worry. You've had a lot to deal with the last few weeks. I'd forget half of what I said too."

Huh.

"How did you meet your wife?"

"We met in line at Subway when we were in college. We had one at the student union. Her friend pushed her, and she fell into me. She told me later she'd had a crush and never said anything, so Caroline took matters into her own hands and pushed her into me. She was so flustered." He laughed at the memory. "Best thing Caroline ever did for either of us. She was Allison's maid of honor at the wedding."

"Did you get married after college?"

"Yes, her father insisted, but I would have married her while we were freshmen and when she got pregnant a year later. We moved out of the dorms and into a small apartment."

"How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-nine, soon to be thirty."

"How soon?"

"I'm a Halloween baby."

"Really?" She sat up and almost dropped her partially empty plate. "Halloween is my favorite holiday."

"Don't most women love Christmas?"

"Christmas is Christmas. You can't dress up and go to haunted houses and deck out your front yard to look like your

very own haunted house. There are no scary movie marathons...”

He laughed again, and the sound ghosted over her skin like a caress, and she shivered.

“Are you cold? I can turn the heat up.”

“God, no. If you do that, the house will heat up, and it’ll never cool down tomorrow.”

“Is Georgia always this hot?”

“It’s not hot.”

“It’s October, and it was eighty outside today.”

“That’s not hot.”

“Woman, I’m from LA, and it never felt like this.”

“It’s the humidity. The wet heat sticks to you. To me, this is actually cool.”

“I’ve been in New York for a couple of years, and I guess I got used to the cooler weather. We’d be in the high sixties or low seventies right now.”

“Now, that’s cold.”

“Cold is when it drops below freezing.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Nah, I thought that too, until I learned what it was like to be able to go outside without sweat dripping down your spine.”

“I guess you can get used to anything.”

“Have you ever thought about leaving Georgia?”

“I was thinking about it the last few days. It might be easier to get away from Josh if I moved, but I can’t afford it right now. I barely have a hundred dollars in the bank, and it would take thousands of dollars to move.”

“Any place in particular you’ve thought about moving to?”

“Not really. Like I said, it’s just a thought that’s a dream until I can save some money.”

“New York’s a good place.”

“I’m not sure raising kids in the city is a good thing. It’s also really expensive from what I’ve heard.”

“If you’re referring to New York City, I’d agree with you. Our office is located there, but most of us live out of the city where it’s not nearly as expensive and has good schools. Plus, you get a true four-seasons experience. The summers can be really hot, and the winters can be really cold, but fall and spring are absolutely perfect. I thought I’d hate it, but it’s where I ran to get away from my memories. I’ve grown to love it.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Do you ever think about going to college?”

“I did two semesters online, but once I got pregnant with Cash, I had to go back to work full time. And then Stevie died, and I got pregnant again... There was never any time to go back, not even online.”

“What were you studying?”

“I wanted to be a teacher. My mom was a teacher, and I guess following in her footsteps was my way of making her proud.”

“But is it something you want to do? You have to do something for the right reasons.”

“It is. I want to be an elementary school teacher. I think they make a big difference in whether a kid goes on to like school later or not. You get to instill in them the building blocks for later. Sometimes I’d volunteer in Raine’s classroom, and it only made me want to be a teacher more.”

“Then that’s what you should do, no matter how long it takes to earn your degree.”

“Why did you want to be a cop?”

“I wanted to help people, and I saw the police force as the ultimate way to do that.”

“The police have gotten a shit reputation the last few years.”

“Agreed. Seeing the things some of them have done...” He broke off and shuddered. “It’s disgusting. The actions of a few are giving the whole department a bad reputation. I’m glad the force is looking at itself more and dealing with internal drama and cutting out the bad apples.”

“I haven’t had the best interactions with police myself, but men like Detective Andsley give me hope there are a few good ones left.”

Dylan reached for her plate the same time she did, and his fingers brushed hers. The blush that lit up her face warmed him. She liked him. He knew it, but he didn’t want to press her on it and scare her away. Just sitting here with him and talking to him was a huge deal.

He took it from her and set it on the coffee table along with his. She was watching him warily, like she assumed he was going to try something. As much as he wanted to kiss her, he kept that urge to himself. Scaring her when she was being so open with him would be a bad thing that might set back any progress he’d made with her.

“My sister still works as an officer. She just got promoted to patrol sergeant in Santa Monica. She’s doing a great job at instructing her officers on how to properly deal with situations, and she’s fired a few assholes.”

“Is she older than you?”

“Only by a year.”

“You must be close.”

“We are. My mom raised us and my older sister after my father left her when we were all just babies. It’s why we respect single parents so much. We watched our mother work herself to the bone to pay the bills, put food on the table, and still manage to get us a few of the things we wanted.”

“It can be really hard to do that.”

“Yeah.” He pulled a throw off the back of the couch and spread it over her. She was still shivering, and as much as he didn’t want to turn the AC up, he’d do it.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

“So, ready to watch this series? Maybe we can watch an episode or two a night? There’re two seasons.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

He smiled and hit play on episode one. He’d take the small steps and be happy with them. He settled back and let himself feel a little joy for the moment, and it felt good after feeling nothing for so long.

Chapter Sixteen



Dylan paced in the office. They'd noticed a dark sedan that had driven by the gated community several times over the last week. At first, it hadn't been a cause for concern. Lots of people drove past the community on their way to and from work, to the grocery store, and for any number of various other reasons. They noticed the car slowed down when it passed the community on every trip, and then yesterday, it had parked across the street from the entrance. The driver had sat there for several hours and watched people come and go. It raised an alarm.

They ran the plate, and it came back to a Laura Trevor. She was an accountant who worked at a firm in Atlanta. They'd found out she did a lot of work from home and was currently on vacation. The police had been alerted, and as soon as the patrol car showed up, the sedan left before officers could speak with the driver.

They'd come by the house, and Dylan had handed over the footage of the car and the officers agreed it was odd behavior. They were going to make sure a patrol car passed by the community every hour on the hour for the next few days. Conner didn't think it was enough, and honestly, neither did Dylan. He was worried they'd get inside the community. Things happened. Things they couldn't control, like a friend giving out the gate code to someone who shouldn't have it.

The Rivers family could easily pay for that information. All they needed was a list of names of the people who owned homes here. Money talked when threats didn't.

"I can't!" He heard the frustrated cry all the way down the hall. PT was here to work with Raine. The child had been unwilling to even try to walk since she woke up. Dylan had a suspicion she was terrified to try, because if she couldn't, then it meant she'd never be able to run again, and according to Hailey, the child loved running almost more than she did fairies. The doctors said it would be hard, and it would take a lot of work, but she could learn to walk again.

"Okay, let's take a break while I talk to Rainey Days."

"Why do you call me that?"

Dylan walked down the hall so he could listen to Jarrod talk to the little girl.

"Because you remind me of rainy day where all the clouds and the fun are gone."

"I'm fun."

"Mmmhmm, but I bet you're more fun when you're running and chasing fairies in the garden."

She didn't say anything.

"I have a secret."

"What?" she whispered in that loud whisper only little kids could do.

Hailey came out of the bathroom behind him, and he put a finger to his lips and pointed to the living room where Jarrod and Raine were. They were both turned away from them. He wanted to hear this secret, too.

"I was out in the garden last night, and I ran into some fairies."

"You did?"

He nodded. "I talked to them about you and how your legs didn't want to work anymore. They were very sad because if

they couldn't fly anymore, it would make them feel all dreary like a rainy day, too."

"Fairies will die if they can't fly."

"I know. They wanted to help." He took something out of his pocket, and they both heard Raine gasp.

"Is that...is it fairy dust?"

"It sure is," Jarrod agreed. "They sprinkled some of their magical fairy dust into this little pouch. They said it will help you walk. It can't make you better, but it can give you the magic you need to work hard and get better. They said they'd be watching to see if you used their gift and if it worked so you could come outside and play again."

"They gave me this?" The awe in Raine's voice was a magic all its own.

"Yes, and remember they're watching to see if you try or not. They want you to be able to run through the grass like they fly through the flowers. You want to make them proud of you, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"Then how about we call Lane and Fiona back in here and you try to stand? They want you start small, and that means trying to stand. Think you can do that for the fairies?"

"Yes." Her voice was hushed, but there was a determination that hadn't been there before.

Jarrold looked up and saw them and then motioned for them to leave before Raine saw them. Dylan took Hailey's arm and steered her into the office, shutting the door.

"When he said leave it to him, he meant it." Hailey sighed. "I didn't even think of fairy dust."

"You would have."

"I don't know. I feel like such a failure at the moment, I'm not sure I would have."

He turned her toward him and used his fingers to gently tip her face up so she had to look at him. "You are not a failure.

You did your best to protect your children. You could no more stop a bullet than anyone else. You did everything right. Never think you failed them, because you didn't."

"What if they blame me?" she whispered. "What if they ask me why I didn't stop Josh? Why did I let them get shot?"

He couldn't help it. She was so sad and vulnerable. He pulled her to him and hugged her tight. She stiffened, and as soon as he'd made up his mind to let her go, she relaxed. She fucking relaxed. She was starting to trust him, and that was the best shit. He had the urge to fist pump in the air, but now was not the time.

"Raine, Annabelle, and Cash love you," he told her quietly, stroking her long, dark hair. "They won't blame you because they know when they're scared, you're the person they run to. You make it better, and when you can't, they know you did your best. If you didn't care, then they'd feel a type of way, but they know how much you love them, sweetheart. Don't ever think they'll blame you for things out of your control."

"What if I blame myself? If I hadn't started dating him..."

"You met a man who seemed kind and decent. You didn't know he was an abusive asshole until later, and when he hit you, you kicked him to the curb. They saw that. They saw you stand up for yourself, and you taught them to do the right thing. You did nothing wrong."

"Maybe one day I'll believe that."

"You will."

"Promise?"

"I swear it."

She stayed there, and he continued to stroke her hair, doing his best to keep her calm and reassured while trying to keep his hormones under control. Now was not the time for his buddy to let her know just how much he liked her this close to him. Getting a hard-on right now wasn't an option. She trusted him to hold her and not try anything.

"Why are you always so nice to me?"

“You deserve everyone to be nice to you.”

“I get that your job is to protect us and to keep us safe, but you go out of your way for me. The others, they’re kind, but with you it’s more than that.”

Fuck. What did he say here? If he was honest, he might send her running. She probably didn’t trust her own judgment at the moment.

“I’m afraid.”

“Why are you afraid?”

“Because my judgment is off. I didn’t see what kind of man Josh was until it was too late.”

“Do you think I’m anything like him?” It rankled him, but he couldn’t blame her.

“I don’t think so, but I don’t know.”

“All I can do is show you I’m nothing like him, and I hope that one day you’ll see you can trust me.”

“I want to believe that the trust I’ve put in you is warranted. I’m just so scared to get hurt, to let my kids get hurt.”

“I would never harm a child.” Now, this he took issue with, and he wasn’t about to let her get away with that. He pulled back. “Look at me, Hailey.”

Hailey didn’t want to look at him. She felt his anger. Felt it on a bone-deep level.

“Hailey.”

The bite of the command in his voice scared her, but it compelled her to look up, and sure enough, he was mad.

“Do you honestly think I’d ever hurt a child?”

No. No, she didn’t. She’d seen the pain in his eyes every day they’d been at the hospital. Being there brought back painful memories of losing his daughter, but he’d stayed for them. You couldn’t hurt like that if you didn’t care. Only a parent could care like that.

“No, Dylan, I don’t think you’d ever hurt a child. But what if they get attached and then it hurts when you leave? I can’t watch them go through that again.”

“What I’m going to say is going to scare you, and that’s okay.”

What was he going to say?

“You don’t have to worry about them getting attached and me leaving, because that’s not going to happen. I’m not going to leave. Even after we’ve put that fuckhead in prison for the rest of his life, I’m still going to be here. I like you, Hailey. I like the kids. It’s been a fucking long time since I’ve had feelings for any woman. I have them for you, but I know you’re not ready yet. I can wait. Until then, I’m going to be right here. I’ll be anything you and the kids need me to be. Whether that’s a protector, a friend, or anything else in between.”

“You don’t know me.”

“We’ve spent weeks talking, so I do know you in all the ways that are important. Everything else is just details. After my family died and before I met you, I walled myself off. I was cold, indifferent to everything. It’s how I survived. But you woke me up, made emotions and feelings rush in. That’s how I know you’re important. You did what no one else could. So I’ll be patient, and I’ll wait until you’re ready. You’re worth waiting for.”

Her expression would be comical in any other situation, but this wasn’t a laughing matter. He was terrified his confession would send her running and she’d demand he get out. He panicked thinking about how he’d keep her and the kids safe if he wasn’t right there with them.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” she said after several long moments.

“Nothing, sweetheart. You don’t have to say anything at all. I just want you to know I’m not going anywhere unless you force me to. If this is too much, I can go next door and send someone else to take my place inside.”

“No.” Her reply was fast and held a little of the panic he was feeling. “I don’t want anyone else in here but you. We trust you.”

Trust.

Such a small word, but a word that meant a great deal to him because of who was giving it. Hailey trusted him.

“Okay, but if you need me to keep my distance, I can do that too.”

He saw the struggle on her face. He scared her. He’d known that from the beginning, but he was hoping the trust she was starting to put in him would overcome her fear.

“No, I...I don’t know what I want.”

“It’s okay not to know. You’ve been through a lot.”

“Is it wrong for me to like you? What if it’s a savior syndrome or something?”

“A what?”

“You know, you fall for the person who saves you. It goes away later.”

He smiled. “No, I don’t think so. If that was the case, I’d have fallen for every single woman I’ve protected in my career over the years. This is different. It’s something real. For me. You have to come to that conclusion on your own, and if you end up not having feelings for me, then that’s okay too. Everything is on *your* timeline.”

“Mine?”

He nodded and placed his hand along her neck, his thumb stroking over her cheek. It was a massive win that she didn’t pull away.

“I’m a patient man, sweetheart. I’ve waited a long time for you and the kids, so a little while longer means nothing to me. I’m here when you’re ready.”

“And if I’m never ready?”

“Then we’ll be the best of friends.”

She blinked, and he swore he saw a glimmer of tears. He hadn't meant to make her cry.

"Don't cry." He pulled her to him again and wrapped his arms around her. She was so fucking tiny she didn't even come to his chin. The top of her head barely came to his shoulder. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"It's just..." She sniffed.

"It's just what?"

"I like you, too, but I'm not sure I trust myself. I'm afraid I'll be too scared to do anything and lose something special, and I'm afraid I'll jump and be wrong again."

"Neither of us is going anywhere any time soon. We've got time for me to prove to you that I'm nothing like Josh and I'm not going to hurt you or your kids. We can take this as slow as you need to."

"Slow is good."

"Then slow it is."

"Mama!"

They both looked up, startled, when Raine started yelling.

Dylan was out of the room faster than she was. He stopped short when he saw Raine standing with the help of the tiny walker. She was grinning to beat forty.

"Look, Dylan, look! The fairies helped me to stand!"

"That's amazing, Raine," he praised the little girl. "Fairy magic is the best kind of magic."

Hailey stepped around him and hurried over to her daughter, who she pulled into a hug and started telling her how proud she was of her.

Jarrold gave him a thumbs-up, and Dylan nodded to him, grateful. They were all starting to worry about Raine not walking. He'd been thinking of things to bribe her with, but her love of fairies did the trick in the end. He and Hailey would have eventually thought of it, but Jarrold was faster.

Granted, Jarrod had spent more time with Raine than he had, but he was going to change that.

Honestly, he'd been hesitant to spend as much time with Raine as he had with Cash. He was afraid being around her would hurt too much. She reminded him of Molly, and those memories hurt. But it wasn't her fault, and she deserved his attention as much as Cash or Annabelle did. She wasn't Molly and could never take his daughter's place, but if he was going to be all in with Hailey and her kids, that included Raine. She was a beautiful little girl who needed him as much as the others did.

Watching her and her mother, he knew he was all in.

They were his.

Chapter Seventeen



Tiny fingers tugged at his arm, and Dylan came awake instantly, his gaze finding Cash staring at him solemnly. He looked scared to death, which put Dylan on alert, but then he remembered the kid had been having nightmares. All the kids did, even Annabelle.

“Hey, little man, did you have a nightmare?”

He shook his head, his messy white-blond hair sticking up at all ends. There was even an impression on his cheek where he’d been lying on the pillow.

Dylan sat up and picked the kid up, putting him in his lap. “What scared you?”

“Sissy,” he whispered.

“Sissy? Do you mean Raine?”

Cash shook his head.

“Annabelle?”

He shook his head again. “Is it in your room?”

Again he shook his head.

“Can you show me?”

The little boy climbed out of Dylan’s lap very carefully and motioned for Dylan to follow him. They went down the stairs to the back of the house, to the office.

That's when Dylan saw the open sliding glass door. The alarm hadn't triggered. What the ever-loving fuck? He picked Cash up and picked up the landline. Dead air.

Someone had bypassed security and cut the lines. How did someone get past all the security?

Fuck this shit. He stopped in the kitchen and got a flashlight out of the drawer. Then he went to the hall closet and moved one of the large suitcases before putting Cash there and handing him the flashlight.

"I know it's scary, but you need to stay hidden. I'm going to put a blanket over you. Don't come out unless you hear me, Jarrod, Cole, or Gregg. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Is Sissy upstairs?"

The little boy nodded.

"Turn the flashlight on if you get scared, but don't make a sound."

He covered him with one of the extra throws they'd stashed here, and he shut the door. Hopefully, this wouldn't scare the kid worse than he already was, but Dylan needed him safe.

Creeping back upstairs, he listened as he found his way to his room. It was the first one at the top of the stairs. He picked up his phone and sent a silent 911 text to the group. Then he grabbed his gun from under his pillow and went to Annabelle's room. She was sound asleep in her crib. He checked the windows and the closet. Raine's room was next door.

In here, Raine was asleep, but her wheelchair had been slashed and her stuffed bunny gutted and scattered on her bed. He checked the closet and under the bed before checking Cash's room. His *Cars* DVD lay broken on the floor, the racetrack broken into pieces, and his beanbag slashed. Again, he checked the closet and under the bed.

Anger bloomed not only at whoever did this but at himself and the team for not waking up, for letting someone get in the

house. He'd slept through all of it. It was unacceptable.

Hailey's room was closed. He opened it cautiously, half afraid he'd find her hurt or maybe even dead. Get rid of the victim, and the case went away.

But she was sound asleep. There was, however, a very large message scrawled over the wall telling her to shut up or there would be no next time.

He checked her closet, the bathroom, and under her bed before he knelt and shook her. Her eyes sprang open, and her body clenched.

"It's just me, calm down. I need you to get up and go to my room. Quickly."

"What happened?"

He turned on the bedside lamp and motioned to the wall. Her eyes widened and then swung to him.

"It's okay. The kids are fine. We'll figure this out. Go to my room. I'll get Raine, you get Annabelle. There's a lock on the door. I want you lock yourself in while we work."

Her gaze landed on the gun he held loosely, and she sucked in her breath.

"I'm not going to hurt you, but I have to be able to defend you if someone's in the house. Now, get Annabelle. I'll get Raine."

"Dylan!" Cole shouted as he came through the door downstairs.

"Upstairs. I put Cash in the hall closet. Get him and bring him to my room!" he shouted back and stood. "I already cleared their rooms. Get Annabelle. Cole is bringing Cash to you, and I'm going to get Raine. Hurry."

Hailey's hands shook as she scrambled out of bed and followed Dylan out of the room, going straight to Annabelle. Her baby was sound asleep and didn't so much as stir as she picked her up and went back down the hall, stopping to watch Dylan pick Raine up, who muttered, and she heard him whisper something about fairies dancing. Raine giggled and

hid her face in his chest. She saw the wrecked wheelchair and the other damage to the room. Who had done this?

Dylan motioned her forward, and they both stopped when they saw Cole at the top of the stairs with Cash in his arms. The little boy was rigid and looked terrified. It was the gun. His eyes were trained on Dylan's gun, which was still in his hand.

Cole realized it as soon as she did and started whispering to him and carried him into the bedroom. Hailey ran after them and put Annabelle in the middle of the bed before taking Cash, who was shaking uncontrollably, from Cole.

Dylan cursed behind her, and he quickly put Raine in the bed beside Annabelle. Her little girl gasped, and Hailey felt Dylan take her hand and tug her down on the bed. He sat down and faced them.

"Raine, Cash, can you look at me?" His voice was quiet, calm, and both kids looked at him.

He held up his gun. "This can hurt people, but it can also protect them. I know it hurt you both very badly and it's scary, but it's only scary when scary people use it. Do you think I'd hurt you or your mom?"

"No," Raine said first. "You and Jarrod keep us safe."

"Good girl," he said. He heard Cole muttering in the background, but Raine knew him and Jarrod more than she did any of the others.

"Cash?" He leaned forward, pushing his face closer to her son's. "Do you think I'd hurt you?"

"No," he said softly. "Safe."

Dylan smiled, and Hailey almost cried. He spoke. He said words. It was the first time since he'd woken up that he'd said a single word. He thought Dylan was safe.

"Good boy." He reached out and ruffled Cash's hair. "This gun is here so I can protect you, not hurt you. I will never turn it toward any of you. I'll teach you both about guns one day,

but they are not to be played with. They're only to be used by adults. Understand?"

They both nodded slowly.

"Cole and I need to go clear the house. My room is safe. Your mama is going to lock the door behind me. Do not open it unless it's me, Gregg, Jarrod, or Cole. Understand?"

"What about..."

"Viktor, Conner, or Gregg. Those are who you open this door to. Understand?"

They all nodded, and Dylan turned the lock as he and Cole went out of the room. All of her kids crowded around her, looking at her to make everything better, but she was at a loss. Someone had gotten into the house and destroyed Raine's wheelchair. Why? Sure, do what they wanted in her room, but why do that to a child?

"Mama?" Raine whispered.

"What, baby?"

"Is Josh back? Is he gonna shoot us again?"

"No, baby, Dylan's not going to let anyone shoot us."

"Promise?" she asked, her eyes wide and imploring.

"Safe," Cash whispered, patting his sister's arm.

Raine nodded. "We're safe."

Even after everything that happened, her kids felt safe. That was because of Dylan and all the men outside who had shown them not every man wanted to harm them.

That meant everything to her.

"Let's watch a cartoon, okay? You try to sleep, and Dylan will let us know when it's safe to leave."

She flipped until she found Nickelodeon and settled against the bed, all her kids nestled close as she waited for Dylan.

Dylan growled as he stalked through the house. The fucker had gotten inside under all their noses. It was because they hadn't been allowed to put in a full security system like he wanted. The homeowners wouldn't agree.

Someone had hacked the system and looped a video. It was very well done. No one noticed it from the hub. Nor had they seen anyone enter the house. It must have been right after they'd made their pass. Cars were parked out front and down the block. There was no fence, so they'd just walked up and managed to enter the home. The security system had been disarmed.

With the fucking code.

He was pissed. Gregg was pissed.

Conner was lethal, and Viktor barely contained him.

This had come from someone on their fucking team. No one else could have known that code. The only people who had it were Hailey and every man assigned.

How could he go up there and tell her the men he'd vouched for had done this? But who? That was the real question.

The three new hires were his first suspects. They passed KSI's rigorous background screenings. There should be no red flags, but at this point, he was wondering what they missed.

"What did we miss?" Gregg asked, his expression as lethal as Conner's. "Who did we invite onto our team who would have sold out a mother and her three children?"

"I've got Nik and Mason on the phone. They're going to go digging through not just backgrounds, but through family members as well."

"I'm not sure we'll find anything," Gregg said. "The men and women we hire are smart. Most of them know how to hide things. They're either military or police trained."

"Considering the stealth of getting in here without alerting Dylan or any of the rest of us, I would lean more heavily on being military trained." Conner came over to the sink and

filled the coffee pot. “No offense to any of you on the force, but you’re not trained in stealth like we in the military are.”

“I have to agree with my brother.” Viktor tossed his cell on the countertop.

“Cash said the word ‘sissy.’ I think he was referring to someone. I thought he meant Annabelle or Raine, but he shook his head when I asked him.”

“Sissy?” Cole stroked his chin. “I’ve never heard Hailey refer to either of the girls as Sissy.”

“I call my oldest sister Sissy,” Gregg offered. “I think that’s normal, but I agree, I’ve heard no one refer to either girl as that. We need to talk to Hailey.”

“I’ll get her. Jarrod, can you go stay with the kids? Maybe don’t show them your gun. They’re already scared enough.” Dylan nodded to Jarrod’s service pistol.

“Yeah.” He took the gun out of the holster, made sure the safety was on, and then put it back before putting on the robe Dylan tossed him.

Dylan walked with him upstairs. They’d left them alone up here for over an hour. Hopefully, the kids were asleep.

He knocked on the door. “Hailey, it’s Dylan. Can you unlock it?”

He heard the mattress creak, and she had the door open within seconds. Her gaze bounced between Jarrod and himself.

“Are the kids asleep?” he asked.

“Yes, they fell out about half an hour ago.”

“Jarrod is going to stay with them, but we need to talk to you downstairs.”

She looked worried about leaving them, and he took her hand. “Jarrod won’t let anything happen to them. They trust him. It’s okay.”

Her teeth worried her lip, but she finally nodded and followed him downstairs to where Cole, Gregg, Viktor, and Conner were waiting. None of them looked happy.

“What happened?” she asked once she was seated at the island with a mug of coffee in her hands. Dylan handed her the hazelnut creamer she liked, and she nodded her thanks.

She was scared. Someone had gotten into the house even with all the security and people watching. If Josh could do that, then how were they safe?

“Someone broke in.”

“Obviously,” she murmured. “But how? I thought the security system would prevent that.”

“Normally, yes.”

“But?” she prompted when no one said another word.

“But whoever broke in had the code to deactivate the system.”

“What?” she whispered.

“They also hacked into the cameras and put the video on a loop so they wouldn’t be recorded. I’ve woken up Mason and Nik, who are both exceptionally good hackers. They’ll figure it out.”

“Are we still safe here?” She looked to Dylan, trusting he’d tell her the truth.

“I don’t know.”

Not what she wanted to hear. “Why not?”

“Because someone had the code to get into the house.”

“Okay?” Why did they look so grim?

“That means someone who had the code gave it to the intruder.”

Wait...

“Someone, as in one of your guys?”

“Until we can clear them, we think so. We brought down three of our new hires. They passed all our background and psychological screenings. I want to say it’s not, but that is the only plausible solution. I’ve called Kade. He’s pulling Abel, Drae, and Mickey from their current assignments to come

down here. They've all been with the company for years and are trusted. If they weren't already on assignments, they would have been here. The new guys will be flying out on the first flight this morning to take over those assignments."

She wasn't sure what to say. What to think.

Viktor came over and sat on the stool beside her. She flinched away from him. He frowned but didn't get up. The anger vibrating off him scared her, but he never so much as made a move to touch her.

"I understand you're probably angry and wondering if we know what the hell we're doing. We do. I hire mostly ex-military or ex-police. I take this job seriously, and trust me when I say I will find out who did this, be it one of my own or someone else. I'm not taking chances with your life or your children's lives. We will keep you safe. From now on, there will be a guard sitting outside on the front porch and one in the back yard. Twenty-four-seven. I don't want to put more than Dylan in the house if possible because I don't want to alarm the children. I've left messages with the homeowners to see if they'll allow me to put video cameras up inside, which they were very against, but it would make me feel better for that added layer of security."

"And if we don't think we can keep you safe here, we'll move you again." Conner moved around to the fridge and started pulling out things to make sandwiches. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

"We'll do what we have to in order to keep you safe," Viktor assured her.

"I don't want to upset the kids again," she said. "When they see what happened in their rooms, they're going to be scared."

"We'll get that cleaned up, but the police are on the way. They need to document the damage and take statements."

"Not that it'll do any good."

"You'd be surprised," Dylan said. "The police here seem to not be in the Rivers' pocket, at least the ones I've spoken to."

We do have background checks pending on the officers on the roster.”

“How did you get that?” she asked.

“Need to know, Hailey, need to know.” Conner grabbed some paper plates, and he and Gregg started building a monster sandwich.

How could they eat right now? She was nauseated.

“We do need to ask you something.” Dylan motioned for Viktor to move and then took his place. “Cash woke me up. I thought he’d had a nightmare, but he said the word ‘Sissy.’ We’ve never heard you call either of the girls that before, but we wanted to ask.”

She felt her face drain of blood.

“What’s wrong?” Dylan took both her hands and turned her to face him. “Tell me.”

“Sissy is what Josh always called his cousin Gloria. They all called her Sissy. She spent a lot of time with us, and that’s what my kids called her, too.”

“Was she ever in the military?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t seem to have a job. I just thought maybe she was a trust fund baby.”

“What’s her full name?” Viktor had his cell out.

“Gloria Anne Rivers. She used to always say Annabelle was named after her. She babysat for us when we wanted to go out.”

“Texting Kade now. He’ll have answers within the hour if she has a military background.”

“Why do you think she was in the military?”

“Because of how stealthy she was. She got in without alerting anyone. Except for Cash. I think he woke up and saw her. He came to get me once she was gone.”

“Is that why you had him in the closet?”

“I wasn’t sure if the intruder was still in the house. I put him somewhere safe until I cleared it.”

“He’s talking. Just a word here or there, but he’s talking.”

“If nothing else good comes out of tonight, then we have one blessing to be thankful for,” Gregg said around a mouthful of food.

There was that.

“If anything else happens, I think we should take her back to New York.”

Dylan’s statement brought her head up. What the hell was he talking about?

“Gabe’s house is a fortress. He has more than enough bedrooms. He and Abbey have been using his apartment in the city the last few weeks because of her big murder trial. He’ll let us borrow it if we need it.”

“And I doubt the Rivers family’s reach extends all the way up there. We have more friends and allies there,” Viktor agreed thoughtfully. “There’s a security hub set up in the guest house as well.”

“It’s not something we’re thinking seriously about right now.” Dylan squeezed her hands. “It’s our contingency plan. Cole, can you call Gabe and make sure we can use the house if necessary? Just don’t wake him up until at least five. He’s a grouchy bastard when he’s sleepy.”

“Will do.”

There was a knock at the door, and she jumped.

“That’ll be the police,” Dylan told her. “We asked them not to come with lights or sirens so as not to frighten or wake the kids.”

Police. Sure.

She felt like she was spiraling.

Dylan seemed to know it.

“Viktor, can you take the police upstairs and show them the damage? I’m going to take Hailey into the office so she can calm down before they ask for her statement.”

Viktor nodded, and Dylan gently pulled her from the stool, picking up her coffee and guiding her down the hall to the office.

Once he had the door closed, he pulled her close. “Everything’s fine.”

“She could have killed any one of them,” she whispered. “Josh has already tried once. She could have just come in, and we’d be none the wiser until morning.”

“You hit the nail on the head, sweetheart. She didn’t want to kill them. She may not have the stomach for murder. She left you a message to warn you.”

“I always thought she loved my kids.”

“Maybe she does. Maybe that’s why she left a message for you. Maybe she wants you to shut up or leave so you’ll be safe. We don’t know until we find her.”

“You think you can find her?”

“We’ll find her. Conner will put together an extraction and containment team for when Max tracks her down. We’re close to finding Josh.”

“You are?”

He nodded. “Max had him yesterday, but he was gone by the time the police arrived. We think someone in the department tipped him off. If we got that close, then we’ll get him again. Next time, Max is going to let us know and we’ll take him in.”

“I’m scared. The thought of her in here with a knife...she slashed Raine’s wheelchair. She had a knife, Dylan. A knife. She could have slit our throats.”

She pressed herself as close as she could get. She was shaking, and the more she thought about Sissy in the same room with her kids, holding a knife... Her knees went weak, and Dylan caught her before she fell.

“I got you.” He picked her up and carried her to the sofa, holding her in his lap. “It’s okay. If I need to put someone in their rooms at night to make you feel better, we’ll do that.”

“That might scare them more.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“I hate this,” she whispered. “I hate feeling scared all the time. I didn’t used to be. I used to laugh at things that were hard. My dad taught me that laughing is better than crying, but all I do is cry.”

“We all cry sometimes, sweetheart. We wouldn’t be human if we didn’t.”

“I don’t feel human anymore. I don’t feel much of anything except being useless and afraid.”

He tipped her face up. “You’re not useless.”

She wished she believed him, but she didn’t.

“Why is everything so hard?”

“I don’t know.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “But you’re not alone anymore. You have me and everyone here.”

“Will you kiss me?” The question slipped out before she thought better of it. It wasn’t a good idea, she knew that, but at the same time, she’d had a hell of a night.

“Are you sure?”

“No, but I want you to kiss me. I’ve wanted you to kiss me for weeks. I just didn’t trust myself to ask you.”

“What’s different now?”

“I’m sitting here shaking like a leaf, thinking about someone who could have murdered me or my children in our sleep, and I...”

“You what?” he whispered against her ear.

“I trust you to make sure that doesn’t happen. I trust you, Viking, and I haven’t really trusted anyone since my dad died.

I trust you not to hurt me or my kids. I trust you to make this better.”

It came down to that simple truth.

She trusted him.

So, when he took her face in his hands and tilted it up, she didn't panic. She didn't tense up. She waited.

And when his lips finally touched hers, it was unlike anything she'd ever felt before. She'd been kissed softly, she'd been kissed in the heat of passion, but nothing compared to the first brush of his lips against hers.

It wasn't fireworks and trumpets blaring.

He tasted like what she thought of home being like—warmth, comfort, and safety. He wasn't greedy. He didn't deepen his kiss. He simply kissed her with a gentleness no one else ever had.

And the warmth turned to heat that spread from her lips to the tips of her fingers and down. She pressed herself closer, wanting him to deepen the kiss, but he didn't. He nibbled, he teased, and he played.

The knock at the door interrupted them, and he pulled back first. “What?”

“The police are almost done upstairs. They want to talk to Hailey.” Cole sounded slightly amused. Had he opened the door and seen them kissing? She'd been so focused on Dylan, he might have and she just didn't see him.

“Give us a minute, and I'll bring her back to the kitchen.”

“Take your time,” Cole called. “Kids are asleep, so there's no rush.”

They heard him walk away, and Hailey sighed. “Did he open the door?”

“I don't know,” Dylan said. “Maybe.”

“Do I have to talk to the police?”

“Yes, you do. We need every incident documented.”

“You’ll stay with me?”

“I’ll be right beside you, and if you need a break, just tell me and I’ll make them wait.”

She sighed and climbed off his lap. She’d rather get this over with and then deal with the kiss in the morning. She didn’t regret it, not one bit. She just had to figure out if she wanted to try this with Dylan. He’d already told her what he wanted. She needed to figure out if she wanted it too.

And that was a question for tomorrow. Right now she had to deal with the police.

Chapter Eighteen



The kids were a little quiet, but that was to be expected after they'd been woken up in the middle of the night and scared yet again. Hailey assured them they were safe, but she wasn't sure they believed her. Before the break-in the other night, they'd stayed in their rooms a lot, but now they were hanging out around her. Currently, Dylan was on the couch with both Cash and Raine piled on top of him watching *Frozen*. It was the third time they'd watched it today, but he didn't complain. He simply sat there with his arms around them both, watching the movie. He was so patient.

She got up from the chair and checked on Annabelle, who was in the Pack 'n Play sitting up surrounded by pillows and chewing on a teething ring. Her teeth were coming in, and she'd been fussier than usual the last couple of days. They tried to keep chilled teething rings for her, but she tended to cry even as she gnawed on them. When the tooth finally broke the surface, she'd get some relief, but until then, they were all resigned to a crying, fussy baby.

One of the new security guys came in the front door. Abel. She only remembered because he was a giant of a man. Raine even called him giant instead of his name. Cash always stayed behind either her or Dylan when Abel came around. She didn't blame him. He looked like he could hurt someone without even trying.

“Something smells good,” he said and winked at the kids, who hunkered down further into Dylan.

“I’m making peach cobbler and peach glazed pork chops with mashed sweet potatoes.”

“Now you’re making me even hungrier. Cole’s cooking next door. Some health food sh...stuff.”

“There will be lots of leftovers for you if you’d like. There are more pork chops than we’ll eat.”

“I would appreciate it, ma’am.”

She nodded and checked on the cobbler in the oven. The peach sauce for the pork chops was simmering and the sweet potatoes already mashed and in a dish in the warmer along with the chops. The salad she’d put together was in the fridge. They were just about ready to eat.

She took down plates for the kids and started cutting up a single pork chop for Raine and Cash to share. She’d be lucky if she got them to eat any of it. Neither was really fond of pork chops, but when she added the sweet peach sauce to it, at least they’d attempt it. She took the mash and the rolls she’d baked earlier out of the warmer and added it to their plates before setting them at the table. Dylan came up behind her and started to help her carry things to the table.

“Abel, I’d invite you to stay, but...” She glanced to the kids who were huddled together on the couch.

“I get it, and don’t worry about it. Could I get a plate to go, though? I’m on backyard duty for the rest of the night.”

“Sure.” She handed him a plate. “Go fix whatever you want.” Then she got the salad out of the fridge and took it to the table. “You guys ready to eat?”

Cash jumped up and started to come over, and then he saw Raine still sitting on the couch and stopped, waiting until someone came to help his sister. She might be older than him, but he’d always taken care of her and Annabelle. She had a feeling he’d be a thorn in both their sides when they started dating.

Dylan picked up Raine and carried her to the chair with a booster seat in it. She was still so tiny, you'd think she wasn't even five. Even with the booster seat, the table was still a little tall for her.

"Do you want milk or water?" Dylan asked.

"Sweet tea?" She batted her eyes at him.

"Hmm...sweet tea on top of the peaches? Do you want cobbler for dessert?"

"Yes!"

"Then maybe we drink some milk with supper so you can have the cobbler. I don't think your mama will appreciate all the sugar otherwise."

"She says too much sugar is bad for my teeth."

"She's right." He pulled the chair out for Cash and then helped him up into it. "Milk or water, Cash?"

"Milk," he said softly.

Every word he spoke went straight to Hailey's peace of mind. The therapist said he'd talk when he felt safe again. Dylan made him feel safe. He'd been stuck to him like glue since the other night. He was Dylan's shadow. He never lost his patience either, which was surprising. Stevie loved his kids, but he didn't like how clingy they could be sometimes. And Josh was great with them in spurts. He would walk away for a few when he needed to. Dylan didn't do that. He was there no matter how clingy they got. He was even up with Annabelle last night walking her as she screamed because, as he pointed out, she was too heavy for Hailey to carry until the doctor cleared her.

They hadn't mentioned their kiss either. She was still thinking about it, and the more she thought about it, the more she wanted another kiss. One that wasn't trying to comfort her.

One that would tell her if the attraction she felt was just in the moment or if it was real. Her hormones laughed at her when she asked herself that. It was real, and both she and her hormones knew it.

And they wanted more.

She just wasn't sure how to approach that with him.

Viktor came running through the door. "Pack up. We have to leave."

"What?"

Dylan started moving before she even got the word out of her mouth. He went straight to the crib and picked up Annabelle, passing her to Abel. Viktor took Raine, and Dylan came back for Cash.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"I'll explain on the way. We need to get out now." Viktor turned off the stove, and more of the KSI people flooded into the house.

Not another word was said as she was hustled out into the evening and into one of the KSI vehicles, driven by Gregg. Dylan got in and helped her buckle Raine and Cash into their car seats. Cole climbed into the back with Annabelle and Raine while Jarrod slipped into the front passenger seat. They were pulling out before she'd even buckled herself in.

"Can someone explain what's going on?"

"Viktor got a text from Mason," Gregg said. "He's been monitoring the police, and an alert came over they were headed here with social services to collect Annabelle. Her father got a temporary order of custody. We're leaving before it can be served."

"How...they said..."

"It's signed by a judge in Carrollton," Jarrod put in. "Until it can be sorted, the police are required to follow the order."

"He wants nothing to do with her. He's never even seen her."

"Doesn't matter," Gregg said, his voice low. "The team is cleaning out the house of laptops and cellphones. They're grabbing your purse as well, Hailey. Viktor is going to call the

attorney. I'm assuming since she didn't call us, she wasn't alerted to the hearing."

"Can they do that?"

"They're not supposed to, but in that county? They do what they want."

"Where are we going?"

"Contingency plan," Gregg told her.

New York? They were going to New York?

"But..."

Dylan put a finger to her lips. "It's okay. The lawyers can handle the temporary custody order, and they can get it overturned where we know the lawyers and judges. It's going to be fine."

Jarrold looked back at them. "I texted Angel to make sure there are things for the kids they need. Cole grabbed Annabelle's diaper bag and some premade bottles. She's good until we get home."

Hailey wasn't sure what to do or think. This was so crazy. If they hadn't been tipped off, the police would have shown up probably during the middle of dinner and taken Annabelle from her.

Thank God for all of these men. Thank God.

"We'll need to get food for the kids," Dylan said. "We were just sitting down to eat."

"Jarrod, text one of the other guys to grab something and we'll stop long enough to take the bags once we get far enough away. I don't want us to be stopped once they realize we're not there." Gregg tapped on the steering wheel. "We're in for a long drive."

Dylan took her hand.

"We're fine. Annabelle is safe, and she's not going anywhere."

She had to believe that, or she'd lose her mind.

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to him, and she didn't hesitate to sink into his warmth. He gave her strength where she had none.

"Kids, I know you're scared, but we're all safe," Dylan told them, keeping his voice quiet. "We've got a long drive ahead of us, so try to sleep."

"I'm hungry," Raine complained.

"We're getting you a Happy Meal from McDonald's."

"Chicken nuggets?"

"You can have all the nuggies you want, Rainey Days."

Raine grinned at Jarrod.

These were such good men. They made her believe there were still good guys out there.

And the one wrapped around her might be the best one she knew. Scared, but fortified by the wall of strength Dylan exuded, she took a deep breath and settled in for the long drive.

Chapter Nineteen



It was well into the early morning when they finally arrived at Gabe's. Kade was waiting with the keys when they pulled up. He looked grumpy, but then who wouldn't be when you found out you had a possible leak that could have cost lives within your firm? Dylan would be mad as hell and grumpy, too. He got out of the vehicle when Gregg pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. Everyone exited except for the sleeping occupants.

"I've already called in a family lawyer our attorney recommended. She'll be here first thing in the morning. Angel and Becca stocked the fridge and picked up some toys. That's on us. Don't worry about the cost, Dylan. I'm told Cash likes cars, Raine loves fairies, and Annabelle loves to chew on anything that goes near her mouth."

"That's about it."

"There aren't kid friendly rooms, but we tried on short notice."

"I appreciate it."

"Viktor says you're keeping them."

"I am."

"I'm happy for you, and know that we're going to do everything we can to help you keep them safe. Now that

you're here where Gabe has a small security fortress set up, we can breathe a little easier."

"We can sleep." Gregg yawned. "I think I can sleep for a solid week."

"Before or after you eat?" Kade asked, but there was a trace of a smile with the sarcasm.

Gregg rubbed his belly. "People got to eat. Hailey loves sugar, too, so I'm in good company. Speaking of, I'm sending Drae to pick up food. This time of night, we've got pizza or Chinese. Any preferences?"

"Chinese if you get it from that place below the office. They actually have different sauces for different items and not just the same brown sauce for everything. Otherwise, pizza."

"I don't know if they're still open, but I'll have Drae check." He looked up as the rest of the SUVs pulled up. "Let me catch him before he gets out."

Dylan shook his head as Gregg jogged toward Drae's vehicle. Drae was usually Shayna Moore's main bodyguard, but given the circumstances, Max, her fiancé and the firm's tracker, didn't even fuss about pulling him from her detail. Kids trumped overzealous fans every day of the week.

"What do you need?" Kade asked. "Our firm screwed up, and we'll make it right."

"We don't know that yet," Viktor told them as he and Conner approached while Cole and Jarrod stayed with the SUV containing the Roberts family.

"Who else could it have been?"

"Max hasn't found anything in any of our employees' backgrounds that suggests they'd take a bribe or be forced to work with the Rivers family. We could give them all lie detector tests, but we know how easily those can be manipulated. At this point, we're still digging, but we have no concrete answers."

"Until we figure this shit out, we should probably make sure the suspects are backed up by people we trust."

“That will be easier now that you’re home. I’m going to send most of these guys home. Abel and Kayla will stay to monitor the hub while the rest of you sleep. I want a meeting at the office tomorrow to go over all this shit. Dylan, that means you. There will be people we trust here to watch Hailey and the kids.”

He started to argue, but Conner held up his hand. “I’ll stay with them.”

All the arguments he had deflated. Conner was a one-man army who could defend Hailey and the kids more than probably all of them put together. He’d seen the shit Conner accomplished in the past.

“Fine, but if something happens, I’m holding you personally responsible, Kade.”

Kade’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded.

“Let’s get everyone settled for the night, and the rest of us will go home and try to get some rest.”

Dylan walked back to the car and opened the door. He found Cash awake.

“Hey, little man. You ready to go to bed?”

“Safe?”

“Yes, you’re very safe here. Lots of cameras watching who comes and goes. There’s even a room that can only be unlocked from the inside where no one can get in. It’s called a panic room. It’s for when things are really, really scary.”

The little boy nodded. It was awful that he had to ask if he was safe. It broke Dylan’s heart, but he was going to spend the rest of his life making sure the kids never had to think like that again.

He reached over and unbuckled his seatbelt and then started working on Raine’s. She never so much as stirred. Jarrod laughed and picked her up while Cole grabbed Annabelle’s car seat and the diaper bag. She was probably due for a diaper change.

“Hailey, we’re here,” he said softly and gently shook her knee. Her eyes sprang open, and she looked around before her gaze landed on him and Cash.

“Where’s Raine and Annabelle?” There was no denying the panic in her voice, so he hurried to reassure her.

“Jarrod has Raine, and Cole has Annabelle. They’re walking toward the house.” He pointed out the window and saw her visibly relax. “We’re putting all the kids in one room. You can stay in there too if you like, or take the room right next door. There are cameras in every inch of this place, inside and outside. Motion detectors are set up. There is a panic room inside as well. This is the safest place you’ll ever be.”

Hailey yawned, but she tried to force her foggy brain to work. She heard what he said, but it didn’t really register. All she saw was Cash wrapped around him as he exited the vehicle and then extended a hand to help her out.

She unhooked her seatbelt and took his hand without thought. She trusted him. Her body didn’t flinch away from him. There were things that would take her time to work through, but she trusted him to keep her and her kids safe.

The cold hit her as soon as she stepped outside the vehicle. It had to be in the forties or colder. It rarely got this cold in Georgia, and she wasn’t prepared. Dylan noticed and urged her to hurry toward the house.

And when she was inside, it was like entering another world. The place was huge and decorated in a homey yet very elegant design. Whoever lived here had money. They didn’t flaunt it, but you could tell.

“Big,” Cash whispered.

“It sure is,” she said as he rubbed his eyes. “But you can explore it in the morning. Time for bed.”

He laid his head on Dylan’s shoulder, and her heart cracked. Cash probably didn’t remember his grandfather, but he would do that when he was a baby with her dad. He’d never done it with his own dad. He probably didn’t even remember Stevie.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed. You need to go to the bathroom first?”

They’d put him in a Pull-Up at the first gas station they’d stopped at, just in case. He’d been potty trained since he was two, but she still kept Pull-Ups around in case of emergency, and driving hours upon hours was an emergency if there ever was one.

Dylan motioned for her to follow him up the stairs. Cole and Jarrod were talking at the top of the landing, and they smiled when they saw her.

“Both your girls are sound asleep,” Cole said. “I’ll bring the Pack ‘n Play up in just a second. I put pillows around Annabelle until then.”

“Thank you both.”

“We love the little tykes. No thanks necessary.”

“You...love them?”

“They’re easy to love,” Jarrod said around a yawn. “I’m going to go crash while I can. Kade’s called a big meeting tomorrow.”

“Gregg’s getting food,” Dylan told him. “If you’re hungry, you might want to wait up.”

“What’s he getting?”

“Pizza or Chinese, depending on what’s open.”

“Eh, I’ll go to bed. Neither of them is good for my acid reflux. Besides, I’m more of a breakfast person, anyway. Good night, Hailey. Good night, little man.” Jarrod ruffled Cash’s hair, and Cash hid in Dylan’s neck. Jarrod just smiled. “Don’t worry, kid. You’ll get used to Uncle Jarrod soon enough.”

Hailey watched him and Cole disappear down the stairs while Dylan opened a door she assumed was the bathroom. “All right, Cash, let’s get your business done so we can get some sleep.”

“You stay with me?”

“You want me to stay in your room?”

She could only assume he nodded, and then she heard him peeing.

“Easy there, boyo, try to keep it in the toilet. We don’t want to play slip and slide in pee.”

“Yuck.”

“Yuck is right. Your mama won’t like stepping in piss one little bit.”

She heard him giggle, and it made her breathe a little easier. If he was laughing, he was getting better. She’d still take him to therapy, but that sound more than anything else gave her peace of mind.

“Now it’s time for bed. And if it’s okay with your mother, I’ll stay in there with you guys so you feel safe.”

Was that okay with her? She wasn’t sure, but at the same time, she wanted him there.

When they came out of the bathroom, Dylan had hold of Cash’s hand, and it was odd how much they resembled each other. Same hair and same eyes. Maybe a different smile, but if someone didn’t know they weren’t related, they’d never know the difference.

“I’d be grateful if you could stay with us,” she said before Dylan could ask.

“You got it. Let me go grab the Pack ‘n Play, and you get this one in bed. I’ll be up in a few.”

She nodded and ushered Cash into the bedroom. The lights were on, but it didn’t disturb either of the girls. They were always good at sleeping through everything, even the loudest of thunderstorms.

Cash tugged on her hand, and she glanced down. “What, baby?”

“Cold.”

“Let’s get you in bed, then, where it’s warm.” She picked him up and pulled the covers back so he could slide in beside

Raine. She tucked him in but didn't turn off the lights. Dylan would need it to set up the Pack 'n Play.

Cash snuggled up to Raine and closed his eyes. His breathing evened out within a matter of minutes. She wished she could sleep as easily as the kids did. The fact was her mind was wide awake. The nap in the car didn't help. But what else had there been to do? The car ride lulled her, and she went the way of the kids into a dreamless sleep.

Dylan came up a few minutes later with the portable crib. He set it up and then moved Annabelle over into it, making sure she was warm enough while keeping her head away from anything that could smother her. She did that herself whenever she put the baby down.

"Old habits." He smiled and came back over, sitting at the foot of the bed. "Allison and I used to worry about SIDS and any number of other things when Molly was a baby. I think we watched her sleep more than we slept ourselves."

"I did that with all of mine. You never outgrow those worries no matter how many you have."

"Parents will always be parents. Are you hungry? Gregg texted to say Drae's on his way back with both Chinese food and pizza."

"They found food this late?"

"It's New York. This close to the city, you can find all kinds of places open. Drae drove the thirty minutes into town, though. There's this great Chinese place a few blocks from our office. It's the best I've had outside of China."

"You've been to China?"

"I went there a few years ago for some training in intelligence. I don't typically do bodyguard work. I work behind the scenes, mostly. Information is my game. Max and I usually work together. I find things, and he uses those things to track his target. Mason and Max have been working this case since I've been on bodyguard duty."

"If they get scallion chicken, I'd like some. I slept so long in the car, I'm not sure I can sleep, anyway."

“At least the kids can sleep.”

“I guess I’ll make everyone a big breakfast in the morning if there are enough groceries.”

“Angel and Becca made sure there was plenty of food.”

“Whose house is this?”

“One of our associates, Gabriel Knorlin and his soon-to-be wife. Abbey’s an assistant district attorney in the major crimes division. She’s been working on a big murder trial, so they’ve both been staying at Gabe’s apartment in the city so she’s close to work in case of emergency. She’s put a lot of time into the case, and they were both happy to lend out the house while we needed it.”

“I think you told me that before, but I guess I forgot.”

“It’s been a rough couple of weeks. You’re allowed to forget a few things here and there.”

“What happens now that they went to the house and we weren’t there?”

“They’ll have to locate you to serve the custody papers. While they try to do that, all the attorneys will converge and find a way to make sure Annabelle never leaves your custody.”

“What if they can’t?”

“Don’t worry about that. Now that we’re here where I can breathe a little easier, I’m going to find every single thing there is to know about Ronnie Browning. I’ll go all the way back to who he bullied in elementary school if I have to. By the time I’m done, no judge, bought or not, will be able to hand him your daughter. The fallout with the public will be too great.”

“The job is what I’m worried about. That’s the big thing I can’t provide right now.”

“I’ll see if we can’t take care of that as well. Don’t worry. I’m not going to let them take any of your kids from you. We’ve retained local counsel for you, and she’ll be here in the morning. I have to go into the office for a meeting tomorrow, but you’re safe here. There will be guards we trust completely

protecting all of you until we get back. Gabe also has a panic room downstairs that can only be opened from the inside, so if you want to wait in there until we get back, you're welcome to do that as well."

"You have to go?"

"Yes, but we won't be gone long, and I'll bring you back a clean phone that will have all of our numbers programmed into it."

"I thought it was fine when the social worker told me everything was okay."

"The order didn't come from local social services. It came from Carrollton. The order would have been forwarded to local law enforcement and child and family services. I'm sure your attorney there will have your social worker testify when the custody order is challenged. I'll dig up enough information to arm her for war when she goes in for the hearing."

"What if that's not enough?" she whispered.

"Then I'll relocate all of us somewhere we can never be found and a place that has no extradition treaty."

"You would come with us?"

He smiled, and for the first time all day, his face looked worry free. "Of course. I told you already how I feel. That means I'm here for the easy parts and the hard parts. I'm going to take care of you and the kids."

When he reached for her, she didn't hesitate. She let him pull her into his lap and hold her. It felt good. She knew she was safe, and that feeling meant more to her than anything.

"You're okay, Hailey. You're all safe with me. I promise."

"I know."

He kissed the top of her head, and she snuggled into him, content that he wouldn't push her until she was ready and that he meant what he said. He'd wait and keep them all safe.

Chapter Twenty



The next two weeks passed in a blur for Hailey. There were meetings with lawyers from both Georgia and New York. There were therapy sessions for not only herself but Raine and Cash. Raine also had daily PT sessions to help her walk again, and she was making progress.

The kids seemed to be opening up and were enthralled with how colorful fall in the northeast was. Leaves of all colors had fallen into the yard, and Cash loved running through them and listening to them crunch under his feet. Dylan would rake the yard, and then Cash would fall into the piles of leaves, scattering them all over again. This made Raine more determined than ever to get her legs working again. She told Hailey she was going to be able to run before Christmas. She didn't doubt it. All the doctors and the physical therapists said children were more resilient than adults, and watching her little girl make strides solidified that concept for Hailey.

She was worried about when this was all over and they went home. They could go back to the nice house Dylan rented, but what then? She would run into the same problem as before, especially if Josh went away. The Rivers family would make her life a living hell. She had no doubts about that. They'd never thought she was good enough for Josh to begin with, and she'd be the reason he was locked up. Finding work would be nigh on impossible. She had to come up with a better

solution. Maybe they would stay in New York. Dylan lived here, and if she thought they could build a future together, that wouldn't be possible if they were back in Georgia and he was here.

And that was a whole other can of worms. They'd spent the last few weeks talking and getting to know each other. She knew more about his family than she probably did her own at this point. He loved to talk about his sisters and his mother, who had been a single mother, too. He'd told her his mother was the reason he was standing today. She'd kept him moving after his family died, and he'd told Hailey how grateful he was to her even if he dodged her calls.

She'd told him all about her life growing up, her dad, her brother, and how hard it had been for her when her father died. She hated her kids wouldn't have their granddad as they grew up. That she wouldn't have her daddy to fall back on when times got hard. She missed him.

Hailey sat down one night and reflected on her relationship with Dylan and compared it to the one she'd had with Stevie. Sure, she'd been friends with him, but she couldn't say she'd known him as well as she did Dylan. They didn't sit and talk. Stevie never argued with her, just acquiesced. Dylan did, on occasion, argue with her. Well, once, really, when she didn't want to take more than three guards with her to meet with Raine's physical therapist team. He'd been adamant and told her in no uncertain terms her and Raine's safety trumped everything else. She couldn't even be mad at him because all he'd wanted was for them to be protected.

And he'd meant what he said. He took things as slowly as she asked him to. He didn't push, but he was always there. He did, however, kiss her good and thoroughly whenever he could. The more she grew to trust him, the more she trusted herself. And with that, the emotions she'd locked away started to come alive as well. The feelings of safety turned into want and need and desire. Things she thought died over time, things she thought Josh beat out of her.

But turned out her hormones were alive and well. They'd just been waiting for her to be ready for them. The body

followed the mind, her therapist said. When the mind decided it was well enough to handle something, then the body allowed it.

So her mind decided it was okay to trust Dylan, and her body let its needs be known. She and her therapist had a good laugh about it. She thought it would be hard to talk to a therapist, but it hadn't been. Seems she needed to talk to someone, and this woman never pushed, just let her talk and ramble at her own pace.

Dylan nudged her shoulder, and she looked up.

“You good? You seem really quiet.”

“Just thinking.”

“I bet you're glad you don't have to worry about Ron anymore.”

“You have no idea.” She was so grateful to Dylan. He'd worked tirelessly to put together a portfolio on Annabelle's father that no court could look past. Certainly not the ones here in New York.

They'd just come from the custody hearing. She didn't even have to testify as she'd feared she might. Ronnie had gotten arrested for possession with the intent to distribute here in New York two days ago. He'd been found with several bottles of oxy as well as half a dozen baggies of meth on his person and in his motel room. He'd been stupid enough to try to buy more from the dealer on the corner from where he was staying. Since he was being watched by KSI, photos had been taken and forwarded to the police here. They set up a sting, arrested him, and then obtained a search warrant for his room. It was hard to argue your case if you're sitting in jail for the foreseeable future.

It was the first real win she'd had since Josh started terrorizing her. The judge had awarded her full custody, and her Georgia lawyer assured her this would help in Georgia. Same rule applied. He couldn't contest her custody if he was sitting in a jail cell for possession with the intent to distribute.

There might even be federal charges pending since he'd crossed state lines to buy and sell.

"Now if only we could find Josh."

"We need to talk about that." He helped into the SUV and then got into the driver's side. Lucien and Gregg were behind them. Cole and Jarrod had taken the kids over to Viktor's to play in his massive back yard full of toys. They both started calling themselves Uncle Cole and Uncle Jarrod. Far be it from her to discourage anyone who wanted to love her kids. They needed all the positive adult males they could get in their lives after the shit show Josh had been.

Dylan glanced over at her and worried the news he was about to reveal would send her spiraling down a rabbit hole. She'd made so much progress the last couple of weeks. He didn't want to derail that, but she had to know.

"Max has been tracking several credit cards associated with the Rivers family and their businesses. There is one in particular from a shell corporation that he's concerned about. The last few charges were here in New York."

"What?" There was no denying the alarm in her voice. He reached over and squeezed her hand while keeping his eyes on the road. New York traffic was slow as molasses, but it could get dicey if idiots tried to weave in and out of the lanes.

"Don't panic."

"We have to go get them. Right now."

"Jarrod and Cole won't let anything happen to them. Calm down."

"Calm down? How can you tell me to calm down when he's here?"

"Because you know as well as I do that the guys won't let any harm come to your kids. Viktor and Dimitri are there as well. It's a gated community, and Viktor has his own arsenal of cameras and motion detectors installed. They're as safe there as they are with us. If we run over there and swoop them up, it might scare them. Let them have some fun, Hailey. They've been cooped up for weeks."

“Maybe you’re right. I don’t want to make them feel any more afraid than they have been.”

“They’re carving pumpkins, drinking hot apple cider, and eating pumpkin rolls and Halloween cookies. Sara has all kinds of Halloween crafts set up for when Delia and Mateo get home. It’s going to be a fun day. We can go over there if you want to. I’d like you to meet Sara anyway. She’s a good woman who’s dealt with domestic violence in her past.”

“How far do they live from the house where we’re staying?”

“We’re all in the same area. It takes about eight minutes to go from Viktor’s to Gabe’s. I timed it when we took the kids there this morning.”

“Let’s go to the house first, then. I want to try to calm down before going over to Viktor’s. I don’t want them to see me upset. You’re right in that they need to have some fun and just be kids for a little while. I’m letting my own fears control me and, in turn, them.”

“No, you’re not. You’re just scared. That’s normal.”

“I think I’ll probably always be scared in some respects.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“At first, I was simply because you’re a man. Then I started to be afraid of you because of how kind you were, and I’d let that blind me before. I didn’t trust myself.”

“And now?”

“And now I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid of losing you.”

“Never happen,” he said.

“You can’t promise me that. Especially given what you do for a living.”

“Normally, I’m not on bodyguard duty. I’m the information man. So you don’t need to worry as much.”

“Maybe,” she muttered.

“No maybe about it, sweetheart. I know what it’s like to lose someone, so I will not intentionally ever do that to you.”

Dylan wished he could promise her that he'd never be in danger, but he couldn't. Sometimes he did do bodyguard duty because they were short staffed. He could see Kade using this as an excuse not to expand for a while, but truthfully, they needed more men and women than had been hired. He may not be involved in the finances of the company, but he knew the amount of work they were doing. They needed people even if it was going to cost them in the beginning. You can't grow a business without spending money. Those were facts.

"How about we pick up some lunch and just relax for a few hours? You won a major victory today, and Annabelle isn't going anywhere. You can breathe a little easier, and the kids can enjoy some Halloween madness."

"Raine asked me if we were going trick-or-treating on Saturday. She wants to be a fairy, of course."

"We can take them in Viktor's neighborhood. It's safe, and they'll have a lot of fun."

"You think it would be okay?"

"I do. We'll have a small army of guards with us since all the Kincaid children will be there as well as Max and Shay's kids. They'll be surrounded on all sides."

He hoped it would go off without a hitch and they'd fall in love with New York as much as he had fallen in love with all of them. Being around Raine was still hard some days, but he found that if he embraced the pain and dealt with the memories, it wasn't as difficult to get through as it had been in years past. He'd grown to look forward to every time he heard Raine laugh, and he cheered her on when she was able to take a few steps with the aid of the child-sized walker. He loved the little girl, but then she wasn't hard to love with her outrageous stories of fairies and her contagious smile. The fact she could still smile after someone tried to kill her amazed him, but that was the resilience of children.

They grabbed lunch from Sal's pizza place a few doors down from Angel's bar. Their lasagna was some of the best he'd ever eaten. He might not be a pizza snob, but he could appreciate good Italian food when he came across it. Gregg

appreciated the three large pizzas he ordered for the guys in the command center. Dylan did wonder how much of it Gregg would eat all on his own. He'd watched him and Angel pack away seven pizzas on their own before. It wasn't a leap thinking he'd eat the majority of what Dylan handed over.

The house was quiet when they went in, and he set the alarm as he kicked off his shoes. Another force of habit. His mother had once made him mop the entire house when he'd tracked mud in at the age of thirteen. It was something he'd never done again. Some lessons just stayed with you.

"It's weird not having the kids here," Hailey said after a moment.

"We can go over to Viktor's if it makes you more comfortable."

"No, I'm good. Just commenting." She walked into the kitchen and got out plates and silverware as he unloaded the bags. "That smells good."

"Best lasagna you'll ever eat," he promised.

"So you say. You haven't tried mine."

"Do you do something special?"

"Pepperoni."

"Huh?"

"I add pepperoni and spicy Italian sausage to mine. I like the flavor it gives it."

"I've never seen that tried."

"I came up with it when I was fifteen. Those are my favorite pizza toppings, and I wondered what would happen if I added it to the lasagna. My dad loved it. We always made it like that from then on."

"You'll have to make it for me."

"That, I can do."

He pulled the chair out for her to sit, and she waved it off. "Let's eat in front of the TV. I want to finish *The Lincoln*

Lawyer.”

He shrugged and picked up their plates. “Do you want a glass of wine?”

“No, I don’t drink. My grandpa was an alcoholic, as was his dad. It runs in the family, so I tend to not drink any kind of alcohol.”

“Not even the occasional drink?”

“Nope, not even.” She sat and took her plate. “Do you drink?”

“I used to drink more when I was cop than I do now. Sometimes the things I saw, I’d drink to forget it so I could sleep. Allison noticed it, and I stopped drinking so much. It went to the occasional beer with friends if we were out. It remains that way today. I don’t keep beer in the house, another habit stemming from having kids.”

“I’m glad you don’t drink too much.”

“If it bothers you, I won’t drink at all.”

“No, I don’t want you to do that. You’re aware, and that’s all anyone can ask for. A beer every once in a while won’t kill you or me. Just because I don’t drink, I don’t expect other people not to.”

He turned on the TV and navigated to the show they’d been watching. He enjoyed it, but he thought she might like it more. She really was a huge fan of *Law And Order*.

“Have you ever thought about studying to be an attorney?” he asked as he ate.

“Not really. Why?”

“Well, you love any type of show having to deal with legal dramas. Why not think about doing something you love?”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it before.”

“Well, why not think about it? I can introduce you to Abbey. She’s an ADA, and you could ask her anything you wanted about a career as an attorney.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to be a prosecutor, though.”

“You’d be a defense attorney?”

“Well, everyone deserves a defense, and if you look at what I’ve just gone through, I can see why that’s true. If I were a lawyer, I’d want to work with cases like mine.”

“Family law, then.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“I know you said you wanted to be a teacher, but give it some thought. Figure out what you really want to do and then go for it.”

“I’d still want to get my teaching degree even if I did go on to law school. Never hurts to have a backup.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

They settled down and ate their lunch while they finished season two of *The Lincoln Lawyer*.

“I’m stuffed,” Dylan declared two hours later. He shouldn’t have had the pie that came with lunch.

Hailey glanced at her own plate, which still held some of her lunch, and her pie sat uneaten in the fridge. The kids would probably get it later. She wasn’t a fan of chocolate pie. Dylan, it seemed, was.

She shook her head and tried to gather their plates, but with one arm casted, it was a harder job than she’d thought.

“Let me.” Dylan took everything from her as well as what was on the table. “I can see you’re in pain. Do you need some ibuprofen?”

“I can get that myself.”

She wandered down the hall to the bathroom where it was located on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet. They’d moved everything out of the kids’ reach. She doubted they’d climb the sink and rummage around in it, but she wasn’t taking chances.

“Here.” Dylan handed her a bottle of water, and she gratefully accepted it. She chased down two of the pills with a drink of water, leaning back against the sink. She was in a little pain today. Not only did her arm ache, but her back did as well. Her kidney had been bruised when Josh kicked her over and over. The pain came and went. Today was a day it decided to flare up more than usual.

“What hurts?” Dylan asked, a frown etching his brow.

“Nothing to worry about.”

“Everything to worry about,” he countered. “You had major surgery not too long ago. You’ve been packing Annabelle around. Don’t think the guys haven’t told on you.”

Tattletales, the whole lot of them.

“It’s fine, Viking, I promise. I just need some rest, I think.”

“Then lay down while the kids are busy at Viktor’s. Sleep and I’ll...”

“You’ll what?”

“Catch up on paperwork.”

“What if...” She broke off, unsure of how she wanted to go about this. If there ever was a time, it was now while the kids were out of the house.

“What if?” he prompted when she didn’t finish her sentence.

“I was thinking...that...we haven’t really talked about...” Her face got hot, and no one had to tell her a blush was rushing to her cheeks.

He tipped her face up, his expression solemn. “What are you asking me?”

“I... Will you kiss me again?” There, she’d said it.

His ice blue eyes went slightly darker. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, unable to get any more words out for fear of embarrassing herself.

“Come on.” He took her hand and led her upstairs to her room. “There are cameras everywhere, and I don’t want

anyone getting a show.”

That never seemed to bother him before, but she wasn't going to argue with him either. She didn't like the thought of being watched any more than he did.

He closed the door behind them and leaned against it, studying her so intently it made her squirm. “What?”

“Nothing, just thinking about how beautiful you are.”

Some days she didn't feel beautiful. Being covered in baby spit-up would do that.

“Come here.” He held his hand out, and she hesitated a bare hint of second before taking it. Her brain was still trying to catch up with her heart.

“It's okay that you're wary,” he whispered when he'd pulled her close. “All things considered, I'd be worried if you weren't.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he agreed and tipped her face up. “I'm content to wait for you to be ready for me.”

“And if I was ready now?”

“You're not, at least not for everything, but that's okay too.”

“What do you mean, for everything?”

He smiled, and there was a bit of a devil in it. “Today is about you, Hailey. It can be about me, about us, later, but today is all you.”

She frowned, not understanding, but he didn't give her time to say anything else. He dipped his head and captured her lips. The kiss was achingly soft and gentle. He was always so patient in how he handled her.

Hailey pressed herself against him and deepened the kiss herself, knowing he'd keep it where it was if she didn't. He let her lead more than anyone else ever had. Not even Stevie took his cues from her.

It wasn't long before he pulled her toward the bed. He sat and kept her between his legs.

"Remember what I said?"

"Today is about me."

He nodded. "Do you trust me, Hailey?"

"Yes."

"Good girl." He smiled, but he didn't move to touch her. "I want you to take off your shirt. Can you do that?"

She swallowed but did as he asked, feeling very unsexy in her functional white bra. She was also self-conscious of the stretch marks she had from three births.

"Beautiful," he whispered more to himself than to her. He took her hand and pulled her closer. His fingers traced over her abdomen before moving up to cup her through her bra. "You all right with this?"

"Yes." She cleared her throat, having heard the squeak he didn't comment on.

"Can I take it off?"

She did it for him, and he chuckled. She liked that he asked, that he didn't assume she'd be fine with whatever he wanted to do. It let her control this, and maybe that was what she needed. Her control had been ripped from her thanks to Josh, and Dylan was giving some of that back to her. He was such a good man.

"Nope, you're staying out of your head today." He squeezed her nipple to make his point. "I just want you to feel today. No thinking."

Easier said than done.

"Do you feel comfortable taking your pants off?"

It was a big move. It was one thing to be topless, but it would leave her in nothing but her panties, almost completely naked and vulnerable.

"It's fine if you're not."

And that made up her mind. He meant it. He'd be fine if she said no. She undid the button and zipper on her jeans and let them fall, moving to kick them out of the way when they hit the floor.

“Good girl.”

She didn't know why, but she loved when he said that, like she'd done something so brave he wanted to praise her. She'd never been one to want that kind of praise before, but with Dylan, she craved it.

“Now what?” she asked when he only stared at her.

He scooted back on the bed, still fully clothed, until he was resting against the headboard. Then he beckoned her to follow him.

She climbed on the bed and straddled his lap. He looked surprised, but this time she ignored him and instead kissed him. He tasted like the chocolate pie he'd had earlier, and she found herself licking at the inside of his mouth, wanting to taste more of it. He let her kiss him for only a few minutes before he pulled away from her. She was unsteady and her breathing a little erratic, but he didn't even appear winded. Not fair.

Before she could pout about it, he pulled a nipple in his mouth, and she gasped so loud he laughed.

Hailey liked sex. A lot. Three kids were testimony of that. But never had she felt like she was on fire with a simple touch. His lips pulled and sucked, his tongue laved over her swollen nipple until the sensation ripped a moan out of her. She fisted his hair and tried to pull him away but found herself pressing him closer, wanting more of the exquisite torture.

He moved over to the second nipple, his fingers playing with the one his mouth just left bereft. It served to only heighten her arousal, and she squirmed on his lap.

“Stay still,” he said.

“I...” He bit down on her flesh, and her body spasmed. “Do that again.”

He laughed and did as he was commanded. “You like this?”

She nodded but then spoke, realizing he couldn’t see her. “Yes.”

His teeth latched on to her tip and pulled, biting down ever so gently. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make sure she felt it.

“God, yes, that. That, right there.”

She wasn’t sure how long he continued to torture her breasts, but it was enough to drive her to the brink. She could feel the heat gathering between her legs and the pressure building. She pressed down, seeking relief, but he denied her. Both hands gripped her hips and held her still while his mouth continued its ministrations to her breasts.

“Dylan,” she whined when she couldn’t take it anymore.

He ignored her.

And soon she understood. The orgasm hit her so unexpectedly, she nearly fell over. If it wasn’t for his hands holding her steady, she would have. He licked her nipples as her body twitched, taking its time coming down from one of the most intense orgasms of her life. From him simply sucking on her nipples.

“I...” she wheezed, trying to catch her breath. “I didn’t know that was possible.”

He simply watched her, his eyes hooded and full of desire.

“Can I touch you?” he asked.

“You’re not already?”

“Hailey.” His tone said it was not the time for jokes.

“Yes, Dylan, you can touch me wherever you want to.”

“Good girl.” He flipped her, and she was lying on her back staring up at him. “I’m going to take your panties off. You good with that?”

She nodded, lost for words at the intensity in his expression.

She expected him to pull them off, but he didn't. Instead, he came over her and leaned down to kiss her, keeping his weight off her. It was brief and over before she thought to kiss him back. He moved so he could kiss her neck, and then his lips traced a path down her body, licking and swiping as he went.

She watched as he moved between her legs. He took them, pressed them together, and pushed them toward her body so he could remove the white undies. She had no idea where they ended up as he tossed them. Her focus was on him.

He spread her legs, keeping them against her. "Hold your legs for me, baby. Don't let them fall."

She swallowed, and he only grinned at her.

When he didn't touch her, she shifted slightly. "Don't move."

The wait was killing her, and he knew it. Damn him. For a man intent on being gentle, he was being devious. She wanted his touch more than anything.

It wasn't his fingers she felt. It was his warm breath as his mouth moved closer to her center.

"Dylan, please..."

"Shh," he whispered. "Let me look."

She was completely naked and spread open before him like some kind of feast. None of her past lovers had ever taken the time to do this for her. It was get in, get out, with very little foreplay.

"Why are your clothes still on?"

"Because this is about you and not me."

"But what if what I want is to feel your skin against mine?"

"Are you ready for that, Hailey? And don't say yes. Think about it for a minute. I don't want to scare you. You're too important to me."

Was she ready?

She'd suffered beatings for almost six months. Beatings that made her pull inward, and she'd lost her self-confidence, her trust in a man.

But here was her Viking. He never pushed, was always patient, and did exactly what she needed. He put her first. Her needs came before his. Her kids' needs came before his. He'd earned their trust. And she felt safe telling him the truth.

"I don't know, but I'd like to try."

He sat up and studied her, looking for the truth of what she said. "If it gets to be too much, tell me and we'll stop. We'll go back downstairs and find something to watch until it's time to pick up the kids."

And this was why she felt safe enough to try with him.

She nodded.

He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. She knew he worked out and ran every morning, but the man was in shape. Far more than even Josh had been, and he went to the gym every day.

Dylan was toned and tanned with an athlete's physique. He really did remind her of a Viking warrior.

"Pants," she said.

He frowned, and she could tell he was about to say no, it was too much.

"Please, Dylan? Please let me see you."

His entire body softened, and he stood, letting his pants and boxers fall to the floor together. His body was on full display, and he didn't disappoint. He was a big man, so she'd expected he'd be big, but good Lord, the man's dick was huge.

"I'm not sure that'll fit."

He laughed. "We'll worry about that later. Right now, I want to taste you." He came back and crawled over her, his body encasing her, his skin as hot and fevered as she felt. Her hands came up, and he held still while she explored his body. His

eyes closed and he moaned, the first one he'd let out since this started. She smiled at the reaction her touch set off.

He nipped at her lips and gently pushed her hands away before moving back down to his original position between her legs. He pushed them wide and back, telling her to hold them.

He was damn bossy, she decided, and was about to tell him that when his tongue made a swipe from her opening up to her clit.

She sucked in a breath and let it out slowly when that same tongue tortured her clit. Her walls clenched and she pressed up, but his hand gripped her hips to hold her still.

“No, sweetheart, you're going to stay still and take the pleasure I give you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she gasped when his teeth tugged on her clit.

“If it gets to be too much, just tell me.”

As if.

It could have been five minutes, or it could have been an hour, but he continued to lavish attention on her with his teeth, his tongue, and his lips. She needed his fingers inside of her to relieve the pressure, and when she asked, he said no. He fucking said no.

He just continued, happy as you please.

“Dylan, I'm not going to forget this,” she warned. What was good for the goose was good for the gander.

“I'm hoping you won't.”

Right when she thought she was going to snap, he shoved two fingers inside her. He curled them, and it hit that spot that had rarely been touched. He thrust his fingers high and hard in her while he bit down on her clit, and it was all over but the screaming as another massive orgasm hit her.

He kept thrusting his fingers while she came down from the crash and her body twitched.

Dylan kissed her clit and climbed back up her body once she'd calmed down.

“Happy?”

She nodded, and he started to get up. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find something to clean you up with.”

“Don’t you want...”

“Like I said, it’s not about me. It’s about you.”

“And if I want you inside me?”

“You’re still going to have to wait because I don’t have any condoms, and I wouldn’t disrespect you like that.”

“Promise me you’ll go get condoms today.”

He laughed. “I’ll go get condoms today.”

“And I can sleep in your room instead of mine from now on?”

“You’d be okay with that?”

“You make me feel safe. I want to go to sleep knowing I’m safe.”

“You’ll always be safe with me.” He gently disentangled himself and went to the bathroom. He came back out carrying a warm, wet washcloth he used to clean her up. It was such a kind gesture. No one had done that for her in the past. He tossed it back into the bathroom when he was done and crawled into bed beside her. She went willingly into his arms, content for the first time in a long time as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-One



Halloween came, and the kids were bouncing around in all their costume glory. They both complained about the warm clothes they had on under their costumes, but it was downright cold outside. Sure, the high fifties might not be cold to everyone up north, but it was freezing to a southerner. She didn't want her kids getting sick because they weren't dressed warmly enough.

Everyone was gathered at Viktor's house, and all the children were raring to go. There were a lot of them, too. All, except for two of them, were five or under. Hailey doubted she'd remember everyone's names, but with as much laughing as was going on, she didn't care. Halloween was her favorite holiday, and she'd decided to let herself enjoy the day.

Josh was a constant worry. They knew he was in New York. He'd been spotted twice, and Max had all but had him several times, according to Dylan, but he remained a step ahead. It was pissing both Max and Dylan off. She'd heard them discussing it. But she'd warned them. Josh's family had a lot of pull and resources. They might not ever find him if he didn't want to be found.

But she was a constant reminder of his failure. He'd told her once that he never failed at anything. He always got what he wanted one way or another. The day she told him to leave and never come back, he'd smiled. She knew then it wasn't going

to be a clean break; she just hadn't known how physically abusive he was.

Thanks to her therapist, she was starting to lose some of her fear and to let out all the anger at the situation. Holding it inside wasn't good for her or the kids. She dealt with it through talking.

"You guys about ready to go?" Dimitri asked as he came through the living room dressed as Count Dracula. It amazed her that he had such light blond hair when every one of his brothers were all dark complected with black eyes and black hair. She'd heard Viktor tease him about being adopted. He took it good naturedly and said he couldn't help that he inherited all the good looks from their mother.

She did wonder what their mother looked like because Dimitri was such a stark contrast to the other Kincaid brothers.

"I think so," Angel said as she started wrangling kids. "Kade, you're sure you want to stay home and give out candy?"

"I'm not dealing with that mob." He waved to where the kids were gathering. "I did it last year. It's Vik's turn."

Viktor, who was dressed in an Indiana Jones outfit, smiled and started to tell him payback was a...but was cut off when his wife slapped a hand over his mouth, pointing to the kids listening to the exchange.

And this was why she loved Halloween. Everyone was dressed up and being silly. Raine and Cash were laughing, and all was right with the world for this short period of time. Annabelle was in the playpen in the corner of the room surrounded by toys and gurgling happily. Sara had offered to watch her until they got back, and she'd had no reason to say no. Dylan assured her it was safe.

"Let's get this nightmare on the road," Dimitri said and opened the front door. There was a line of kids coming up the driveway. "Kade, you're up!"

The kids piled out of the house and started toward the one next door. Hailey hung back and just watched them all. She

took out her phone and started snapping pictures. This would go in her scrapbook of special memories. She'd thought everything was lost, and now she was happier than she'd ever been, even with the threat of Josh lurking.

Jarrold was pushing Raine's wheelchair, and he'd lift her out of it when they got to homes with porches. She demanded to stand, and he held on, ready to catch her if need be. She'd wanted to do it, but Raine had demanded Jarrold wheel her. It didn't bother her in the least, as Jarrold was the reason Raine was up and starting to walk. Let the man be her crutch if that was what she wanted.

"Happy?" Dylan murmured.

"Extremely."

"It's been a while since I've been on trick or treat duty. I'd forgotten how much fun it was."

"Let's hope you still say that in an hour when your feet are killing you."

"That's why I put on the running shoes."

"Which clashes with your Viking outfit."

He shrugged. "As long as you like it, I don't care what anyone else thinks, Dorothy of Kansas."

She laughed and looked down at her ruby slippers. It was one of the few costumes left that actually fit. Everything else had been cleaned out. She'd even braided her hair in pigtails.

"Dorothy loves your costume, Viking. Now, march forth and try not to get in front of the stampede of children."

The next hour passed without incident, and Dylan kept a close eye on all the children. They'd gotten a call about half an hour before they'd gone out trick-or-treating that a group of armed men had tried to break into Gabe's house. They'd been stopped and arrested. Not one of them had cracked so far on who sent them. The police had them in a holding cell until they could be either arraigned or transferred to the county lockup. They hadn't told Hailey yet because they didn't want

to ruin Halloween for her or the kids. He'd tell her once they were back at Viktor's and everyone was safe.

He'd also called in four guys to follow along at a short distance to make sure everything went off without a hitch. Kade and Viktor agreed with the extra manpower since their own kids would be out here.

Several of the younger kids were starting to wear down and they were slowing, a sure sign it was time to turn around and go home. Delia and Mateo were having none of that. They wanted to keep going. Dylan could hear them pleading with Dimitri, and he grinned. No one told Delia no. She'd pudge her lip out and it would wobble and that was that.

He heard Dimitri agree to fifteen more minutes.

Those fifteen minutes would turn into an hour while the rest of them packed the littler ones. Cash was already sitting in Raine's lap while Jarrod pushed them.

Hailey stopped walking and bent down to take one of her shoes off and shake out her foot. How she wore heels without complaining was a mystery to him. He was used to a lot of physical exercise since he needed to stay in shape, and all the walking didn't really bother him, but she was still healing.

So he squatted down in front of her. "Hop on, sweetheart."

"I'm too old for a piggyback ride."

"You're never too old for one," he rebuked. "Hop on. And watch that skirt. Don't be showing the goods to the neighborhood."

She snorted but then did as he asked and climbed on his back. He caught her legs as her arms wrapped around his neck, and he stood. She wasn't heavy, and he could carry her like this the rest of the walk if need be.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Dylan?"

"Hmm?" he asked when her chin hit his shoulder.

"Can I tell you something?"

“You can tell me anything.”

“My kids love you.”

“I love them, too.”

“It’s not too hard for you? I mean Raine is around the same age as Molly.”

He started to walk, and it took him a minute to answer her. “At first it was. But then I remembered how much Molly loved everyone. She’d embrace Raine, and they’d be best friends before the day was out. That’s just who she was. She’d want me to do the same. Some days, it hurts, and I can’t breathe for missing her, but most days it hurts less. Raine is not Molly. She’ll never replace her in my heart, but loving Molly helped me open my heart to Raine. She’s mine now as much as Annabelle, Cash, and you are.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“With all my heart, Hailey. I love all of you, and I’m going to love you until my last breath.”

“Me?” she asked softly. “You love me?”

He hadn’t planned on telling her that. He was afraid it would make her run, but it sort of just popped out.

“I know you’re probably thinking of all the red flags that raises, but I’m nothing like Josh. I don’t abuse women and children. And it’s okay to not say it back. I know you need time. I just want you to know I’m not going anywhere and I’m going to be here for you and the kids.”

She started to say something, but as they passed by two houses separated by a security fence, she cried out, and he felt her being pulled off his back. He held her legs tighter, but a gunshot rang out, and the pain blistered his shoulder as the bullet ripped through it. His arm fell, and Hailey was hauled away from him.

He turned, pulled his gun, and aimed it at Josh Rivers. The man was dressed like he just left the boardroom in slacks, a dark navy button-down shirt with a lighter color tie. His hair was styled and his wire-framed glasses perched on his nose. If

it weren't for the gun he was holding to Hailey's head, you'd never know he was a deranged lunatic.

"Did you really think you could escape me, Hailey?" Josh asked as he pulled her deeper in between the fences. "I told you I always get what I want, and if I can't have you, then no one can, not even those brats of yours."

"Stop," Dylan told him, his voice quiet and deadly. He saw his men rushing out of the corner of his eye, but he kept his sights trained on the man holding his heart.

"Do you think I'm scared of you? You're not going to shoot me as long as I have her. So where do we go from here?"

"That depends on you," Dylan said, locking his emotions down so he wouldn't do something stupid.

"I think that depends on Hailey. If she's a good girl and comes with me, then no one else has to get hurt."

"There are men surrounding you on all sides. The police are on the way. Hailey's not going anywhere."

"Then I'll just kill her here and now."

"If you shoot your gun, then ours will fire in response."

"She dies, I win. I kill her and you kill me, I still win. It's a win-win situation for me."

Rage flared to life in Dylan, but he pushed it down. His rage would get her killed.

"You kill her, we *won't* kill you. We'll shoot to incapacitate, and you'll go to jail where they will prosecute you for first-degree murder. You'll spend the rest of your life in prison. All the money and connections in the world can't save you if you kill her. Then *I* win, motherfucker."

Josh laughed, the sound echoing through the now-empty streets. Thank God all the kids had already turned the corner. Viktor would keep them away from this.

"What do I care if I go to jail? I have enough money to keep me protected and rolling in whatever I want. I still win."

Money could buy him a lot of things in jail. He wasn't wrong.

"But this isn't the south." Conner stepped up beside him. "This is New York, where we know all the cops, all the judges, and all the wardens. All the money in the world can't save you from us. If we took down a cartel, an overgrown child will be easy to deal with. I can guarantee you'll be visited daily. They'll never kill you, but you'll always remember us."

"You don't scare me." The man's eyes were full of delight. He wasn't scared. He was truly insane.

"That's fine, Joshua." Conner smiled. "The people I do scare are the ones you'll be dealing with in jail. That's all that matters."

Dylan kept his attention on the gun pointed at Hailey's temple. Her face was pale, but she didn't look as terrified as he thought she would. She looked almost calm, and that scared him. Did she think this was inevitable? Was she giving up?

"Hailey, you good?" he asked, just needing to hear her voice.

"I'm okay."

Josh laughed. "Not for long."

"Maybe not, but my kids are fine. That's all that matters to me."

"How the fuck those brats survived is—"

"A miracle," she finished for him. "Evil doesn't always win."

"It's going to win today."

Gregg was behind Josh. He put a finger to his lips and crept closer. He was silent as he approached the pair.

"Hailey."

Her eyes cut to him. "You told me you loved me, and I didn't get the chance to say it back. I do love you, Dylan, more than I ever thought possible. So much so I'm trusting you with my babies. Promise me you'll take care of them."

“You can take care of them yourself.”

She smiled slightly. “I filed the papers last week naming you their guardian if something happens to me.”

Gregg was right behind them.

“Hailey, honey, listen to me. I need you to do something for me.”

“I’m sick of this shit,” Josh butted in. “Enough talking. I don’t want to hear this. Time to pay the piper, Hailey Jo.”

“Hailey, fall down now!”

She listened and slid down Josh’s body. He pulled the trigger too late, and the bullet whizzed to the left. Gregg hit him from behind, taking him to the ground while the others rushed to help hold him down.

Dylan pulled Hailey free of the mess and wrapped his arms so tight around her, she’d probably had a hard time breathing, but he’d just been scared shitless.

“I got you,” he murmured. Her body shook. “I got you, baby. It’s okay. I got you.”

“I love you,” she told him, tears running down her face. “I didn’t want to die and you never hear me say the words. I love you so much.”

He watched as Gregg zip tied Josh’s hands and feet together and hauled him up onto the sidewalk. He was screaming obscenities, but he was contained. They thought something like this might happen, but they assumed he’d wait until there were just a few people around. They’d discussed contingencies and scenarios, but no one had thought about Josh choosing Halloween to try to take her.

“Your shoulder,” she gasped and pulled back. Her already pale face went white. “Oh, my God, you’re bleeding!”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Conner told him, his face stern and stony. “Paramedics are almost here. That’s going to require a hospital visit.”

“It’s...”

“It’s a through and through. You need x-rays to make sure no bones were chipped. Don’t argue.”

He shut up. Conner had the air of a commanding officer, and he’d respected the chain of command in the police force. It irked him that his first thought was to obey, but then Hailey made this distressing sound.

“Please don’t argue, Dylan. Get it looked at. Please.”

Conner smirked, knowing he wouldn’t tell Hailey no.

Bastard was more manipulative than Viktor.

“Fine, but I’m not going anywhere until the police get here and that asshole goes to jail.”

It took another ten minutes for the police and the paramedics to arrive and put Rivers into the back of a police car. Conner and Gregg followed when they finally took Josh to the station.

The paramedics told him he needed to go to the ER, and he went without argument. Hailey rode with him, Cole telling her he’d make sure the kids were fine.

The hospital was a six-hour event. For x-rays, stitches, and pain meds.

By the time they made it back to Gabe’s, the house was quiet. They checked on the kids, who were sound asleep, and they waved to Jarrod, who sat in a chair, reading.

Hailey followed him into his room. She helped him out of his costume and fussed over his shoulder.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not yet. They numbed it. It’ll hurt like a bitch in the morning, though.”

Jarrold knocked on the door. “You decent?”

“Come on in.”

“I just got a text from Gregg. Police will be here at seven a.m. to take your statements. They wanted you to come down,

but Conner convinced them to come here instead.”

“They book the bastard?”

Jarrold grinned. “Gregg said they heard him screaming all the way outside the police station. He’s demanding his attorney and better accommodations. Hate to see what he thinks of Rykers. He ain’t in Georgia anymore.”

Dylan glanced at the clock. It was after one in the morning, and the pain meds they gave him were kicking in. He could barely hold his eyes open. He hated any kind of pain meds, but he knew that without them, when the numbing wore off, he was going to be in some serious pain, so he’d agreed to a day or two’s worth of meds.

“I’ll let you guys get some sleep. Don’t worry about breakfast. Mason said he’d stop by his favorite breakfast place over by campus and bring everyone food. He said they have the best pancakes in the city.”

He’d have to tell the kid thanks when he saw him.

“Do the kids know anything is wrong?”

“They wanted to know where you both were, but I told them we caught the bad guy and everyone was talking to the police. I said you’d see them in the morning.”

“Did that go over well?”

“No,” he laughed, “but they eventually passed out. They’d walked so much tonight, they were too tired to fight sleep.”

“Thank you and Cole for watching over them tonight.”

“It’s all good, Miss Hailey. We love the little buggers. Uncle Cole and Uncle Jarrod will always be here for when you need us.”

She leaned her head against Dylan’s chest, and he pulled her closer.

“You two get some sleep. That one looks ready to pass out.” Jarrold ducked out of the room and closed the door. “Keep it PG-13!” he yelled through the door. “I don’t need to be hearing any of that!”

Hailey giggled.

“I doubt I could manage anything other than PG-13.”

“Sit.” She pushed him down on the bed and took his shoes off. He’d forgotten when he came through the door downstairs. Then she helped him with his pants. “I don’t know where your pajamas are.”

“It’s fine. I can sleep in my underwear. Just help me get this shirt off.”

He took the sling off his arm, and she gently removed his shirt before making him put the sling back on. “The doctor said you had to wear it until you see the orthopedic surgeon.”

The bullet had hit his shoulder blade before tearing through to the other side. It splintered the bone, and they wanted to keep him. He refused. Hailey argued, but he needed to get home and see his kids in order for his insides to settle down. Hailey was fine, but he wasn’t until he’d seen all three of the kids, safe and sound asleep in bed.

“I want to adopt them,” he said.

She reared back. “What?”

“I’m going to propose to you sometime in the very near future. When we get married, I want to legally adopt them. They’re mine, and I want them to know they’re wanted and loved by me.”

“I…”

He took her hand. “I know you’re not ready yet. I can wait patiently until you are. I’m just letting you know that I want those kids as much as I do you. I want all of you to have my last name.”

He swiped the tears that fell down her cheek. He hadn’t meant to make her cry.

“You’re a good man, Dylan.”

“I’m also the man who loves you with everything he has.”

She leaned forward and kissed him, but she pulled away before he could do anything to deepen it.

“Nope. You need to sleep, and those kisses lead to things you’re not up for tonight. All I want is for you to sleep and know that I love you. Everything else can be figured out in the morning.”

“Are you going to say yes when I ask you?”

“Yes, Dylan, when you ask me in the future, not today, not tomorrow, not next month, I will say yes.”

He knew she’d need time to accept this, not because she didn’t love him, but because she still had trust issues with herself. He could wait.

“Viktor showed me a house yesterday two streets over from his that’s for sale. It has six bedrooms and a back yard as big as his. If you like it, I want to buy it for you and the kids. I can stay at my apartment until you’re ready to have me around all the time.”

She helped him get into bed and then stripped down to her bra panties. White. When she slid in and cuddled up to him, his entire body relaxed.

“I want you around all the time.”

“Thank fuck,” he muttered and kissed the top of her head. The first signs of discomfort hit his shoulder, but he ignored it. Having her here with him was worth it.

“Do you think Josh is going to stay in jail?”

“Oh, he will. They’ll prosecute him here in New York for attempted murder of both of us. He fired his weapon and it hit me. He’s not going anywhere any time soon. Once he serves his time here, then Georgia will get a crack at him for the attempted murders of all of you.”

“They’ll try him here first?”

“Honestly, that’ll be up to the prosecutor and the DA, so I can’t promise it, but he’s going to jail for a long time no matter where he ends up. If he goes to Georgia first, he’ll still face charges here in New York once he’s served his time there.”

“He’s not going to get bail?”

“Considering he’s had a warrant out on him for almost a month? They won’t give him bail because he evaded police and he has the means to flee.”

“I hope he rots in jail.”

“We’ll do everything we can to keep him there.” He shifted so his shoulder wasn’t unsupported. “Now, let’s get some sleep, and we’ll worry about tomorrow tomorrow. That sound good?”

She nodded and yawned.

Soon they both fell asleep, and Dylan was more than grateful for the second chance he’d been given and the family that came with it for him to love and protect and for them to do the same for him.

Epilogue



Kids ran everywhere, but Dylan didn't see his anywhere, and panic set in. He'd probably always panic when he couldn't lay eyes on Cash, Annabelle, and Raine. Simply because his own had died, and they'd nearly lost all three to gunshot wounds last year. He knew how easily things could happen, things that took the most precious people away from him.

"Raine!"

"She's right there." Hailey pointed to the left, and sure enough, she was standing with Kade's daughter, Arielle, at the corner of Viktor's house. They were getting ready to go trick-or-treating. "And Cash is over there with MJ."

MJ was Max and Shayna's little boy. Technically, he was Max's brother, but they'd adopted him and his sister, Grace. The two of them decided they would raise them as their own, and they didn't want it to be weird if they had kids of their own down the line.

Hailey was barely holding onto Annabelle, who wanted down to play with all the other kids.

"Let her run," he told his soon-to-be wife. "If she gets too tired while we're out, one of us will carry her while the other

packs Cash.” He’d end up packing Cash because the kid was just heavier than his sister.

Raine was running around like a hooligan with Arielle. It was a blessing. It had taken months of hard work, but you’d never know she’d had to relearn to walk. He always saw the pride in Hailey’s eyes when she saw her baby running. Jarrod took credit for it, and neither he nor Hailey disagreed. If Jarrod hadn’t come up with the fairy dust idea, she might not be where she was now.

“Let her run?” Hailey laughed. “Weren’t you just yelling for her at the top of your lungs?”

“I can see where she is now, so it’s fine.”

Hailey snorted. “Why is Conner glaring?”

“He’s on niece duty when we go out. Kade told him it’s his turn this year to wrangle the girls. No one is getting near any of them. Once we leave, I’ll be zen knowing Conner is watching them.”

“I get the feeling he scares people a lot.”

“You’re not afraid of him?”

Dylan waited patiently for her answer while she thought about it. “No. Maybe because he’s never been scary around me. He’s charming.”

It was Dylan’s turn to snort. “Charming is one way to put it.”

“Are you jealous?”

“No.”

She made a humming noise that said otherwise.

“Do you miss Georgia?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Sometimes.”

“What do you miss?”

“The gallons of sweet tea.”

“We have sweet tea here.”

“Uh, no. Unless I make it myself, I can’t get a decent cup of it. What passes for sweet tea here would be considered garbage down south.”

“It’s not that bad.” He drank it sometimes, and it really wasn’t.

“It’s like drinking diluted Pepsi with a dash of tea thrown into it. It’s garbage.”

The sweet tea Hailey made was good, but it had too much sugar in it for him. It was diabetes in a cup. He’d agree to disagree on this because he knew he’d never win the argument. You didn’t debate a southerner about their sweet tea.

“What else do you miss?”

“Southern cooking. And I know I make it myself, but it’s not the same as going into a restaurant and ordering food I didn’t have to cook. People up here don’t understand the concept of gravy.”

People up north didn’t drown their food in gravy, but again, it wasn’t a fight he was going to win.

“What else?”

“Hot summer days just sitting on the porch swing and listening to the crickets as night falls.”

“The trailer had a porch swing?”

“My grandparents’ place did. Daddy sold it after they died, and I missed that house.”

Dylan had learned that while Hailey’s father adored her and did anything he could for her, he’d had a bit of a gambling problem. Most of the money he’d gotten for the house went to pay off those debts. She didn’t blame her father, but it would have made her life a hell of a lot easier if she’d had a home instead of an apartment.

“So you’re telling me you want a porch swing?”

“It would be nice.”

They'd bought the house two streets over from Viktor's. All the furniture that had been purchased for the safe house in Georgia had been moved up here to furnish the new house once all the renovations had been done. The house had needed a lot. They'd lived in his two-bedroom apartment for six months while the contractor worked to get the house remodeled. Annabelle's crib was in the master, while Cash and Raine shared a room. It had been cramped, but Dylan thought it was needed. It gave the kids a sense of safety and security.

"The papers came today," Hailey told him.

"Whatever Conner did to make Ronnie sign the adoption papers worked. I'm assuming it's one of those situations where I shouldn't ask questions?"

"You would be right. I'll have to tell him thank you." The paperwork for him to adopt Raine and Cash had already been filed, and they were just waiting on a court date. Ronnie had been a little vindictive about losing out on the hundred grand Joshua Rivers promised him for trying to fuck Hailey over with Annabelle's custody. He'd been refusing to sign the adoption papers for weeks. Conner said to leave it with him when he'd heard Hailey talking to Sara about it. Whatever he did worked, and Dylan wasn't going to ask him any questions.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

They both turned to see Cash running full speed toward them. Dylan blinked, and when the kid hit him, he fell backward, his arms automatically going around the kid to keep him from getting hurt as they fell.

"Look!" Cash held up the brand-new Mator truck Gabe had bought him. Only now it was covered in grumpy stickers. But none of that mattered to Dylan. Cash had called him Daddy without so much as a moment's hesitation. It was the first time he'd done that.

He glanced to Hailey, and she brushed the tears away. Several of the women were also crying. Hell, Dylan felt like crying himself.

“Look,” Cash said again, and Dylan forced himself to pay attention.

“Why did Mator poop on himself?”

The kid giggled hilariously and jumped off Dylan and rushed away without answering.

He lay there looking up at the darkening sky, kids running all around him, feeling both shocked and happy. *He called me Daddy.*

“He called you Daddy,” Hailey whispered.

“He called me Daddy,” Dylan agreed and finally managed to pick himself up off the ground. Sure, Annabelle had been the first one with the da-da-da, and then Raine started a few months after that, but Cash rarely spoke. And when he did, it was usually one or two words.

Granted, he’d only said two words this time, but boy what a feeling it gave Dylan to hear the child he already called his son say the word “daddy.” It meant more to him than anyone realized, even Hailey. When he’d lost Molly, it broke something inside of him that these three children were slowly healing. He didn’t feel empty anymore, and there were still days his grief would overpower him when he thought about his daughter. There would be days like that until the last time he closed his eyes and passed, but it was bearable now, and the kids had done that to him. They gave him back his joy, tarnished as it may be without his daughter.

It was a gift he cherished.

Hailey wrapped her arms around him. “I’m so happy!”

Now everything would be complete when they got to the church in two weeks and she said, “I do.” They had built a family based on trust and love, and he would protect it with his life for as long as he could.

“I’m happy too, sweetheart, but I’ll be happier when you and the kids have my last name.”

She grinned and then pulled his head down so she could kiss him. There were catcalls and laughter, but he didn’t care. If

this was what the rest of his life would be like, he'd take it and never look back.

About the Author

So who am I? Well, I'm the crazy girl with an imagination that never shuts up. I LOVE scary movies. My friends laugh at me when I scare myself watching them and tell me to stop watching them, but who doesn't love to get scared? I grew up in a small town nestled in the southern mountains of West Virginia where I spent days roaming around in the woods, climbing trees, and causing general mayhem. Nights I would stay up reading Nancy Drew by flashlight under the covers until my parents yelled at me to go to sleep.

Growing up in a small town, I learned a lot of values and morals, I also learned parents have spies everywhere and there's always someone to tell your mama you were seen kissing a particular boy on a particular day just a little too long. So when you get grounded, what is there left to do? Read! My Aunt Jo gave me my first real romance novel. It was a romance titled "Lord Margrave's Deception." I remember it fondly. But I also learned I had a deep and abiding love of mysteries and anything paranormal. As I grew up, I started to write just that and would entertain my friends with stories featuring them as main characters.

Now, I live in Huntersville, NC where I entertain my niece and nephew and watch the cats get teased by the birds and laugh myself silly when they swoop down and then dive back up just out of reach. The cats start yelling something fierce...lol.

I love books, I love writing books, and I love entertaining people with my silly stories.

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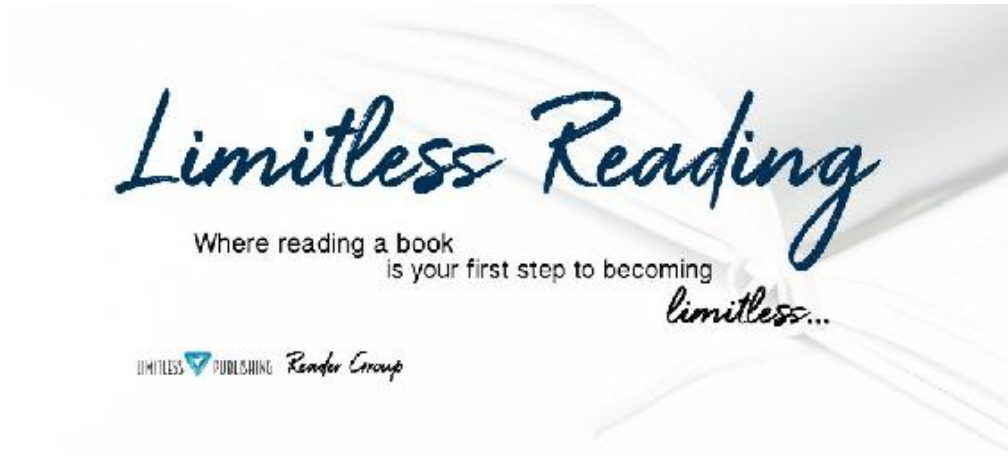
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