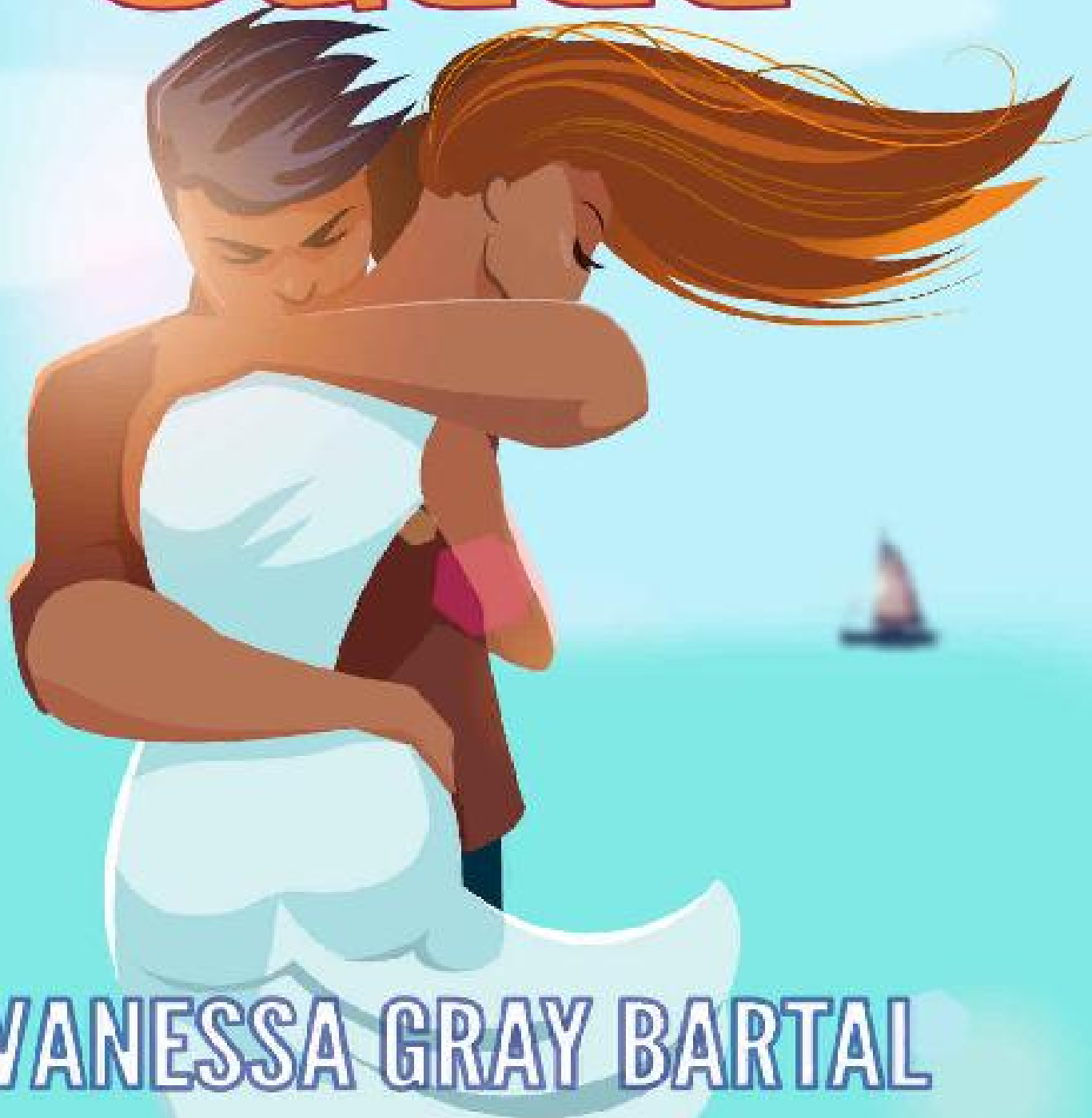


Hacked and Jaded



VANESSA GRAY BARTAL

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CHAPTER 1



Something had been wrong and off the last few months, and Elyse knew exactly what it was. Or rather who. Ever since her boss (and friend) Gaines Hillcrest quit to open a private company, work hadn't been the same. It wasn't only that his replacement was a horrible human, though he was, it was also that he had messed up the flow she, Gaines, and Logan had created. At the time she knew she had fun and enjoyed her work, but she had no idea they'd captured lightning in a bottle, that everything after would feel unnatural and disconnected. She still saw Logan occasionally, still grabbed lunch when they were both miraculously available, but the magic was gone, and so was the fun. Elyse never dreamed she would be that person who dreaded work, who dreamed of retirement. But here she was, dreading and dreaming.

She was doing it now, dreaming of a different life as she stood outside Gaines's newly christened security firm, picturing a life where she could also chuck it all and follow her dream. The problem, besides money, was that she thought she had already followed her dream. For as long as she could remember she had wanted to be a hacker, working for the government as a spy. *You did it, now what?* That was the question that haunted her lately. She had worked a few

freelance jobs for Gaines, as a favor, but certainly she couldn't work for him fulltime. Neither of them could afford the other. His company was new and still getting started, she didn't fault him for that. But Elyse was self-supported and couldn't take a pay cut, not now or anytime in the future.

Sighing, she made herself step forward and open the door.

"Good morning," a cheerful female voice greeted her. Elyse stopped short and stared at the woman who gave her a beaming smile of welcome. She wore a pink dress with a yellow cardigan that had honest to goodness gnomes knit into it. The image was so incongruous with the serious looking sign out front that Elyse was momentarily disoriented.

"Uh, hi," she said slowly, and it came out like a question.

"Hi," the woman repeated, beaming. "Can I help you?"

"I have a meeting with Gaines," Elyse said in the same slow drawl, her brain still trying to make sense of the woman's unexpected appearance.

"Super, I'll let him know you're here," she said. "Would you like a latte while you wait? We have caramel, vanilla, and white chocolate peppermint." She listed the flavors on her fingers, her tone loaded with more enthusiasm that Elyse had ever used for anything in her life.

"I'm good, thanks," Elyse said. She still stared, but the woman seemed unperturbed by her inspection and soon returned to her work, highlighting the heavy stack of papers in front of her on the desk. The door behind her opened and Tristan stepped out. Elyse had met Tristan twice when helping him on other cases. He was built like a tank and impressively stern, like a wall with arms. She watched with something like awe as he stopped behind the woman and squeezed her

shoulder, expression going all soft and gooey as he glanced down at her.

“Hi,” Elyse said, now sounding amused.

Tristan snapped to attention and made his face blank again. “Oh, hi, Elyse.”

The woman at the desk gasped. “You’re Elyse, *the* Elyse?”

“Er, yes?” Elyse said, not sure why she should be famous in these parts.

“I’ve heard so much about you. Oh, you have the most interesting job ever.” Truly, the woman stared at her like a teenager at a Taylor Swift concert.

“Um, thanks,” Elyse said, eyes swiveling as they searched for a safe place to land. Thankfully Gaines chose that moment to open his office and poke his head out.

“Hey, sorry, I was on a call. Come in.” To the woman at the desk he added, “Hold my calls,” which for some reason made her laugh with what sounded a lot like delight.

“You got a secretary?” Elyse said as she followed Gaines into his office and closed the door. She hoped Gaines wasn’t wounded by her incredulity, but last she knew his fledgling outfit couldn’t afford anyone more than Tristan, though business had been picking up steam lately. She was confident he’d get there, but he hadn’t yet, as far as she knew.

He laughed good naturedly, which was pretty much his go-to state of being. “No, that’s Josie, former client, turned Tristan’s girlfriend.”

Elyse’s eyes bugged. She had helped on Josie’s case, but they hadn’t met. “That girl and *Tristan*?”

“I know, right?” Gaines said, sharing her amusement. Tristan was the epitome of ascetic. “She teaches kindergarten and is lending a hand for a few weeks until school begins. She’s been a lifesaver. Not only is she handling all the phones and greetings, she’s been doing a lot of busywork neither of us has time for. She says it’s a fun change of pace.”

“Anything else would be,” Elyse said, shuddering at the thought of being locked in a room with twenty five-year-olds. Her opinion of Josie just went up ten notches. She’d worked with a slew of spies over the years, but not one of them was brave enough for that particular task.

Gaines leaned back in his chair, regarding her. “What can I do for you, friend?”

It was strange, Elyse thought, how his departure felt like the true beginning of her maturity. Before he left, she’d held onto the belief that work would always be fun, that her coworkers would always click and work well together. Now she knew better. And she already realized something else: not everyone was a true friend, ready and willing to be there for her, no matter what. Gaines was one such person, so when he called her friend and asked what he could do for her, he really meant it. Despite the fact that his business was new and he had to hustle to find clients and keep solvent, if Elyse asked him, he would drop everything to come to her aid.

She smiled. “Lucky for you, today I only need advice.”

His brows rose. “*You* need *my* advice? You know everything.”

Now she laughed. Elyse was skilled with a computer, but Gaines had often told her it was her gut and instinct he relied on more. And in fact he had done so, on many assignments. She had a gut feeling about things that usually turned out to be

correct. “I do,” she agreed, causing him to chuckle. “But I’m entering into uncharted waters, or about to.”

“How so?” he asked.

She huffed a breath. “I think my uncle is missing.”

“You think?”

“He’s...” she made a back and forth motion with her hand. “I guess you’d call him an anti-government conspiracy theorist? Maine tends to breed those, especially the part of Maine I’m from. We take care of ourselves, and we don’t like outsiders. He’s always been the family oddball, even by Maine standards, and that’s saying a lot. So no one thinks too much of the fact that he’s become a little MIA, but I have this feeling that something’s not right.”

Gaines nodded gravely. “The Elyse Intuition. You know my feelings on that. What do you need from me?”

“I took some time off work. I’m going to go up there and poke around a little.”

His brows rose. He didn’t know the full story on her life or her family, but he knew enough to understand what it meant for her to go back home after she’d fought so hard to get away. “Do you want me to come with you?”

It was nothing less than she expected of him, but it still made her heart wrench and tears prick her eyes that he’d offered. “I don’t think I’m there yet, I’d like to poke around a little, see what I think is going on. But I’ve never handled a full investigation myself, not sure I even know where to begin. I guess I wanted to give you a heads up, have you on standby, in case I have questions or get stuck and need some direction.”

“I am always happy to be on standby and answer questions or provide direction, but I don’t think you’re going to need it,

Elyse. You're one of those rare hackers who could do my job, too. You've always been innovative, self-directed, and good at thinking on your feet. You'll do fine."

She felt something inside her settle and calm at his reassurance and let out a breath, relaxing the stiff set of her shoulders. "I'm pretty mad at you, Gaines. Your replacement is the absolute worst." She rolled her eyes, thinking of her new boss, whose every breath felt like a living demotivational poster. He vacillated between being a nitpicky micromanager and absentee ghost, one who left his underlings holding the bag when his absences inevitably hit the fan.

"I'm sorry. I've been hearing rumors, but I didn't know it had gotten this bad."

"It's only a matter of time until someone dies," Elyse said, and she wasn't joking. The line of work she was in dealt with life and death matters on a daily basis and there was no room for error or ego.

He spread his hands. "The offer is always open to join us."

"I would love that, truly, but..." she let her words trail away, not wanting to insult him.

He grinned, reading her mind. "But I can't afford you."

She shook her head sadly.

"Someday," he promised.

"I'd love that," she reiterated. "In the meantime, I'm a walking ad for your firm. Anything that comes along that's outside our realm, I shuttle them toward you."

"I appreciate that," Gaines said.

He didn't say as much, but she thought the new venture was going well. She knew Gaines well, after so many hours

logged together in so many different situations and countries. Though he always projected an unruffled, easygoing air, she could always see beneath the façade. There was no desperation in him now, no what-have-I-done regret, merely a fierce determination to keep going. That signaled to her that he was making a success of it, one client at a time. *Maybe someday*, she thought and gathered her bag as she stood.

“Have fun in Maine,” Gaines said.

“Not possible,” she replied, gut clenching with dread.

“Then at least have some lobster,” he amended.

She didn’t tell him there was no joy in lobster or anything related to her home state anymore, if there ever had been.

CHAPTER 2



She caught a flight into Portland, rented a car, and drove up the highway, bypassing the beautiful coastline in favor of expedience. Even with that timesaver it was a four-hour drive to the tiny little town of Hanset, nestled between Machias and Eastport. Coming home brought no sense of comfort or relief, only a tense sort of anxiety that had increased since her parents gave up their battle against the elements in favor of warmth and comfort in Florida. She wouldn't be seeing them on this trip. If she had her way, she wouldn't see anyone she knew, save her uncle, if she could find him. But that wasn't how life in a small town worked, especially in the off season when there were no tourists to distract from the harsh reality that was cold weather in Maine.

Almost as soon as she was within the town limits, she saw the lights and heard the siren. Repressing a useless sigh, she slowly eased the car to the side of the road and slid it into park. Only when he knocked did she realize she'd forgotten to roll down the window. Instead she'd been staring straight ahead, gearing up.

"Do you have your license and registration, Ma..." That was as far as he got before he froze, mouth dropping about a half inch in shock before he recovered.

She knew him, of course, had known him since the beginning. He had haunted her nightmares for almost two decades, and now he looked at her the same way he always had, as if he couldn't believe two such different species inhabited the same planet. To be fair, it was the same way she'd always looked at him.

“What's the trouble, officer?” she asked. It was harder to infuse her tone with wry sarcasm than she wanted it to be. “Was I driving without being known in town again?”

His lips pressed together in annoyance. Was he annoyed at her observation or at being caught pulling someone over for nothing? She had no idea. “Your left taillight is flickering,” he said. “This is a friendly warning to be on the lookout and maybe have it fixed.”

“I'll be sure and let the rental company know,” she said. They regarded each other in silence. “Do you actually want to see my license and registration?”

“Maybe,” he said, and the hint of wry amusement in his tone surprised her.

“What's going to be the deciding factor?” she asked, pushing back a smile. Smiling at him would feel too much like losing, but this exchange amused her and she couldn't seem to help it.

He leaned in and rested his hand on the doorframe. “Did you lie on your license?”

“What would I lie about?” she returned, not willing to give him an answer to anything, even this.

His eyes flicked up and down her features, noting the changes, she was certain. “Hair color? Weight?”

She rested her hand beside his and leaned closer. “Officer, do you honestly think I would lie to the government?”

He studied her as if trying to pierce through her outer shell and into her soul, a look she’d seen often. “I have no idea,” he said sincerely.

“You never did,” she said, pulling her hand off the doorframe. “Am I free to go?”

“Yup,” he said, but he didn’t sound certain. As she pulled away, she felt his eyes on her; she didn’t look back.



Without her parents in town, there was nowhere to stay. Certainly not at her uncle’s secluded shack in the middle of the woods. Naturally her parents had urged her uncle to move to warmer climes along with them; naturally he had refused. The only thing that would remove him from Maine would be a pine box. She shuddered, dispelling the mental imagery. Surely he was okay; surely he was around somewhere, skulking like a cat and waiting to resurface. Just because he hadn’t popped up anywhere lately didn’t mean he was gone, right? *If you believe that, then why are you here?*

Shut up, she commanded the insistently annoying voice that always questioned every decision. She had committed to this thing; she would see it through, make certain her uncle was okay, and get out of Dodge. She thought these things as she pulled into the gravel parking space designated for the bed and breakfast. Hanset was an old whaling community. Like many in New England, it had long ago fallen by the wayside. Only a few mansions still stood as testament to the bright

promise of what once was a thriving and wealth-filled industry. Three of those mansions had been repurposed into bed and breakfasts. But the fact that they were too far north of Bar Harbor to consistently be on the tourism radar meant they eked out a living from those intrepid tourists who ventured up the coast. And while it might be enough to survive, it was never enough to thrive. All three of the mansions had been neglected, settling for patch jobs whenever anything fell into disrepair, instead of the complete and expensive overhauls they all needed. They were like three sisters, former debutants trying desperately to hold onto their fading beauty. Realistically it couldn't work for much longer. You could only patch the ceiling so many times before the leak that caused the soggy drywall would turn to mold, then warped boards and rotting infrastructure. But for now the fading flowers were still standing, albeit with stained carpet and faded wallpaper.

Elyse chose which B&B she would stay in based on what she knew about who ran it. *Marauder's Nest*, where she'd stay while she was in town, was run by a pastry chef who had attended the prestigious Culinary Institute of America. That wasn't why Elyse chose it, however. It was because the woman in question, Georgette, was a little bit younger and had been as big an outcast as she had. Like a Venn diagram of town losers, their paths had circled each other without ever actually intersecting. Though they hadn't been friends, Elyse had liked the girl and felt a kinship with her, enough to give her whatever business she would supply during her stay in town.

"Elyse," Georgette said, smiling as if she'd been standing watch at the desk and waiting for Elyse to arrive. Given the fact that Elyse seemed to be the only off-season guest, it was a reasonable assumption.

“Hi,” Elyse said, feeling a small pinprick of discomfort. Georgette was profoundly hearing impaired. She read lips, Elyse knew, and unbelievably well. But there was always that small moment of initial discomfort when Elyse tried to reorient her bearing, gearing herself to speak while facing Georgette, to enunciate without over-enunciating.

“It’s so good to see you,” Georgette said.

“Thanks,” Elyse said. She didn’t want to lie and say the same in reverse because, though she had no problem with Georgette, she also had no desire to be in her hometown. If she tried to pretend otherwise, it would be blatantly transparent, especially for someone who studied people’s expressions and nuances as much as Georgette. She set her sunglasses and small handbag on the desk between them. “I might have to extend my stay, if needed. Would that be okay?”

“I think we could probably make space,” Georgette said, waving her hand around the cavernous mansion with a smile.

Elyse laughed. “Was it a bad year?” Even this far north they depended on the almighty tourist dollar. Most people lacked the resources to survive more than one bad season, let alone several in a row. Only the big conglomerates had that kind of money.

“I did all right,” Georgette said, the ring of pride unmistakable in her tone. Then, as if not wanting to jinx it, turned somber. “I mean, I survived.”

“That’s all any of us can do,” Elyse said.

Georgette nodded her agreement. “Since you have the run of the place, I gave you my best room, it’s quiet and cozy and no hot water issues.” She held up double crossed fingers, again in case saying something out loud might cause it to become

untrue. She grabbed a key from the cabinet and turned toward the stairs to lead Elyse.

“I got pulled over by one of your brother’s minions,” Elyse said. Georgette’s brother, Brody, was the chief of police. When Georgette didn’t respond, Elyse at first thought she’d offended her. Then she realized Georgette was turned away from her and hadn’t realized she was speaking, which was probably for the best. The last thing she needed was to involve herself in a conversation about anyone local.

Georgette opened the door for her and led the way inside. Elyse took in the room without really seeing her surroundings. Some part of her noted that it was clean and cozy, but her mind spun a thousand different directions. And she was tired.

“Is something wrong?” Georgette asked, mildly anxious.

“No,” Elyse said, remembering to face her this time and smile. “It’s great, thank you. I was just dreading supper.” Dismal now, she pivoted toward the interior of the room again. It *was* rather cozy, too cozy to want to go into town and have to face anyone at either of the few supper options. She could drive another town over, but she was suddenly exhausted.

Georgette glanced away and back again. “I’ll make you a sandwich.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Elyse said, but her relief was palpable.

Georgette smiled. “I know I don’t *have* to, I *want* to. I get it, Elyse.”

Elyse wondered what it had been like for her to come back after culinary school. Of course she had her big brother on standby, but who else? To Elyse’s knowledge she hadn’t had

many friends in town, if any. “I would love that. Can I do anything to help?”

“No. Do you want to eat downstairs, or should I bring it up here?”

“I know I’m really living up to the anti-social computer geek stereotype, but would you mind if I ate up here? Although I can totally come get it.”

Georgette held up a hand. “You’ve had a long day of travel. Of course I’ll bring it here, I don’t mind.”

“Georgette, if this keeps up, I might stay forever.”

“Don’t be too optimistic,” Georgette said, her smile tipping toward sympathy. “You’ll have to leave this room and face them eventually.”

She left before she could see the effect of her words, which was probably a good thing because Elyse was fairly certain her face now looked crestfallen.

CHAPTER 3



Elyse pulled open her computer and left Georgette a glowing review, along with a picture of the incredible sandwich she made for her supper. It was the least she could do and well deserved. If more people knew about Georgette's food and easy hospitality, she would definitely win the low-key tourist war she waged with the two opposing B&B's.

After she ate and checked a few work emails, she showered and crawled into bed, barely conscious of falling asleep. Her last thought was to wonder why travel was so exhausting, why she felt more tired at this moment than she had after flying literally halfway around the world and through various time zones. Emotional baggage? Whatever the reason, her head barely hit the pillow before she was out.

She woke an unknown time later, heart thumping. It was still dark out, but she didn't need the light to make out the silhouette of the man in the corner of her room. Not that she needed to see him to know he was there. She could smell him, and not merely because it had been far too long since his last shower.

"You're here," he said with no preamble and no inflection.

"Hi." In contrast she sounded uncertain.

He let out a heavy sigh. "How are you?"

“I’m...” That was as far as she got before her throat closed. She cleared it, swallowed, and tried again. “I’m...” Her hand pressed to her eyes, trying to push back the tears and grit. “I don’t know. How are you?”

He shrugged.

They sat in silence that was halfway between awkward and uncomfortable. “Who told you I was here?” she asked at last.

“I saw you when you drove past.”

“Cotton pulled me over.”

“For the crime of being unknown?” he asked. His tone lacked his former warmth and humor, and she missed it so much it physically hurt. She wasn’t prepared for that ache, had spent too long pushing it away. Her knees drew to her chest and she circled them with her arms, physically holding herself together.

“Yeah, I guess. Although if he’d known it was me, he still probably would have pulled me over.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “My brother likes everyone but you. It’s weird.”

She flinched. It was nothing less than she already knew, but still. Ouch. “Yeah, well, I didn’t give him much reason to, I guess.”

He shifted forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “I liked you enough for both of us.” The words should have eased her, but his delivery was so flat, so clinically detached, that they left her feeling empty and more than a little sad. “I wish I could see you. I bet you look pretty.”

Self-conscious now, she pushed at her hair. “I look exactly like someone who traveled all day, showered, and went to bed

with wet hair.”

“You’re not one of those girls,” he said, slightly annoyed.

“What girls?” she asked.

“Those insecure girls who are into their looks. You never cared about things like that.”

“Want the truth?” she asked, the darkness making her feel brave.

“Always,” he answered sincerely.

“I’m not sure I even know who I am anymore, Standish. Everything’s so messed up.”

He sighed. “Probably my fault.”

“No,” she said, tone vehement as she shook her head.

“Maybe a little my fault?” he tried. “Be honest.”

“Maybe a little,” she agreed. “But real life, out there, beyond Hanset?” She pointed to the west, not certain he could see it but feeling compelled to do so regardless. “It’s tough stuff.”

“Going to be honest here, Elyse. It’s not so great in Hanset, either.”

They fell silent again, more comfortably this time. “Why’d you come back? And don’t say for me, because we both know that’s not true.”

“My uncle, Dante. I think he’s missing. Have you seen him lately?”

“Do you think we have a club somewhere in the forest?”

“Do you?”

“I wish,” he said. “That would be cool. But, no.” He stood abruptly in that new way he had, as if all his limbs had forgotten how to be natural, along with his tone that could never seem to modulate the correct affect anymore. “Elyse?”

“Yes?” she said, gripping the bedcovers with both fists. He was so much larger when he towered over her, so big and imposing.

“Was it about me a little? The reason you came back. Like five percent?”

She shook her head and felt tears prick her eyes. “No,” she whispered.

He shifted to the left, as if he was going to pounce, then took two big steps back. “At least you’re still honest. I’m glad that hasn’t changed.” He slipped through the door and disappeared while Elyse tried to release her death grip on the blanket, tried to still her thumping heart.

Her glance slid toward the window. Should she call someone? Tell someone he was here? *Who?* The only person she could think of was Cotton, his brother. No way would she make that call. And anyway, what would she say? *Standish was here, he slipped in my room while I was asleep and we had a conversation.* So what? Lots of people ran into their exes when they returned home. Of course not everyone had a story quite like she and Standish did, but that meant nothing, nothing at all.

She lay there and replayed the conversation in her head, feeling increasingly wretched. How could she tell him that, while he wasn’t the reason she came home, he was most of the reason she stayed away?



The sun rose earlier in Eastern Maine. Elyse had forgotten, until those first gray rays eked into her eyelids, rousing her at an unheard of hour. Like something from a dream, she remembered Standish's visit. Unburrowing from the bed, she eased toward the chair where he'd sat and ran her hand over it. Had it been real, that visit, or her imagination? The nap of the chair was pushed the wrong way, had been imprinted by someone. She sat and gazed at the space where she'd just been, wondering what he saw, what he thought when he looked at her. There was a time when she knew, when she could read every flicker of his expression and know exactly what he thought and felt. And if she didn't know, she would ask and he would tell her. But now...

Someone knocked on her door. Her head swiveled there now, unable to imagine who would knock on her door at the first crack of dawn. Believing it must be Georgette, possibly with breakfast or coffee, she rose and opened the door, blinking in surprise at the person who stood before her.

"Cotton Dupree," she said, giving his name more weight than she wanted it to have. Their parents had given them the ridiculous names Cotton and Standish for that reason, to capitalize on the gravitas such southern and unique names would grant their children in the stoic Downeast town where anything other than Bob or Joe was deemed exotic. That was how most people in town used to say it, both names together. *Cotton Dupree. Standish Dupree.* At least until Standish became notorious on his own, no last name needed for emphasis.

“Elyse,” Cotton said, sounding as ragged as he looked. His beard stubble had filled in all the missing pieces since high school, becoming thick and rugged in the intervening years. He had fine lines around his eyes now, but not around his lips, absolutely nothing to suggest he spent time indulging in a smile. He gave her a little nod. “Can I come in?”

“Um, okay,” she said, realizing for the first moment that she wore a tiny pair of sleep shorts and a tiny t-shirt that read, “Shutdown Mode” with a picture of a hedgehog using a laptop as a pillow, little thought bubbles of snores coming out of his mouth. His eyes flicked down, then flicked back up and away, and... “Did you just smile?”

“No, I’m delirious from lack of sleep.” He came all the way into the room and sank into the same chair his brother had used the previous night, forcing Elyse to crawl back into bed. She pulled the covers up, more for comfort than modesty. If she ever needed a shield, it was with Cotton Dupree.

“I came to tell you that Standish had a bad night. He might try to come see you, but we’d like to prevent that, if possible.”

He would have continued, but she held up a hand to halt him. “Do you have a mouse in your pocket?”

He frowned in confusion. “What?”

“Who is we?” she tried.

“What?”

“You said ‘we would like to prevent that.’ Who is the ‘we’ in this scenario? Your parents?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “No, they don’t have a problem with it.” His tone told her he had a problem with them not having a problem.

“So it’s just you. *You* don’t want Standish to see me.”

“He’s been doing better lately. This is going to set him off.”

“I already saw him.”

He stared at her, mouth slightly agape in shock, as if she’d just told him she ran over his cat on purpose. “You tracked him down already?”

“I’ve been tracking him this whole time. It was only a small matter of following the device I set ten years ago. I set tracking devices on all my paramours, a timesaver, really.”

His look changed from shock to amused annoyance. “What’s the real story?”

“He showed up a few hours ago, sat where you are.” She stared at the far wall, remembering everything she’d rather forget. Her attention shifted back to Cotton when he spoke.

“He came into your room? While you were sleeping?” He dashed to his feet. “Did he hurt you?”

“He didn’t hurt me. He wouldn’t hurt me.” Her whisper turned tremulous. “Would he? Not on purpose.”

Cotton advanced to the bed and perched on the edge of it, letting out a ragged breath. “I don’t think so.”

Elyse realized how close to tears she was and felt a combination of horror and embarrassment. *Don’t cry in front of Cotton.* How long had that been her life’s motto?

“Hey,” he said and then he did the impossible; he reached out and drew her into a hug. Even more shocking, she let him.

“Why are you hugging me?” she asked, voice muffled against his chest.

“Because I’m nice,” he said.

“You are not nice,” she contradicted.

“Well, I’m not a monster,” he said.

“Aren’t you?” she asked, but tiredly as she sagged against him. He ran a soothing hand up and down her back a couple of times. She used to have dreams like this, sort of. In her scenario she and Standish were married and Cotton had finally accepted her and become the quintessential big brother—kind, caring, fun. All the things he was with other people. It was never this sort of hug, a commiseration over all that had been lost.

“I don’t know anymore,” he said, sounding as weary as she felt. They stayed like that a few beats until they both came to their senses at once and pulled back, frowning at the other in accusation and confusion.

CHAPTER 4



“**W**hy are you here, chick?”

Strangely, Cotton didn't move off the bed, even after the odd hug interlude. He remained perched beside her, head tipped in question. And he called her “chick,” a thing he had never done. Maybe age had softened him. Doubtful, though, knowing all she knew about him. He must have an agenda of some sort, even if she couldn't see it.

“I'm looking for my uncle.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because I think he's missing. Have you seen him?”

“Not in about three years, but you know that's not unusual. We all assumed he went off the grid, when your parents moved south.”

“He did,” she agreed.

“Then how do you know he's missing?”

“Sometimes he would message me,” she said.

“Telepathically?” he asked, brows aloft.

“Yes, we have a great psychic connection.” She shoved his shoulder. “Occasionally he'd find a safe channel on the internet and send messages.”

“What sort of messages?” he asked, probably knowing Dante wasn’t the sort who kept up on sweet uncle-to-niece communication.

“Warnings and the like.”

He hunched forward, brows doing the same. “Warnings about what?”

“The government.”

“Did he not realize you work for the government?” he said.

“Of course he realized, that’s why he was trying to warn me.” She rubbed her forehead wearily.

“And what was his response when you dispelled his notions?” he asked.

She dropped her hand and frowned at him. “‘Dispelled his notions.’ You talk like a bad caricature of a corrupt southern lawyer. Do you know that? I can almost picture you on a plantation in Louisiana, drinking sweet tea and remarking on the humidity.”

His cheek ticked and his tipped his head. “Picture me often, do you?”

She looked away, cheeks flushing with confusion. “Of course not. You’re Standish’s brother.”

“And what does that matter anymore?” he asked.

Her jaw dropped. “It matters because...” she trailed away, unable to come up with a rejoinder. “It matters,” she said at last, lamely.

“Yeah, it matters,” he agreed in the same dull tone, then huffed a breath. “Anyway, back to Dante. What happened there?”

“I didn’t dissuade him.”

His expressive brows rose. “What does that mean?”

“You asked what his reaction was when I debunked his theories; you’re assuming I debunked them.”

“Elyse, Dante is crazy,” he said.

“Crazy is a matter of perspective, in some cases,” she returned hotly.

Now he really scowled. “You would say that, I suppose.”

“Cotton, you don’t know what I know. You haven’t seen the things I’ve seen. Not all of Dante’s ramblings were insane.”

His lashes fluttered. “Are you saying that you, a federal agent, agree with your conspiracy loving, anti-government uncle?”

“Not on all counts, certainly. But some of the things he hit upon, they weren’t so far off the mark.”

He remained staring at her with silent incredulity.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she commanded.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m about to take up my own cabin in the woods and type a manifesto. I didn’t *encourage* Dante, and when I could, I tried to counteract his theories with a dose of reason. But I couldn’t debunk him completely, when I know some things to be true.”

“What things?”

She tossed her hands wide. “I’m not going to confide confidential state secrets to you.”

“You don’t know confidential state secrets,” he said with the cocky smirk she remembered from their youth. It irked her, that smirk, but not enough to risk her job by proving what she knew. She remained steadily silent, regarding him with crossed arms and what she hoped was her own haughty smirk. It must have worked, at least a little, because his smirk faltered.

“You’re not a real agent,” he insisted.

She said nothing.

“Elyse, you’re some kind of computer geek,” he said, sounding strangely desperate to hold on to this reality.

She quirked a brow at him.

“You don’t, like, do spy stuff.”

“As always, Cotton, I lack the energy to refute what you believe to be true, regardless of what the real truth might be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means.”

He frowned at her, as if seeing her anew and not liking what he found. “There’s reality and then there’s your version of it.”

“Are you about done?” she asked.

“Just...” He motioned helplessly toward her.

“Just what? Go away?”

“Yes,” he said, voice raw. It was nothing less than she expected, but it still hurt. She pressed her lips together, resolving not to let them tremble.

“Not until I check on my uncle.”

“Your uncle is fine,” Cotton assured her.

“After I see that for myself, I’ll go away.”

“In the meantime, leave my brother alone.”

“What Standish does is not up to me. You should know that by now,” she said.

He had no reply. The ensuing silence was awkward, but he still made no move to leave. In a strange way she understood his reluctance. The ties that once bound them might be badly mangled, but they still existed, even if they were threadbare. “I just...” He stared into space. She wasn’t used to seeing him so helpless, and it softened her.

“What?” she prompted.

“I don’t want it to be like it was,” he said, chancing a glance at her. “I can’t go back to that.”

“None of us wants that,” she assured him.

“Seeing you here again, it’s like a gut punch, a reminder of then. Feels like yesterday.” He put a hand over his eyes, rubbing as if trying to erase memories.

“It’s not the same.”

“How is it different?” he demanded.

“We’re not kids who don’t understand what’s going on. We’re adults who can handle the fallout,” she said.

One side of his cheek tipped into what might have been a smile, if he didn’t also look so sad and grave. “You sure about that?”

“Fine, I’m a grownup, and I can handle it,” she said, giving him a provoking little poke in the bicep. “If I have to, I’ll drag you heathens along with me, kicking and screaming.”

“Heaven help us if Elyse is the capable one in the scenario,” he said.

“I’ve *always* been the capable one, you chose not to see,” she said, away from teasing and back to reality.

He shook his head, once again trying to shake off that troubling notion. Likewise, Elyse did the same. Absolutely no one could change Cotton Dupree’s mind if he didn’t want it to change. This was how she knew she’d matured, because when she was a child, his intractability drove her insane and she took it personally. Now she knew it was his problem, not hers. She stared at him as he stared unseeing at the opposing wall. There was a new maturity about him that was unsettling for its grimness. Life here was hard, the combination of weather and poverty made it so. For Cotton, there had been so many other things to make it difficult, probably too many. Despite their differences, despite the fact that he had too often cast her as the enemy in his story, Elyse felt bad for him. And she also felt a tiny amount of desperation on her own behalf. If she hadn’t gotten away, this would have been her. She would have been the one who remained behind, who tried to keep Standish and her uncle afloat, all while trying to hold back the tide of sucking, gutting poverty. There were never enough tourist dollars to go around. Without them, where was money to be made? Fishing? Lobsters? There weren’t enough of those, either. Certainly no industry was interested in relocating to the wilds of Maine, where it cost as much to keep a building heated as it did to manufacture anything that could be made.

“You could go away,” she suggested, apropos of nothing. Or maybe apropos of everything they’d both been thinking.

He turned weary eyes on her. “Go where? Do what? Leave home, leave my parents to deal with Standish alone? Run

away, like *you*?”

“You said you wanted me to go away,” she reminded him. “You can’t have it both ways. What did you want me to do? Stay here and be part of the problem or go away and abandon him?”

The frown came back. Too much longer and he’d have new lines etched between his brows. He shook his head again. Any more information he didn’t want to hear and he’d turn into a dog with water in its fur. “I just...” he trailed helplessly away and looked down at her.

“I know,” she replied, but that didn’t ease the frown lines in his face. Probably because she was the last person he ever thought he’d commiserate with. Having run out of words and head shakes, he finally got up and left her room, closing the door behind him without another word.

CHAPTER 5



Georgette made the most incredible breakfast feast Elyse had ever seen. “Georgette,” she exclaimed when she walked into the inn’s small breakfast nook and saw the display of pastries, fruit, coffee, and bacon.

“What?” Georgette asked, jumping slightly at either the sight or sound of Elyse.

“*This*,” Elyse replied. “This is incredible. How did you have time to do this? And why would you do it all for only me?”

Georgette beamed, pleased. “You’re my guest.”

“I’m not a guest, I’m just me,” Elyse said as she picked up an antique flow blue plate and began to load it with pastries, one of each kind, along with a year’s supply of bacon.

“Well, you’re also that, which is why I’ll tell you I didn’t exactly make these fresh this morning. I pulled some leftovers from tourist season out of the freezer. So, really, you’re doing me a favor by using this stuff up. I always make too much. The bacon is fresh, though, of course.”

“You’re perfect,” Elyse exclaimed. It must be something Georgette wasn’t used to hearing because she flushed with pleasure and began fussing with the table, straightening the

butter dish and jam bowl into perfect alignment. “Did you already eat? You could eat with me and keep me company.”

“Okay,” Georgette said, picking up a single pastry.

“One croissant? Way to make me feel like a hoss,” Elyse complained. She took a seat at the pleasant little wooden table, already set with actual silver and crystal water glasses.

“Think how many of these I actually eat in a week,” Georgette amended, patting her belly.

“I’ll allow it,” Elyse decreed. They munched in pleasant silence a while before Georgette spoke again.

“Did I see Cotton Dupree leave here at dawn?”

“Oof,” Elyse said, and reminded herself to swallow before she truly answered. When speaking to someone who read lips, it was especially important not to masticate while speaking. “Yes, but it wasn’t like that.”

“I didn’t think it was, unless your relationship has drastically altered since school. I was merely surprised to see him leaving of his own volition and not in a body bag,” Georgette observed.

Elyse winced. “Yeah, those were some good times we had.”

Georgette chuckled. “Clearly things have improved somewhat. Not that I would hear any screaming, but he didn’t look mad when he got into his car.”

“How did he look?”

Georgette tipped her head, thinking. “Pensive. Sad, maybe?”

“That’s probably a good summation. What’s up with him? Is he married? Does he have kids?”

Georgette shook her head.

Elyse’s brows rose. “Really? I thought he seemed the type to settle down with someone equally pretty and adoring. Crank out a few kids off the bat and spend his weekends coaching their hockey team.”

“I thought the same thing of Brody,” Georgette said with a helpless shrug.

“Brody’s not married, either?”

Georgette shook her head, looking sad. “He dated my best friend, Carol, a long time, but she dumped him.” Scowling, she stared down at her empty plate, mashing the crumbs with her index finger. “I think the real world has taken both Brody and Cotton by surprise, if I’m being honest.”

“How so?” Elyse asked, then had to ask it again when she realized Georgette was still looking down and couldn’t see her lips.

“I think they thought it would be easier, like high school. Everything would go great for them and click into place. Unlike us, who learned early that we had to fight for what we wanted. I think they’re both a little disillusioned.”

Elyse tipped her head, studying her. “How come you and Cotton never got together? You must have spent a lot of time together, and it’s the classic setup: boy falls for best friend’s little sister.”

Georgette laughed and shook her head. “Of course I had a crush on him when I was a kid, who didn’t? But it only took a little bit of growing up to realize we wanted different things. Not that he ever gave me a second’s notice, mind you. This

realization was mine alone and took place entirely in my head.” She gave a self-deprecating little chuckle.

“Clearly he’s never had a meal here before. This spread would change any man’s mind.” As if to prove her point, she took another bite of Danish and closed her eyes, savoring. When she opened them again, Georgette was staring at her.

“What happened between you and Standish? If you don’t mind my asking. I wasn’t really involved in all the town gossip back then, but in high school...” she gave a helpless little shrug. “You guys were relationship goals, you know? The way you were together, it was what all of us dreamed of finding. Someone to fix and fit all our broken pieces.”

Elyse’s eyes stung and she blinked them rapidly to push back the tears.

“Oh, no,” Georgette said. “I wasn’t trying to make you cry. I shouldn’t have asked.” She began gathering the trash from the table, but Elyse put out a hand to halt her.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind talking about stuff. You can ask me anything. It’s just that no matter how far removed from it I get, it still hurts a bit.”

Georgette sat back down and fixed her with an expectant gaze.

“I’m not a local, you know?”

Georgette nodded.

Elyse laughed. Georgette might say she was out of the gossip loop, but everyone knew who was a local and who wasn’t. Breaking into a Downeast community as a teenager had been one of life’s bigger challenges. She’d been such an outcast, until Standish came along and saved her. “I had this big chip on my shoulder, a survival mechanism. I tried to put

on a tough girl persona, to show that it didn't matter if no one accepted me or let me in or invited me to their parties, if kids made fun of me for the odd way I dressed or did my hair or my emo goth clothes." She rolled her eyes at the transparency of it. Back then it had seemed like a genius plan to assume a new identity when she moved to town because being the Elyse she had been in Portland—shy and studious—felt like a recipe for disaster. Instead she'd started to dress all in black, had darkened her hair, and started lining her eyes and lips in black. By then she was well into computers and manga; the persona came seamlessly together, except for the fact that she hadn't been as tough or cool as she thought she appeared. She'd still been the same shy and sensitive Elyse. And, to her dismay, everything hurt just as much, maybe more. Because in Portland she'd been able to hide and fly under the radar. But here she'd stood out, the only new kid in town and one who was deemed weird and standoffish by the local populace when, really, they were the ones with all the unwritten rules.

"I assumed high school would be this horrendous ordeal I'd have to endure until I could break free and go to college."

"And it wasn't?" Georgette asked.

"No, it was. But suddenly I had Standish, and somehow that made it all better. We were a team." She remembered him as he'd been back then, equally shy and sensitive, unable to fit Cotton's too-big mold. Unlike many of the locals, he had no interest in hockey. He enjoyed art and music and everything else that set him apart. He'd sought her out almost from the beginning, with the pretense of friendship that quickly morphed to so much more. With him she'd felt her first flickers of belonging, her only flickers for a long time. Until college and then, after, with Gaines and their former team.

“What happened with Cotton? I don’t ever remember him being nice to you,” Georgette said.

“He wasn’t,” Elyse said, with some of her former bitterness. Cotton had seemingly hated her from the beginning, and for no apparent reason than that she was *other*, an outsider he didn’t deem good enough for his brother. “He tried hard to break us up, in the beginning. The irony is that in the end, after he stopped trying, was when we finally broke up.”

“Because of Standish?” Georgette asked, tone tentative.

“I guess,” Elyse said. This was still the painful part. “Standish was always moody and tended to be a little depressed. It was part of his charm, you know the type. Broody. And then our senior year it swung from intriguing to scary, from moodiness to full-blown psychosis.” He’d had a breakdown, one that ended with an extended hospital stay and, finally, a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Elyse had hung on, had hoped everything would be better and go back to normal after that. Maybe they could resume their relationship, go away together like they’d planned. Maybe everything would be okay. But it hadn’t; it had gone horribly wrong, in the worst possible way.

She blinked hard a few times again. “I wanted to stay and work it out, but everyone told me to go. I thought maybe if I gave him space, things would work out. But of course they didn’t. He was dealing with so much, and I was away. We broke up.” She left out a lot of pieces, things no one but her and Standish needed to know. “I still don’t know if it was the right thing. Should I have gone? Should I have tried to stay?”

Georgette reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. “You were a kid. It was too big for you.”

“But I let him down, after I swore I wouldn’t.” This time the tears wouldn’t be contained. They spilled over and she batted at them impatiently.

“You sound like Brody. After our parents died, he gave up everything to take care of me. And while I appreciate what he did and can never repay him, you have no idea how bad it makes me feel. It’s really, *really* hard to be the person who owes a debt you can never repay. I don’t think Standish would want you to give up your life like that.”

Elyse wasn’t sure, and she couldn’t ask Standish because he wasn’t in his right mind, hadn’t been there since his breakdown. But the questions haunted her. When was it okay to walk away, to give up on love, to give up on a person? Her heart told her the answer was never. Common sense and self-preservation told her it was about three months before she actually left, before his fallout spread and damaged her, too.

“Maybe there is no right or perfect or whatever it is I keep searching for,” Elyse said.

“Of course there is,” Georgette said, rolling her eyes in exasperation. She pointed to the pastry buffet. “It’s right there.”

Smiling now, Elyse reached for her coffee. “Georgette, I love you.”

“I bet you say that to everyone who loads you up on sugar and bacon.”

“Actually, I do,” Elyse agreed and they finished their coffee in comfortable silence.

CHAPTER 6



The combination of a carb-heavy breakfast and broken sleep made Elyse feel incredibly drowsy. She wouldn't give in to the temptation to go back to bed, however. Not until she checked on her uncle, or at least made a start in trying to track him.

The best place to begin was the local grocery store, with its bulletin board of important notices and upcoming events. *You can do this*, Elyse coached herself as she sat in the rental car in the store's parking lot. *You might not even run into anyone you know*. Of course she would, though. In a town the size of Hanset, it would be impossible not to. Still, it might not involve a conversation. Or maybe no one would recognize her. There was no need to be afraid. She was a federal agent, after all. She'd been in some unbelievably dangerous and dicey situations with Gaines and Logan. Just because she was usually behind the cover of a computer didn't mean she'd never been caught in the crosshairs. Gaines hadn't ever been one for coddling her or Logan, just because they were more comfortable with a keyboard than a gun.

After a couple of bracing breaths, she left the sheltering safety of the rental car and made her way to the market, pausing to inhale as soon as she stepped inside. There was something particular about the way places smelled in Maine, a

combination of fir trees and salt air. *Home*, Elyse thought, but quickly shoved it away. DC was home now, along with the smell of car exhaust and overrun dumpsters. Not this briny, fishy, piney combination.

She felt eyes on her as she wandered to the notice board and inspected it, hands tucked and clasped behind her back. The usual things were there—babysitter wanted, missing cat, lost dog.

“What are you doing?”

“Blamhap!” Elyse yelped and clutched her chest. Cotton stood staring down at her, somehow managing to look stern and amused at the same time.

“Is that a word they teach you in the feds? Some kind of secret code?” he asked.

“Yes, it means go away, you annoy me greatly.” She faced the board again, but her concentration was shot. She read the same note about the missing cat five times.

“If that were the case, I’m certain I would have learned it by now.”

“Don’t you sleep?” she asked, pushing back a yawn.

“Not much and not lately,” he replied, looking fresh as a daisy despite what must have been a rough night for him, too. He was that sort, the kind who always looked good no matter what. He always had been that way, and it was one more disparity between them. If Elyse missed a few hours of sleep, everyone she encountered would know it by her sunken eyes and drawn face. Even her hair felt saggy and lackluster, despite the fact that she’d blown it dry this morning and attempted to arrange it. Meanwhile Captain America to her right had the perfect amount of beard stubble to highlight his

cut jaw. Irritably, she reached out and ripped a number off the cat paper.

“Have you seen that cat?” Cotton asked.

“What are you, the cat police?”

“Yes, actually. I took a special oath. It’s the St. Francis endorsement on my badge.”

Okay, that was a little charming, but she refused to smile, if only on principle. How dare he be handsome and witty when she was groggy and disheveled? It made her feel the disparity between them too keenly, the old high school insecurity that she would never measure up to the Cotton Dupree standard.

“But seriously, what are you doing?” he reiterated when it became clear she wouldn’t elaborate.

“I’m looking for Dante,” she said.

“Did he shapeshift into a cat?”

She puffed a laugh and then frowned, drat him and his humor. “If, while I’m looking, I happen into this cat, more’s the better.” She tucked the cat number into her pocket and repressed a sigh. Clearly she was done with the board; her concentration was gone. But she also couldn’t walk away because that would mean facing Cotton. So she remained staring unseeingly at the notices and flyers in front of her.

He touched her bicep. “Elyse, why does this board have something to do with your uncle?”

She didn’t think he had ever said her name before this visit, as if he could ignore her by pretending she didn’t have one. It made her feel odd to hear him say it now, sort of queasy. “Because this is where people post things about town.”

“No, it’s not,” he said.

“Of course it is, it always has been,” she argued, finally facing him with a frown.

“Wow, for a hacker, you’re pretty dull. We have these things called computers now. Someone started a town page on social media. People post there.”

Her mouth dropped and, to her embarrassment, she felt her cheeks heat. She spent her entire career peeping on everyone’s social media because people tended to post too much, revealing more than they should. It had never once occurred to her the town of Hanset might do the same. In her mind they were forever preserved in amber, where this board represented all the local chatter.

“Well, aren’t I the idiot?” she said, then pressed her palm over his mouth when he started to answer. He grinned, meaning her hand touched his teeth.

“Gah,” she said, snatching her hand back to wipe it on her pants. “Gross. Mouth germs.”

Now his brows rose. “You’ve never had mouth germs before? I was under the impression...”

She whirled and walked quickly away, before he could finish teasing her in whatever manner this currently was. Who knew when she made that long ago wish for him to accept her and become the big brother of her dreams that it would feel like this? Too intense and kind of...squeamish.

Cotton, for whatever reason, dogged her steps, then slid into the passenger seat of her car.

“What are you doing?” she asked, unable to fathom.

“Watching the master at work,” he said, waving to the laptop she’d already reached for.

“But why?”

He faced forward and used one finger to scratch his temple. “It seems like if you’re investigating a missing person, I should be involved.”

“I thought you didn’t think he was missing,” she pointed out.

“I don’t. But clearly you do, and since you’re rather helpless, it would look bad if a tourist actually went missing while on a wild goose chase in the wilderness.”

“I’m neither helpless, nor a tourist,” she said.

“Potato, potatah,” he said, shrugging.

She stared at him. He stared back.

“I know it’s the off season, but you can’t be this hard up for entertainment,” she said.

“To be fair, Elyse, you don’t know what I am.”

She faced forward. That was true. She had never understood Cotton, never known why he hated her so. This didn’t feel like the usual hatred, but she still had no category for it. It was so much easier to be away, to take herself out of the equation and not have to deal with the odd town dynamics, all the old ghosts and memories.

“Are you doing this because of Standish?” she tried.

“In what way would I be doing this for my brother?” he countered.

“Because if I’m with you, you know I’m not with him?”

He blinked a few times, then gave a little nod. “Yes, that’s exactly it.”

She reached for her laptop again, sure he was lying, but not sure how. It only took a second to find the Hanset group in question, but it would likely take much longer to parse through all the posts. “Wow,” she exclaimed during her cursory scroll.

Cotton chuckled. “Fun, huh? Imagine being on the constant receiving end of all that. People seem to believe the police should manage every tiny complaint in their lives now. And if we don’t, we’re not doing our job. Wait until you get to the one about the trash cans.”

That didn’t take long to find, a multi-page diatribe about people putting their cans out too early, too late, too messy. “Apparently there’s a right time and a right way to arrange garbage?” Elyse said.

“Are you team night before or team morning of? Choose now, because it will determine the rest of your life,” Cotton said.

“Oh, my lands,” she said, still scrolling.

“I bet you never have to deal with stuff like this, in the city,” he said and did his tone sound...envious? Wistful?

She closed her laptop and regarded him. “Cotton, crazy is crazy, no matter the locale. Don’t make the mistake of thinking the city is better because it’s somewhere different.”

“Is that the mistake you made?” he asked.

“Yes. I wanted to escape here, rather desperately. I thought things would be so much better somewhere else. I thought *I* would be so much better somewhere else.”

“And?” he prompted when she failed to continue.

“And it’s like I said: everyplace has its own sort of crazy. And I’m still me, no matter where I go.”

“The same sort of crazy?” he said, half joking, half probing. He’d never really known her, mostly because he’d never really tried.

She smiled. “No. As it turns out, I like me pretty well. If moving away taught me anything, it was how to be comfortable in my own skin.”

“You always seemed comfortable,” he said, eyes narrowing with their former resentment.

“Appearances can be deceiving. I was as insecure as I was lonely when I arrived here, and then being an outcast added to it. It was Standish who began to help me see my worth because he was the first person to see it. The first boy to look at me and see something he wanted, something worthwhile.” She stared unseeing at the dash, remembering how it felt to be fourteen, new in town, and terrified of the close-knit Downeast kids who wanted nothing to do with a city-bred newcomer, especially one who outfitted herself head to toe in black as a defense mechanism. Only Standish had been fascinated and intrigued by her tough-girl façade, and only Standish had seen past it to the sensitive, kind girl within. Maybe because he had put up his own façade to hide the same traits. Together, they had been safe. Until they weren’t anymore.

She had forgotten Cotton until he poked her bicep. “Why you crying?” he demanded.

“I’m not,” she said, tossing him a frown as she blinked tears away.

“Lies,” he accused.

“According to you, I’m full of them,” she reminded him. Of all the people in town, he had bought her tough act the most, genuinely believing she was a bad girl who possibly did

drugs and crime and who knew what else. In reality she had never tasted alcohol, never been to a party, never even kissed a boy until Standish came along.

He let out a protracted sigh. “We’ve both done a lot of growing up since high school.”

She cupped a hand around her ear. “I’m sorry, was that a Cotton Dupree version of an apology?”

He crooked a finger at her, beckoning her closer. She leaned in, hand still cupped around her ear. He leaned in, too, and whispered softly, his lips brushing the shell of her ear, “No.”

CHAPTER 7



Elyse didn't know where to go after that. She wasn't sure how to feel about this new normal between her and Cotton. Was it a loss? A victory? A stalemate? Previously he had waivered between ignoring her and being openly hostile. Now he seemed to have developed an odd sort of nostalgic affection for her, as if she reminded him of a simpler time when he only had one, easily vanquished enemy: her.

“What?” he demanded, watching her watch him.

“What is your sudden obsession with knowing the inner workings of my mind?” she returned.

“What makes you think it's sudden? You've been a puzzle to me since the beginning.”

“You never asked questions before; you made assumptions.”

“That's because Standish was on the line between us. Now Standish is...” he motioned vaguely outside the car, which was a good depiction because Standish could be anywhere right now. He tended to roam the town like a stray cat, always turning up in the most unexpected ways at the most unexpected times.

“I don't trust you enough to tell you things,” she said.

“What?” he exclaimed, pressing his hand to his chest in mock affront. “I’m a pussycat, a total sweetheart. Ask anyone.”

She shook her head and reached for her laptop again, but before she could open it, he put his hand out and kept it closed. “Hey, Super Fed, maybe instead of peeping on the computer we could go and, I don’t know, actually investigate?”

“I don’t know if Super Fed was supposed to be an insult or a compliment, but it ended up making me sound fat,” she said.

He laughed. “That is one thing you definitely are not.”

Was that a compliment? Flirtation? Statement of fact? She had no idea, which her perplexed countenance probably revealed as she stared at him. He made a little “hurry up” motion with his hand. “Are we leaving or not?”

“Do you know you are the tagalong in the scenario?” she said.

“I noticed you didn’t say I was unwanted,” he said.

“Cotton Dupree, I have no idea what you are,” she said, turning forward to start the car.

“Elyse, welcome to the club,” he said, reaching behind him to fasten his safety belt.



Dante’s cabin was in the middle of nowhere. If he weren’t such a paranoid misanthrope, he probably could have rented it to tourists and made a small fortune because it looked so much like the ubiquitous Maine cabin in the woods. Transport it to Massachusetts, and Thoreau himself might have constructed it. As it was, it was only habited part

of the time, when Dante wasn't underground, hiding from whichever threat currently plagued him.

“Did you ever think it was weird that we both have relatives who went insane?” Elyse questioned Cotton as they sat in the car, staring at the cabin, making their first impressions.

“If only there were some common denominator between the two men,” Cotton said, poking her bicep.

She shook him off with an annoyed little huff. He was joking, probably, but it still touched a tender spot. Elyse *had* too often felt like the missing link between them. What if they were both crazy because of her? What if there was something about her that turned the men around her severely mentally ill?

Her thoughts became distracted when Cotton put a hand to her back, herding her slightly as they walked up the bumpy, broken path to the cabin.

“What?” he asked when she turned to survey him.

“You're touching me,” she pointed out.

“So?”

“So you have never once touched me, until this visit.”

“What? Of course I have.”

“Really? All those hugs you dispensed, it wasn't me on the receiving end of them,” she said.

He grinned. “You sound grumpy that it wasn't.”

She faced forward, resolved not to blurt more things. She *had* wanted to be on the receiving end of a hug, or any scrap of kindness or affection from him. Instead he had seemed to save all of his venom for her, all of his blame. Standish had been

the one to make room in his heart for her, to lavish kindness, care, and affection on her. After the town's rejection, that care had felt like a soothing balm. And then it was gone, as abruptly as it arrived. The abruptness had been the greatest cruelty, perhaps. When she first arrived in town, an emo little outcast, she had resolved herself to not fit in, to try and steel her emotions against the pain of rejection. And then Standish arrived, her white knight. She softened her heart and let him in completely. And then...

“What?” Cotton asked, and she realized he had stopped walking and was now staring at her.

“What what?” she said.

“You got all tense. I don't see any danger, so I'm guessing this is some internal girly dialogue.”

Her eyes narrowed. She didn't like that he'd guessed correctly. She was used to Cotton's guesses about her being wrong, dead wrong. That wrongness had fueled a sense of injustice that carried her for years, far from home, all the way to Washington DC. Without it, and with his care and interest instead, she had no idea where to go, how to act. “I'm fine,” she insisted.

He tipped his head, clearly not believing her. His fingers reached out and gently touched her elbow, but instead of arguing with her he said, “Show me how a fed investigates. I'm ever so curious.”

His flat tone made her laugh, probably on purpose, the rat. She needed her anger and resentment at him to carry her through this difficult trip. Was he nefarious enough to realize that? To try and disarm her on purpose so he could come in and wallop her when her defenses were down?

“It involves a lot of keening and kicking things,” she said, surreptitiously withdrawing her elbow from his touch. “Like a goat, but with the ability to type.”

He laughed. “You’re so odd.” He said it in the strange, newly affectionate tone, confusing her further.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she mumbled, facing forward again.

They circled the outside of the cabin before trying to gain access, but nothing looked amiss. It was the sort of place that thrived on neglect, so it wasn’t easy to tell if it had been abandoned. There was no landscaping to speak of, no carefully cultivated lupine or artfully placed pine trees. There was merely the hardscrabble mix of granite and shrubs, splayed haphazardly around the foundation, as nature intended.

After their initial inspection, they stood on the sagging front porch. Elyse knocked, but there was no answer. “How do you plan to break in?” Cotton asked, still sounding amused. “Spy tech? Or will you go old school and bash a rock through a window?”

“Watch and learn,” Elyse said as she withdrew a key and inserted it into the lock.

“That was extremely anticlimactic,” Cotton said, smiling when she laughed.

The inside of the cabin was dim. Elyse felt for the light, but it was an off-grid cabin and the batteries hadn’t been charged. She used the flashlight on her phone, made her way to the window, and opened the curtain, flooding the space with enough light to make her flashlight redundant. They stood in the small space, turning in a slow circle as they took it in.

“How depressing is it that I can’t tell if this is abandoned or not?” Elyse asked. The place was messy, dusty, and musty. But that matched every memory she had of visiting her uncle. While he didn’t have the sort of mental illness that made him a hoarder, he also wasn’t a clean freak. His space was always sparse but neglected. He didn’t like to possess things, and neither did he care for the possessions he owned. So it wasn’t unusual to see a mostly blank space filled with dust and debris.

“Is there anything he would take with him, if he fled?” Cotton asked.

“If so, I probably wouldn’t know about it. I know he kept a bugout bag, for inevitable government invasion. What was in it, I have no idea. Obviously he was private about it.”

“Is it here?” Cotton asked, turning in another slow circle. “If he left it, we’d see a bag, right?”

“It might not have been a literal bag. He was cagey about leaving his necessary provisions in one place, hid a few things on the property. It would be more like him to have stashed the bag somewhere hidden so he could pick it up on the run. This, though.” She went forward and stared at a picture on the wall.

“What? It’s the bay. Nothing special about that.” He came to rest beside her, also staring at the picture of the ocean.

“That’s what’s special about it. It’s the only picture in the entire house, to my knowledge.”

“So he loves Maine and he loves the ocean,” Cotton said, but not antagonistically, more like he was trying to play off her to brainstorm. Logan did the same thing at work, and Elyse liked it. What was wrong with her that having someone to oppose made her brain work better? “Has it always been here?”

“I can’t remember, but one thing I do know about Dante is that he doesn’t love anything enough to place it on his wall. He loves his family, as much as he’s able, and none of us have earned a spot on the wall. This...this feels like a message.” She reached out and tried to wrench the picture off the wall, but it was heavy and over her head. Cotton reached over her, trapping her beneath his arms as he grasped and pulled. When he got it off, he’d accidentally pinned her in. Elyse was hyper aware of the new arrangement, but he seemed not to notice as he stared at the photograph.

“Passamaquoddy Bay,” he read out loud. “You can buy this picture at any tourist shop in Eastport.”

“Exactly,” Elyse said. “So why would Dante have it on his wall?”

“Let’s look on the back,” Cotton said, warning her that he was about to twist his arms, wrenching her even closer as he flipped the picture and made an inspection.

What was happening? Elyse couldn’t figure it out. It was as if Cotton had a sudden and desperate need for physical proximity. Standish, in his heyday, had always been overtly affectionate, always reaching for her hand, petting her hair, stroking her cheek. His parents were the same with each other. Elyse had always figured Cotton was the lone outlier in their affectionate brood, but maybe not. Maybe this version was the reality and the cold and aloof teenager had been the anomaly.

“What’s the frown for? Did you notice something?” Cotton asked. Of course he referred to the picture he now held upside down in front of them.

She made herself scour it. “Not off the bat, but I want to take it with us, to put it under a light and inspect it.”

“Would he really leave you a hidden message in invisible ink?” Cotton asked.

“At this point I have absolutely no idea what he would or wouldn’t do, but no one ever lost anything by being thorough.” She ducked under his arm and made her way slowly around the cabin’s perimeter, stopping to crouch by Dante’s little pallet on the floor.

Cotton eased to a crouch beside her. “Why do they live like this?”

She knew the “they” in this scenario encompassed Standish. She’d spent a lot of time pondering the question herself. “Maybe when the mind is so crowded by mental chatter, there’s no room to think about comfort. Only survival.”

“I hope that’s it and not...” he trailed off.

She faced him. “Not what?”

He faced her. “Not because they feel like they don’t deserve it.”

That was a sad thought. She bit her lip to stop it from trembling. If she let herself think too much about the desperation of Dante or Standish, she always sank to despair. “I hope that’s not it.” Her whisper was hoarse. She swallowed hard, pushing back tears, embarrassed to show so much emotion in front of Cotton. Or any, really. She had worked hard to become like a robot when she was near him. To lose that now felt like too much of a loss because of how vulnerable it left her.

Cotton stared at her lip then slowly reached out a hand and used his thumb to tug it free. “You shouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because it makes me feel bad.”

“Is it all about you?” she asked.

“Always,” he returned, smoothing his thumb over her lip.

“We should...” she began, but had no idea how to continue. All she knew was that they shouldn’t be doing whatever this was. Speaking of which, what was this? Why was her ex-boyfriend’s brother, the person she’d long considered her enemy, touching her face? And with such gentle affection?

CHAPTER 8



“Who are you? Are you actually Cotton Dupree?”

They sat in her rental car, still in front of Dante’s cabin. Elyse faced the man beside her, who felt suddenly like a stranger. Or, more disconcerting than that, an ally?

“Would you like to see some ID?” he asked, in the newly wry tone that sounded like everything she said amused him.

“Yes, in fact I would,” Elyse stated, holding out her hand for it.

He fished in his pocket and dropped his wallet into her hand. She opened it and stared hard at his driver’s license. His visage stared back at her, grumpy and unsmiling. “See, *this* looks like you,” she murmured, running her finger over the words that told his name, address, and date of birth. “Mr. Smiley over there is some other guy.”

“What is this about, Crazy pants?” he asked.

“Everything,” she said, making a sweeping motion with her hand. “Your new friendly demeanor, the nicknames, the touching. Who even are you?”

“I’m the exact same,” he said.

She shook her head, vehement now. “No, absolutely not. The Cotton Dupree I know, the Cotton Dupree I remember, is cynical, suspicious, critical, *mean*.”

“He sounds like a super villain.”

“He was,” she exclaimed.

They had a staring contest for a few beats while irritation radiated off her and pinged off him. His composure in light of her annoyance annoyed her further. She had spent half her life with him front and center as the bad guy in her story, and now he had flipped the script and erased it all, or was trying to.

“I’ve grown up, Elyse. I assumed you did the same,” he said.

“No, see, you don’t get to continue to dictate the terms of our long and storied past. First you made me the bad guy, accused me of all manner of evil, and now you’re making yourself the good guy. Like none of the past ever existed. Like you didn’t make my adolescence a misery in every possible way. You know when people talk about their bullies? You know whose face I picture?” She pointed to the center of his chest.

“Bully, please,” he said, puffing a dismissive little laugh.

“I can’t...this is...you are...” She glanced around the interior of the car, all at once realizing she was now in the passenger seat. “Why are you driving my car?”

“I’m not yet,” he said, and then with a little “yoink” reached over and snagged her keys.

“Cotton,” she exclaimed, so annoyed she felt like her head was going to explode.

“You’re not in any state to drive. I’m a professional.”

“You’re a cop, that’s hardly NASCAR,” she returned.

“And are you in a good frame of mind to drive right now?” he asked, shooting her a quizzical eyebrow that annoyed her for its certainty. She was not, in fact, in the mood to drive. Truth be told, she hated to drive and was glad for the opportunity to be a passenger. Public transport was possibly her favorite thing about city life. But he didn’t need to know that.

“It’s my car,” she stubbornly insisted, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Technically it’s *Enterprise’s* car,” he returned.

“You’re not supposed to drive it. I’m the only one on the rental agreement.”

“Now who’s a cop?” he asked, poking her.

“Oh, my lands. Poke me one more time, I dare you,” she said, smacking his fingers away.

His hand eased toward her, finger extended. She grabbed it and squeezed. He chuckled and shifted his palm, holding her hand as he gave it a little squeeze. She stared at him as he continued to nonchalantly drive, as if they weren’t holding hands, as if she wasn’t so aggravated she was about to leap over the console and put him in a headlock, and possibly also bite him.

“What is going on?” she asked slowly, deliberately pushing back her ire. Letting any emotion free in front of Cotton gave him a victory. Hadn’t she learned that lesson early? Just because his tactics had changed didn’t mean the outcome had.

“I’m starving. Let’s get lunch,” Cotton said. Unlike her, his tone was breezy, light and unconcerned. He continued on his

merry way, driving in silence as Elyse stared hard at his profile. He didn't speak again until he'd pulled into the restaurant, turned off the car, and unbuckled his safety belt. "Coming?"

"You want to have lunch with *me*. Here?" She motioned to *Helen's*, the town's most popular diner.

He glanced at the restaurant, crowded with the lunch rush. "Did you have a better suggestion?"

"I have no suggestion. I have no clue what is even happening right now. What are they going to say when we walk in there and have lunch together?"

"Since when do you care about town opinions?" he asked.

"Since when do you not?" she countered.

He faced forward and let out a long breath. "I can't anymore, Elyse. It took me a while to realize what you and Standish knew all along."

"Which was what?" she prodded when he showed no signs of continuing.

"That it's all nonsense, all of it. Nothing matters, in the end. None of the popularity, the status, the identity. It was all a big lie. The things that matter, the people who matter, can be counted on one hand." He held up his hand, palm out, showing her the rough callouses on his palm. She was gripped with the sudden urge to take that hand and run her finger over those callouses. Where had they come from? Rope, most likely, from his boat.

"What brought about this big epiphany?" she asked.

"Pretty sure you know the answer to that," he answered.

“So that’s it. You’re nice now, and we’re having lunch in public.”

“Do you want me to wear a bag on my head? Would that make you feel more comfortable being seen with me?” he said.

“I don’t know that anything could salvage this visit,” she said, hating how perplexed and off-kilter she felt. This was supposed to be her triumphant return: self-assured, confident, a *spy*, for goodness sake. And yet a twist of Cotton Dupree’s whims and she was back where she started: uncertain, unsure, wobbly. Was it on purpose? That was what she kept coming back to. What if this was all some elaborate ruse to lull her into a false sense of security before reverting to his former ways?

If he does, you can go home, she thought, but the thought didn’t bring as much comfort as it should. Mostly because a tricky little part of her brain whispered, *What are you talking about? This is home*. Whenever anyone asked her where home was, she always answered Maine. But she had meant it was where she was from, not that it was actually home, right? Wasn’t home where her parents were?

She grimaced, thinking of their Florida condo, with its tiny spaces, too-thin walls, palmetto bugs, and swampy humidity. Elyse had always been a cold weather girl. The weather had been a definite point in Maine’s favor, possibly the only one. While most people couldn’t wait for summer in DC, Elyse couldn’t wait until it was over. The worst assignments for her were always the ones in the desert. The nature of her job meant she’d spent an inordinate amount of time in or near the desert.

“Now what?” Cotton asked, exasperated, and she realized he’d been staring at her as she thought these things. What did

her expression reveal? Must be something, if he was calling her on it.

“I was thinking about the desert.”

He blinked at her. “The desert. How did you get to the desert from our conversation?”

She opened her mouth to tell him before remembering she didn't have to. “Nothing, never mind. I just don't like hot weather.”

“Good thing you're home then,” he said and opened his door, as if he hadn't casually given her the acceptance she'd longed for most of her life. *Why don't you go back where you came from?* Those had been his first words to her, all those years ago, as she nervously stuck out her hand, offering to shake the hand of her crush's big brother at their first meeting. He had sneered at her hand, refused the offer to touch her, and said those words. *Why don't you go back where you came from?* She had almost cried, with the shock and hurt of it all. Standish had put his arm around her shoulders—the first time he touched her—and herded her away.

Ignore him, Elyse. He's been moody since he became a teenager. My mom says it's normal, but I'm beginning to wonder. He had tossed Cotton an annoyed scowl then. Cotton had returned a raised eyebrow that made Standish sigh and skirt Elyse out of the house and to the tree house in the back yard, one that would become their refuge for all the years to come.

She didn't realize Cotton had come around to her side of the car and opened her door until he extended his hand, offering her help out of the low vehicle. She stared at that hand, pondering the benefits of refusing it, as he had done all those years ago. But she wasn't a teenage boy, and she had

never been as mean or cruel as Cotton Dupree. So she tucked her hand in his, allowing him to pull her up and out and onto the sidewalk beside him. Then he let go of her hand and rested it on her back, herding her inside, like a proper gentleman.

CHAPTER 9



Helen's menu choices hadn't changed in fifteen years, and yet Elyse stared at it like she'd missed the Maine food revolution while she was away. *Meatloaf? What is meatloaf?* In reality she was trying to give herself a reprieve from the stares of everyone in the restaurant.

"What are you going to get?" Cotton asked.

"I don't know," Elyse said. Both hands maintained a sweaty death grip on the menu.

"Aren't you hungry? Are you sick?" Here he leaned in, lowering his voice and arranging his features into what plausibly passed for concern.

Elyse switched her gaze from the menu to him. "Everyone is staring at me," she hissed.

"Probably," he agreed in a whisper that seemed so say, *So what?*

"Why are they staring?" she asked.

"Maybe because they missed you," he said, tugging the menu from her grip with difficulty.

"No, that can't be it," she said, and he chuckled.

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re not as annoying as you used to be.”

“How would anyone here know me? Standish was my only friend,” she said. “I can’t believe anyone in this town would remember me.”

“I remember you.”

“You were my boyfriend’s brother, of course you remember.”

“Why would they not remember? That makes no sense,” he said.

“I only lived here a few years before I went to college and haven’t been back.”

“Yes, but you lived here a few years. That’s not the same as a few weeks. And you had more friends here than just Standish.” He rolled his eyes.

“I had acquaintances, but not any real friends. I was always an outsider because I didn’t grow up here.”

“Nah, that’s just how we are. Everyone liked you,” he assured her.

She blinked at him. “Are you on some sort of powerful psychotropic that makes you misremember the past?”

“Are you?” he countered. “Why are you trying to make it sound like you went to school on the CW network?”

“Cotton,” she exclaimed.

“Elyse,” he replied, mocking her.

She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “This is egregious.”

He grinned. “Egregious. You’re cute. Now what are you gonna get?”

“I was thinking a lobotomy with a side of that memory eraser from *Men In Black*,” she said and he laughed, *laughed*, as if they were old pals catching up over a chummy lunch and not former enemies who never wasted an opportunity to spar.

The waitress arrived, saving them from further conversation. Cotton ordered and Elyse said the first thing she could think of, a club sandwich.

“Good to have you back, Elyse,” the waitress said, tucking her order pad in the waistband of her apron as she turned away.

Elyse blinked at Cotton in dismay. “Who was that? I don’t know her.”

“That’s Amy Hanson’s mom,” Cotton said.

Amy Hanson had been one of the homogenous herd of girls who made up the town’s popular crowd. She hadn’t been mean to Elyse, but neither had she been friendly. In a Venn diagram of high school interaction, their circles hadn’t touched. Then again Elyse and Standish had been in their own circle, apart from everyone else, free floating on the periphery, waiting for the day they could escape. Elyse had never learned nor understood the secret formula that made some people fit here. Cotton had seemingly always known, had been at the center of everything.

“What’s Amy doing now?” Elyse asked, not because she cared, but because it seemed like the polite thing.

“She’s married, has a couple of kids, works at the plant sometimes in season.” He shrugged. The plant in question was one of the remaining fish processing plants in the area, their

numbers having dwindled to almost nothing along with the cod and shrimp population. During the high season, they hired enough help to see them through, a good gig for moms and teenagers who didn't or couldn't commit to year round employment.

“Hmm,” Elyse said, trying to picture herself living that life. Married. Kids. Cutting fish guts for hours to eke out a living. It didn't seem as small and sad as it had when Elyse was a kid. Back then she would have sneered, might even have made fun of such a tiny life. Now it seemed...wholesome? Amy had tethers, concrete proof that she'd lived and loved. What did Elyse have? A heavily stamped passport and a few interesting anecdotes she couldn't share because they were classified. Was that enough? Did Amy feel like her life was enough? Was it merely a case of the grass being greener on the other side?

“What?” Cotton demanded.

“I'm thinking.”

“About what?”

“Why do you care?” she asked, exasperation reigniting. “Why now?” He had never cared about her motivation or inner workings before. Maybe if he had, they would have had a more peaceable relationship. As it was he'd seemed content to assign his own motivations to her, to make her the villain of his life story the way she'd made him the villain of hers.

“Because the first time you were new in town, I didn't want you to be. I wanted you to go away. I didn't care why or who or what. This time I care.”

“Why now? All these years later, why do you suddenly care?” What she really wanted to ask was why not then? Why

hadn't he asked questions and listened to her answers back when she had desperately needed him, could have used him as a friend and protector?

"Because I do," he said.

"That's it, that's all you're going to give me," she said.

He leaned closer and smiled, but the smile looked sad. "Elyse, I don't have anything else left to give."

How well she knew and understood. Once upon a time she'd been idealistic, had believed the fairytale that she could go away and become someone else, someone better. That being in a different location would change the fundamentals of her life. Instead she'd merely grown up enough to realize it wasn't the circumstances that mattered, but rather her mindset about them. One day it was as if it clicked in her brain that there was nothing wrong with her. She didn't have to change, to become more or less than she was in order to be worthy. She merely had to understand and accept herself and adapt her expectations of the world. Not everyone would love and accept her, and that was okay. Since then she'd become more selective about the people she allowed near her, only choosing to invest in the people who helped create the sort of life she wanted, putting up borders against the people who drained her social batteries. Cotton, who had formerly zapped all of her energy, now seemed to be trying to imbue it, and where was she to go with that?

"Why aren't you married?" she blurted.

"Why aren't you?" he returned.

Self-consciously she touched the small scar at her throat. "You know why."

He frowned, staring hard at that scar. “I suppose it’s the same reason for me.”

“That makes no sense,” she said.

He blew out a breath. “There’s only so much emotional energy to go around. So much of mine goes to keeping Standish afloat that there’s not much left over for anyone else.”

“That sounds like an excuse. And I don’t think Standish would want that for you.”

“Both of those things, right back at you,” he said, quirking one of his eyebrows in challenge.

“It’s hardly the same,” she said, swallowing hard as she glanced at the table and away from his prying eyes.

“Why not?” His finger reached out, caressing one of hers. “Hey, look at me.”

She didn’t want to, but he was commanding in that way that made people listen and do what he said. She could say it was because he was a cop, but he’d always been that way, probably became a cop because it was a natural outlet for his bossy leadership skills. Slowly she raised her gaze off the table and met his. She didn’t know his look, couldn’t interpret it, but it made the heat creep into her cheeks, fueling her embarrassment and emotion. He opened his mouth, probably to relay some sort of wisdom or directive, but their food arrived, cutting him off. Instead he closed his mouth and pulled back his hand, but not before Amy’s mom noted their clasped fingers, her brows notching to her hairline, though the rest of her face remained resolutely in check.

“Anything else I can get you two?” she asked, and was Elyse paranoid or was there some sort of insinuation in there,

special emphasis on *you two*?

“No, thanks, we’re good,” Cotton said easily.

“Oh, my lands,” Elyse murmured when she was safely away.

“What?” he asked, glopping a mass of ketchup onto his plate before sprinkling the fries with malt vinegar.

“She thinks there’s something going on here,” Elyse said.

“So?”

“So? You’re my ex-boyfriend’s brother,” she hissed.

He puffed a little laugh that sounded more cynical than amused. “As a cop in this town, let me assure you there are worse, more scandalous things.”

“Maybe, but they don’t involve me,” Elyse said.

“What a little innocent you are. It’s so refreshing. You’d think a girl who goes to the big city and gets a fancy government job would become corrupted, but no. You’re like a cute little country mouse,” Cotton said before shoving a few fries into his mouth.

“You make me sound like I’m about four minutes from handing over my savings account to a Nigerian prince,” she grouched. “I am not naïve. But I do try hard to always do the right thing. To have people believe I’m not is...troubling.”

“For my own clarification, what’s the right thing here? To remain single forever in tribute to your first love? And what’s the wrong thing? Is it me? Please say it’s me. Been a while since I was the bad guy.” His smile turned roguish as he shoveled a few more fries.

“Spoiler alert, you’ve always been the bad guy, Cotton Dupree.”

“Elyse,” Cotton said, tossing her a wink. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

CHAPTER 10



“I think it’s safe to say I can never show my face there again,” Elyse said. When they entered the restaurant, she’d thought everyone was staring at them. By the time they left, she was certain.

Cotton laughed as if that were the funniest thing he’d heard in a while. “Why? Because we’re guilty of the sin of flirting in public?”

She gasped and pressed her palm to her chest in affront. “I was not flirting with you.”

“Fine, then I’m guilty alone. Way to leave me hanging on the gallows by myself.” He opened the car door for her—the passenger side, naturally—and tucked her inside, closing the door gently once she was all the way in.

“What now?” he asked, as if he hadn’t just confessed to flirting with her in front of half the town. “I assume you have a plan for where to go next. Dazzle me.”

Elyse gazed out her window to buy herself some time. She’d never intended to be an investigator, had always pictured herself closeted in a darkened room with a computer somewhere. But Gaines hadn’t been content with that, had dragged her into the field, reluctantly at first. Then, after she found some confidence in herself, she’d become a ready and

willing participant. Still, he was always the lead, with Logan and Elyse tagging along, ready to assist. It was rarely she who came up with the ideas, who planned their missions. Now she felt the full pressure. Where did you begin when you had no leads? *Tug at as many threads as you can for as long as you can until something gives way.* Had Gaines actually said that? Or did she come up with it on her own and assign it his voice?

“Eastport,” she said with certainty she didn’t feel. “I want to see if we can figure out why Dante had a picture of the bay on his wall.”

Cotton didn’t comment as he pulled away from the curb and toward Eastport. Elyse realized she was waiting for his approval and gave herself a mental shake. This was her investigation, not his. She said where, she said when. If he didn’t want to accompany her, he was free to leave. *I don’t want him to*, she realized. His calm and steady presence reassured her, unexpectedly filled up some of the lonely pieces inside her. He was familiar, and yet not. She’d known him forever, and in that way he was familiar. But she was used to being upset and nervous in his presence. This calm feeling was unexpected but not unwelcome. She wondered what he felt. It must have been something positive because he didn’t go away, in fact seemed reluctant to part company.

“Are you dating anyone?” she blurted.

His brows rose and a half smile tugged at his cheek.

“I’m trying to take your measure, not hitting on you,” she said.

“So you say. But to answer your question, no I am not seeing anyone. There’s no one in town left to date.”

Maybe that explained his odd new fascination with her; she was new and therefore interesting by default. Like when you were at a restaurant and thought you were full until they brought out the dessert menu and you realized you could, in fact, go for some cannoli.

“It would seem you’d have your pick of men, being surrounded by all those spies.”

She blinked at him in dismay. “Spies? What spies?” Her job was classified. No one was supposed to know she was a spy or even spy-adjacent.

He tossed her a look. “You think your job’s a secret? This is Hanset. We know more about you than you do. Discussions about you have livened up many a Friday night.”

Embarrassingly, she felt herself blush. Somehow she thought she would disappear from the town’s collective memory as soon as she went away. Out of sight, out of mind. Had they really been speculating about her? Imagining her as a spy? Wondering what sort of things she might be up to? Had Cotton?

“I assumed you’d feel nothing but relief at my absence,” she said.

“I suppose I did at first. But...”

“But?” she prompted when he seemed content to trail off and not continue.

“But I guess I had some time to reflect, to gain some perspective. Hearing the way other people talked about you was enlightening.”

She winced, imagining the things other people had said about her. “How so?”

“I had you pegged as the villain in our little story, the cause of all Standish’s problems.” He paused. When he continued, it was in a softer, gentler tone. “Turns out you were the hero, the one attempting to keep him afloat.”

It was the sort of admission she’d dreamed of, and yet she couldn’t take pleasure in it. “Does it even matter if I failed so spectacularly?” she said, drawing her arm over her waist, trying to push back the pain, to hold it all together.

“It matters,” he said, reaching out to rest a hand on her leg, its weight anchoring her, grounding her.

She took a deep breath and covered his hand with hers, giving it a squeeze. It didn’t escape her that the thing that once drove a wedge between them—Standish—now drew them together. Previously the fact that they’d both loved Standish had made them adversaries. Now it made them...what? She had no idea, but she knew they were finally on the same side of the fence, the side that wanted to help Standish, to keep him well and alive.

“Has it been bad?” she asked, staring at his profile.

“At times. But it’s not the bad moments that are hard. It’s the waiting, the never knowing, the always expecting. The anxiety of never being able to relax completely, never let my guard down because tonight might be the night that he...” His voice broke and he swallowed hard.

“That sounds exhausting. And lonely,” she guessed.

He gave a curt nod.

“I’m sorry you bear the brunt of that,” she told him.

“My parents, too,” he said.

“Yes, but...”

Now it was her turn to trail off and his turn to prompt her.
“But what?”

“But they’re not like you, Cotton Dupree, the keeper of lost souls.”

“Elyse,” he said.

“What?” she asked, smiling preemptively because his tone promised something good was about to follow.

“It’s good to have you home.” Then he tossed her a warm little smile and brought her hand to his lips, skimming them over her knuckles.

Elyse didn’t answer, but she turned toward the window and let her smile blossom until it filled her face completely.



The town of Eastport was a recipe for why Downeasters had trouble trusting outsiders. How many times had someone showed up with money, promising to make something grand, only to disappear and leave the town holding the bag? Too many to count.

“I haven’t been here in forever,” Elyse said as Cotton navigated into town and found street parking. Parking spaces were ample, especially this time of year.

“This used to be the place to go,” Cotton noted. In high school Eastport had been the closest bigger city to Hanset, with more restaurants, shops, and places for mischief. There was also a Passamaquoddy Indian reservation for people really intent on finding trouble, something bored Indian teenagers were always willing to provide. Elyse hadn’t run with the sort of crowd that went looking for trouble and adventure, but

Cotton had. She remembered him being close to a couple of boys from the reservation, for a time.

“Do you still come here?” she asked.

“Not much,” he said. “I guess part of growing up means you stop searching for trouble.” He flicked a glance at her. “For some people.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Rumor has it you travel the world,” he said.

“I’m ever so curious to know how you’ve heard so much about my top secret job.”

He grinned and she began to understand that smile, the one that said he was glad to have provoked her. “We have our ways.”

They walked into a store. Elyse hated the way the owner’s eyes lit with hope of tourists and a possible sale. Then they settled on Cotton and the hope dimmed. “Oh, hey, Cotton. Don’t tell me you’re on a date and this is where you brought her.”

“Nothing but the best for my girl,” Cotton said, giving Elyse’s shoulder a little pat.

The guy behind the counter laughed. “She must not be local, if you’ve fooled her into thinking this is the best.”

“She wants one of those pictures of the bay,” Cotton said. “Do you sell those?”

“Nah, they have those at the historical society.”

“Thanks. Anything new? What’s shaking in Eastport? It’s been suspiciously quiet lately,” Cotton said.

The guy shrugged. “Nothing much. Tourist season was kind of a bust this year.”

“The economy is hitting everybody hard.”

“Yeah, funny how it always seems to hit us harder. There’s talk of jobs with that new hydro facility, but you know how that goes.”

“All talk,” Cotton said.

The guy nodded.

“What new hydro facility?” Elyse asked, tearing her attention away from some baby onesies with a picture of a lobster on them.

“Oh, one of many,” the proprietor said, waving his hand in annoyance. “Every decade or so another one comes along, promising the town gold in exchange for lassoing the power of the tides.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s only a matter of time before they realize nothing here can be tamed.”

“Huh,” Elyse said slowly. She reached for one of the onesies and headed toward the counter.

Cotton’s brows rose. “Something you’d like to share with the class, Elyse?”

“I was going to wait for a better time, but surprise, Baby,” she said, pressing her palm to her lower abdomen.

He coughed a laugh and she smiled as she reached for her wallet.

“My friend’s wife is having a baby. Seeing this reminded me I needed to get them something.” She handed the man her credit card.

“It’s not too late to get you one of these,” the man said to Cotton, with a provoking sort of smile as he folded the onesie into a bag.

“I’ve been trying, but she’s so career focused,” Cotton said, draping his arm on Elyse’s shoulders.

Elyse slipped her arm around his waist. “I told you I won’t, until you have that DNA test done to make sure you’re not actually Satan.”

The guy behind the counter guffawed. “Better keep this one, man. She’ll keep you in your place.”

“That she would,” Cotton replied, giving Elyse’s shoulders a squeeze that made her flush embarrassingly. It wasn’t like she could take anything he said seriously, not with their history and Standish between them. If this were a normal scenario and he were some other man, she might admit she found him attractive. Not Cotton Dupree, though. Never that.

As Cotton grabbed her bag off the counter and held the door for her on the way out, she gave herself another stern reminder, because to her dismay she needed it. *Not Cotton Dupree, anyone but Cotton Dupree.*

CHAPTER 11



They bought mustard next. *Raye's Mustard*, an Eastport specialty, was Elyse's favorite, and she'd missed it. She shipped it to herself, not wanting to weigh down her suitcase with glass bottles that, with her luck, would undoubtedly break and create a pungent mustard flood.

After that they went to the historical society.

"Cotton, hi," an elderly woman greeted them, beaming at Cotton in that way they had, as if they approved all the goodness and ignored all the badness.

"Hi, Mrs. McKee," he said, giving her an angelic smile in return. "This is my friend, Elyse. She's interested in the history of Eastport." He tossed Elyse a rotten smile she didn't understand until Mrs. McKee latched onto her arm and entered into a thirty -minute diatribe on the town's history. It was clear to anyone that this was a moment she'd been waiting for, a chance to show off her exhaustive knowledge to a willing ear. It showed what Cotton knew about Elyse, though. Far from being put off by the woman's unending stream of chatter, Elyse found it fascinating. When Mrs. McKee finally took a pause and a breath, Elyse asked her more questions, starting her on another long-winded lecture.

By now Cotton had realized that instead of annoying Elyse, he had shot himself in the foot with the impromptu history class. At first he meandered around the historical society until eventually he ran out of steam and sat. He might have fallen asleep; Elyse couldn't tell.

Mrs. McKee eventually led Elyse to a scale model that comprised one half the building. "This was their grand plan," Mrs. McKee declared, in the tone of someone revealing the Ark of the Covenant.

"Wow," Elyse said, duly impressed. "I can't believe I lived here so many years and never knew this. Cotton," she called, apparently waking him from a nap because he jumped slightly and blinked at her in groggy confusion. "Did you know about this?"

"Know about what?" he asked, further proof that he'd missed most of the last few minutes of conversation.

"That Franklin Roosevelt tried to use Eastport as a works project, to harness the power of the tides to power the east coast," Elyse said. "It was a massive, huge project that created about a thousand jobs. They built barracks and everything, basically an entire town that sprang up."

"Everyone knows that, Elyse," Cotton said, sounding bored.

"Well, not everyone feels smug ennui about it, Cotton," Elyse returned, hands on hips.

Laughing, he stood and meandered to her, peering over her shoulder as he studied the model. "Dispel my ennui, won't you?" he said, speaking softly because he was close to her ear as he leaned over her. Since there was plenty of space around them, it was a purposeful placement. And a confusing one. His

hand rested on her hip, and she fought upstream of the effect of that.

Clearing her throat, she pointed to the model. “Will you tell us again, Mrs. McKee, for the delinquent pupils?”

Mrs. McKee tittered, amused by their banter or pleased to once again display her knowledge, Elyse didn't know. “Well, it all started with a man named Dexter Cooper. He was here on vacation, laid up with an illness, and began to daydream about our tides. You know the Bay of Fundy, of which our section, Passamaquoddy Bay, is a part, has the highest tides in the world, sometimes fluctuating as much as 52 feet. Worldwide the average is about three feet. A lot of water funnels through our little bay, about a hundred billion tons in a twelve hour cycle, more than all the rivers of the world combined. Imagine if you were able to harness that power. Well, that's just what Mr. Cooper did, and he so happened to have the ear of Franklin Roosevelt, his neighbor and friend. The two of them together embarked on a decade long dam plan that lasted until 1936. That was when funds, and interest in the project, ran out. Our town had invested so much in the project that we were bankrupt. The project was abandoned. During the war, the camp was used as a training facility for the Seabees.”

“That is *so* interesting,” Elyse said. A nerd at heart, there was nothing she loved better than learning. Cotton, the opposite of a nerd, squeezed her hip, letting her know he found it the polar opposite of interesting. “Tell us the part about the new company, please.”

Here Mrs. McKee rolled her eyes. “One of several latecomers over the years that have tried to revive interest in the project. No one has gone to the lengths they did in the thirties, blowing things up and trying to build a dam. Instead

they've proposed things on a smaller scale, to put tide capturing devices on the ocean floor and relay the electricity."

"Won't that disrupt the fish and lobster industry?" Elyse asked. Around here, that was still how most people survived.

"There's been plenty of concern about that, believe me. Lobsters and urchins especially survive on the ocean floor. But they've run some tests and so far nothing seems to be affected. They've even taken safety measures for the fish; the small ones pass through the device unharmed and the larger ones can't go through it, get rebuffed away."

"So fascinating," Elyse repeated. "Did you happen to know my uncle, Dante? I have a picture, but it's old and hard to see. He's not a fan of photography." She fished her phone from her pocket and handed it over. Mrs. McKee squinted.

"Maybe," she said slowly. "He looks a bit familiar. Might he have attended town meetings about the proposal?" There was something in her tone, something that told her Dante had made himself notorious in some way.

"If so, it's likely he was in opposition to the measure and made his opinion known," Elyse said.

"Oh, okay, yes," Mrs. McKee said, nodding, still trying to keep her tone neutral. "I think I remember him, and I think he was fairly vehemently opposed. He seemed to believe..."

"Believe what? Please, I'm trying to find him. If you have any information, I would really appreciate it, anything at all. I know he, uh, can be a little bizarre in his opinions and delivery."

"He seemed to believe the government was involved, that it was a ruse for them to interfere in our lives, possibly to track and control us. People found his opinions amusing, but I also

think they were glad to have someone on their side who was so vocally against the venture. It gave people courage to express their own reservations.”

“Have you seen him at one of those meetings lately?”

Mrs. McKee looked heavenward as she tried to think. “Let’s see, when was the last time I saw him or heard anything about him? I can’t remember the last date, but it’s been quite a while, last fall, perhaps?”

Elyse’s heart sank. It would have been so easy, if Dante was still turning up at one of the town’s meetings. But it sounded like he’d dropped off the radar awhile ago. “Can you think of anyone who might have talked to him, who might know where he is now or where he went?”

“No, but you might try the head of the group against the hydro company. His name is Fred Inger, he runs the hardware store just down the way.”

“Thank you,” Elyse said, reaching out to give Mrs. McKee’s bicep a little squeeze.

“Thank you,” Cotton echoed.

“It’s no trouble. Come back any time,” Mrs. McKee said, sounding hopeful.

They thanked her again and walked to the car in silence.

“What did you think?” Elyse waited to ask until they were back in the car.

“I think you could not be any more of a geek if you tried,” Cotton said, reaching over to squeeze her thigh.

“That’s a given,” Elyse said, smacking his hand away. “I meant what did you think about what we just heard?”

“That Mrs. McKee fancies herself a docent at the Smithsonian?” he tried.

“Cotton,” she said, annoyed.

“What? This is nothing more than we already knew. They want to build a dam; Dante didn’t want them to. How is this a surprise?”

“It is, though. I had no idea people wanted to build a dam here,” Elyse said, staring out toward the bay. She hadn’t been in the group of kids who viewed the ocean as their plaything. Guys like Cotton spent their weekends on boats, swimming and fishing and sailing. Elyse had been too dorky to be part of that club. She and Standish had spent their weekends indulging in their manga obsession, co-writing comics together, watching movies that interested no one else. The kids who spent half their time in the ocean understood its power, knew what was out there. Elyse had only heard stories of the powerful tides and whirlpools in their bay.

“Did you ever get caught in a whirlpool?” she blurted, apropos of nothing.

“Psh,” he puffed, sounding like the cocky boy of their youth. “Girl, too many times to count. It was a test of courage, to get as close to the Sow as we could.”

“The Sow,” she said slowly.

“The Old Sow, Elyse. Where you been?” He cupped her cheek, giving it an affectionate brush with his thumb. “It’s one of the largest, most powerful whirlpools in the world. We skirted it for kicks, taking our lives in our hands to prove...” he squinted. “I’m not sure what we were trying to prove, or if we succeeded in doing so. All I know was that it seemed vitally important to try.”

She stared at him with big eyes. “We lived in two different worlds.”

“I know,” he agreed, still in the newly indulgent tone. In high school the differences between them had made him crazy. Now he viewed them with fondness. Why? His hand sank lower and rested on her shoulder now, his thumb caressing her neck instead of her cheek.

“I could never understand why it bothered you so much, those differences between us. Especially not when you were the one on top and I was the one on the bottom.”

He dropped his hand and sat back, staring through the windshield with a sigh, as if it made him exhausted to try and explain.

“I was born with the understanding and survival instinct that Standish lacked. I got what it took to fit in here, to thrive. I checked all the boxes; I was part fish, I played hockey, I kept my emotional distance and reserve. Standish lacked everything. There wasn't a sport-loving bone in his body, he hated the water, and he wore his heart on his sleeve. He was going to get destroyed, I could see it a mile away. So I tried my hardest to make him toe the line and fit the mold I created. Maybe you don't believe me, but I wanted it for his sake, to protect him.”

He darted her a plaintive glance.

“I believe you,” she said. There was no doubt about his love for Standish. Even if his methods had been wrong, his heart had been in the right place.

“That summer before freshman year, it was like he was finally starting to pay attention. He began to realize he was different from everyone else, that he didn't fit and that not

fitting made him a target. I could only protect him so much, with him being a couple of grades behind. He started to take an interest in things, in hockey, in the boat, in girls.” Here he darted her another look.

“And then I showed up and wrecked everything,” Elyse said.

“I used to think so. I thought I had him on track, and then you arrived and you were so much like him and loved all the same things he liked. And you were so cute.”

This was a revelation to Elyse. She’d felt herself stuck in the awkward phase of things, would never have described herself as cute. Especially not to someone like Cotton, who kept a constant rotation of their high school’s *It* girls.

“It felt like you and I were suddenly in a tug of war for Standish, and I was losing. Badly. I thought the only way to win, to keep him safe, was to sabotage you and your relationship. It was all too easy to see you as the bad guy, to pretend you were evil, the cause of all Standish’s problems. Especially as Standish’s problems began to escalate. At first I think I let myself genuinely believe that you had pushed him into mental illness. Time and perspective fixed that, of course.” He blew out another breath. “In the end...”

“In the end,” she prompted when he trailed off.

He reached for her hand and held it in a friendly clasp. “In the end, I’m glad he had you and, if you want the truth, I was a little jealous that he did. I had friends, but I never had anyone in my life like you, who loved me as much as you loved Standish, who was as loyal, as caring, as patient.” He squeezed her hand.

Elyse blinked impatiently, willing the tears away. “Standish was all those things for me, too.”

“I know,” he said and shook his head. “That kid adored you. I think even my parents got sick of hearing him extol the virtues of the famed Elyse, at least until they met you and fell for you, too.”

“And you thought I’d fooled them all,” she guessed, but with a smile.

“You evil fourteen year old temptress, you,” he said, returning her smile.

“The Mata Hari of Hanset, with braces, bangs, and black eyeliner.” She wagged her brows.

“Completely irresistible,” he said and brought her hand to his lips, brushing them against her knuckles.

Elyse faced forward with a blush, not certain where to go because all of a sudden he didn’t sound like he was joking anymore.

CHAPTER 12



They tried the hardware store in search of Fred Inger, but it was his day off. Exhausted and with no new leads, they turned and headed back toward Hanset. Elyse didn't pay attention to their destination until Cotton bypassed Georgette's inn.

"Hey, where are we going?" she asked.

"You look all done in. I'm going to feed you," he said.

"That's so sweet, but I don't think I can stomach another outing at *Helen's*, in both the figurative and literal sense." She pressed a hand to her stomach, remembering anew how much fried food she'd consumed at the diner.

"Have a little faith, Elyse. This is Cotton Dupree you're dealing with. Only the best, when you're with me."

She laughed as they pulled into his parents' drive. "You're bringing me home so your mom can feed me."

"My mommy's a good cook," he said, feigning defensiveness.

"That she is," she agreed, twisting her fingers together nervously.

"What's wrong?"

How was he suddenly so attuned to her moods? “I love your parents, you know that, but I’m not sure I’m mentally and emotionally prepared to see them.”

“Good thing for you they’re not here,” Cotton said.

“You came to raid their fridge while they’re not home? You *are* a high quality date.”

“It gets worse than that—I still live here.” He tried to say it as if it amused him, but she could hear the embarrassment he couldn’t quite cover. She didn’t judge him, however. It wasn’t like the city, where housing was readily available. Housing was scarce, the living expensive. Not the rent so much as utilities. Living in DC was expensive, too, probably more so. But Elyse had the salary to make it work. Here salaries were stagnant, poverty rampant. Some people paid as much as their mortgage in heating oil for the winter, not to mention the gas it took to get places. And tiny, energy-conscious cars didn’t cut it up here, not when four wheel drive was routinely needed to navigate the heavy snow.

“What about Standish?” She assumed Standish still lived with his parents, but it would be ironic if he didn’t and Cotton did.

“We’re one big happy family,” Cotton said, tone wry and self-deprecating now.

“I hope so,” Elyse said earnestly, resting her hand on his bicep.

He relaxed a little and managed a genuine smile. “It does make it easier to cover all the bases, all living in the same house.”

She nodded her further understanding. Look how much she’d had to arrange to come check on her uncle. Living in the

same house with someone who needed extra oversight would be a handy arrangement, indeed.

“You’re nice,” Cotton whispered into her ear, pulling her into an impromptu side hug that momentarily pressed her against the length of him. Then he let her go and opened the door to the house for her as if nothing had happened. Would she ever get used to his easy affection? Doubtful. Half of her still felt on her guard, wary of his next assault. In her defense, she’d had four years of constant attacks from him, when she lived in Hanset. She doubted the lingering anxiety could go away with only a couple of days as proof of his friendly new demeanor.

They walked into the house and she stopped short, assaulted by the remembrance the smell brought. She’d spent as much time here as she had at her own house, when she was a teenager. Their parents had been eager to welcome Elyse, Standish’s first and only friend-turned-girlfriend. Her parents had been equally accommodating of him, but somehow they always ended up here, usually in the tree house out back, after one of Cotton’s unprovoked assaults. Not that he’d ever hit either of them, but he had mocked Elyse endlessly, making Standish defensive on her behalf. The tree house had been their refuge.

Now Elyse swallowed down wave after wave of memories, most of them pleasant. “What can I do to help?” she asked, voice croaky and raw.

“Nothing. Mom has some leftover lobster salad in the fridge, I’ll make us some rolls.”

“I’m allergic to lobster,” Elyse said.

Cotton stopped short and stared at her in horror.

“I’m not allergic to lobster,” she assured him. “I forgot you’re not allowed to joke about lobster here. It sounds great. Are you sure I can’t help in some way?”

He flicked his fingers at her. “Go wash up, and try to wash off some of that impertinence, while you’re at it.”

“Impossible,” she assured him.

“Don’t I know it,” he said, but he sounded strangely upbeat about it. They parted ways, he toward the kitchen, she toward the bathroom.

The house was as small and ordinary as Elyse’s had been when she lived here. Hardly anyone in the town had money enough to invest in housing. Most people existed on the bare minimum, small houses that were easier to heat, hopefully with a woodstove that could cut the high cost of heating oil. Wood, at least, was plentiful. It had been nice, that shared quasi-poverty. Only the summer residents from Boston had had money, and they had never really been part of the town. Elyse never believed she had been, either, but now she saw it differently. She had been absorbed into the town without her notice, had quietly become a Downeaster without her acknowledgment or permission.

She used the bathroom and washed her hands, smiling at the “good towels” their mother kept for company, those embroidered with a lighthouse. She bypassed that, along with the shell-shaped soap, and used the family’s cloth and the family’s soap, heart tugging painfully for days past when she truly had counted herself one of the family, despite Cotton’s objections.

She finished in the bathroom and, unable to resist, drifted where her feet naturally took her, toward Standish’s room. They had never made it off limits to her, and Elyse and

Standish had never made them regret that rule. Most of their time together was spent in their own little world of make believe. They had been too innocent and naïve to advance physically beyond their years, especially at first. The innocence of that early friendship made her yearn for things long gone, a familiar feeling, one she usually pushed away because it was too painful to indulge. But here, in Standish's room, one that hadn't changed despite the fact that the boy had turned into a man, she couldn't keep the old feelings at bay.

She had loved, loved, *loved*, this boy. He had been her best friend, her love, her everything. For a long time, she had considered him her future, at least until it all went so horribly wrong. And she couldn't be angry or resentful over the break between them because Standish couldn't help it; his mind had betrayed them both.

A framed picture was on his nightstand. Heart thumping, Elyse drifted forward and picked it up. She had expected to see herself staring back at her. Instead she saw a blond woman she didn't recognize.

"His girlfriend," Cotton supplied, now leaning in the doorway, gazing at her.

"Oh," she said, the only thing she could think of.

"He didn't tell you?"

She shook her head. They hadn't exactly caught up, during their middle of the night rendezvous that still felt a little like a dream. She cleared her throat and set the picture down. "How...nice."

"Supper's ready," Cotton said. He held out his hand to her. She took it, stepping away from Standish's things, trying not to read something symbolic into that.

Cotton kept her hand as he led her down the short hallway to the kitchen. He held her chair while she sat, then presented her with a plate loaded with a perfect-looking lobster roll and some blueberries. His plate matched hers. He sat and picked up his roll. Elyse followed suit and forced a smile. She took a big bite, nearly choking when what should have been delicious tasted like sawdust.

“Excuse me, I need a minute. Can I just...” She trailed off, eyes darting helplessly, frantically for escape. Then she pushed away from the table and ran, Cotton’s voice calling her name imploringly behind her.



She ran to the tree house, naturally. It had long been her refuge with Standish. Her feet scrambled up the ladder by memory, the rough rungs scraping her palms. The stinging pain felt good, grounding her with reality. By the time she ascended to the top and scrambled inside, her head felt clearer, the panic dimming. If she were honest, she didn’t know why she felt so overwhelmed. The memories? The feelings? The new information about Standish? Maybe all of it.

“Hey,” Cotton said softly, his head popping suddenly through the opening like a prairie dog checking its surroundings.

“Hey,” she said softly, more than a little embarrassed. “Sorry about that.”

In lieu of an answer, he ascended fully into the tree house, crossing his legs as he sat beside her, close but not touching.

“Want to talk about it?” he offered.

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it, it’s that I don’t know how or where to begin.”

“Is it that you’re still in love with him?” he asked, tipping his head curiously at her.

“No,” she said, laughing a little. “That would be pathetic, indeed.”

“But not unheard of.”

“It’s not like that. It’s sort of like a bruise that’s turned yellow. Seeing him or thinking of him pokes the bruise, but it’s not an earth-shattering kind of hurt. It’s an echo of pain, a reminder of things long past.”

“It hurt when I told you about the girlfriend. Don’t lie.”

“It hurt,” she acknowledged. “Mostly because I don’t know how to let go of people and move on, I never have. Everyone else, it seems like they can let go and move on so easily. Me, I take forever to warm up, and then latch on forever, a human barnacle. Even though the feelings have morphed, they’re still there. I don’t want to care anymore, I don’t want it to hurt that he’s moved on. But I still care, it still hurts.” She pressed her palm to her chest, grinding hard against the persistent ache. “How do I make it stop?”

Cotton shrugged. “Why do you have to? The fact that you can’t, that after all this time, after all that’s happened, you still care? It’s sort of a miracle. And if anyone needs a miracle, it’s Standish.”

“That’s all well and good for him, but what about me? What do I do with my bruised and bleeding heart?”

Cotton pressed his lips together and scooted slowly closer. His arm slipped around her, drawing her against him. He kissed the top of her head, and it helped, that little display of

understanding and affection, it helped so much that it almost brought a new sort of pain, a bittersweet one this time.

“Is she nice? Do you like her?” Elyse asked. What if, unlike when she and Standish had been together, this new woman had Cotton’s full approval? How would that feel? No worries, though.

“Honestly? She’s a dumpster fire. Last year she was in jail three times, and I personally arrested her one of them. She has two kids who are in a revolving door of being taken from her and given back. She goes off her meds more often than Standish does.” He swiped a hand over his face. “This is my punishment for giving you so much grief all those years, that now he’s with someone who is *actually* bad and bad for him.”

“Are you saying this to make me feel better?”

“I wish. It’s inexplicable. My parents wanted to meet her, back in the beginning. The cringe level from that dinner can still be seen and felt from space. Since then we all sort of pretend she doesn’t exist.”

He sounded sad and rather hopeless. Elyse pulled herself together and pushed aside her own shaky emotions. The truth was that Standish was still extremely precarious, an easy fact for her to ignore from her little corner of the world. Cotton was faced with the daily reality.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” Elyse said, rubbing a soothing little circle on his back.

“How did we go from me comforting you to you comforting me?” he asked, sounding mellow and amused.

“I guess because when it comes to Standish, we’re in this together,” she said, easing her arm up to drape companionably on his shoulders.

“I’m not sure if that’s nice or horrifying,” he said, tipping his head to rest on hers. “Part of me thinks you should run as far and as fast as you can, back to DC. The other part...” he did the thing where he trailed away again.

“What?” she urged, giving his shoulders a squeeze.

He faced her, looking suddenly serious. “The other part of me, Elyse, doesn’t ever want you to go away again. And what really puzzles me is that I don’t know why.”

“Mutual comfort and understanding,” she suggested. “A shortcut to your past, provided by someone who was there for it.”

He gave his head a little shake. “That’s not enough to...”

This time he didn’t trail away. He was interrupted by Standish, who popped his head through the tree house door without warning. “What are you guys doing up here?”

CHAPTER 13



After the initial startle caused by Standish's sudden appearance, Cotton coaxed them out of the tree house and inside, where he made an additional sandwich for his brother.

Standish fell on the food like it was his first meal after being rescued from a POW camp, completely incognizant of the fact that Cotton and Elyse both stared at him in dismay. When had he last eaten? Where did he go when he disappeared? How did he fill his time? Not with a job, that was for certain. The pills that kept his mental illness at bay also rendered him vague and forgetful, unable to focus on tasks for long periods of a time. For Elyse this was one of the biggest cruelties of his illness. He'd had so much ambition, once. So much keen intelligence and curiosity. They had plotted and schemed their futures together. Always in Standish's version he was hard working, productive, and successful. Never once did medical disability enter the discussion, but why would it? None of them could have predicted what would happen, what might become of him after his brain betrayed him so abruptly.

He finished his food and licked his fingers, finally looking up so they were forced to begin picking at their own sandwiches. When Elyse pushed away her pesky emotions, she realized the sandwich was delicious, the first time she'd

had lobster since she left Maine. Eating it had brought too many memories she'd rather not feel, both bad and good.

"Cotton, that was so good," she said, after she'd finished and commenced cleaning her fingers with the moist towlette he'd provided. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome, but I can't take much credit. Mom made the salad and bought the rolls, I merely assembled."

"You assemble like a champ," she assured him, closing the distance between them to squeeze his bicep.

"I think you've gotten prettier," Standish blurted, staring at her.

"Oh, no. I cut back on the eyeliner and mascara, that's all," Elyse said, tucking her hair behind her ears self-consciously before feeling too exposed and shaking it free again.

"No," Standish said, shaking his head definitively. "You were that kind who was always going to grow into your looks. You're hot now."

"Um," Elyse said, pressing her hands to her overheated cheeks. Standish had always been sensitive, to her especially. He wasn't one for embarrassing people or calling them out. That was then, however. His medicine did a number on his filter, destroying it completely while also changing his affect and delivery. It was like being called hot by a loud robot.

"Standish," Cotton said, which was a switch in their relationship because Cotton was never the one who stood up for her and usually the one who made her uncomfortable.

"What?" Standish said, ignorant of all the ways he was making things awkward. "Even you can't deny it, Cotton. She's hot now."

“Why would I deny it?” Cotton asked, throwing Elyse the sort of smile that let her know he was amused and delighted by her discomfort.

“See?” Standish said. “Fact. Are you seeing someone?”

“No,” she drawled.

“Why not?” he asked. Beside them, Cotton pushed back his plate and rested his elbows on the table, keenly enjoying the conversation.

“I travel a lot and... Why are we talking about me? Cotton told me you have a girlfriend.” Inwardly she winced at the tiny amount of accusation in her tone. It had been a decade; he was allowed to move on and have a new girlfriend.

“Yeah,” he said, now fiddling with his fork. “You’d hate her. Maybe I hate her.”

“Then why are you with her?”

“It’s better than being alone. And, I don’t know, it’s kind of a relief, not having to try and be good for her. Not worrying about keeping it together. My worst is still better than she’s ever had.”

“Standish, that’s...” Elyse trailed off, unable to find the proper adjective. She felt like this entire visit was a study in her running out of words and urging Cotton to continue with his.

“What? Sad? Shabby?”

She nodded.

“That’s reality,” he said. “I’m damaged goods, Elyse, and we all know it.”

She released a breath and rubbed her fingers over the pressure spot in her forehead. “I don’t like this.”

“No, you never much cared for reality,” Standish said.

She frowned at him and dropped her hands. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “I was falling apart for a long time. You didn’t want to believe that, to see the signs.”

Cotton shifted uncomfortably, probably trying to decide if he should intervene or let it happen.

“Are you blaming me?” Elyse asked.

“I don’t think so,” Standish said. “Not for all of it, no. At the end, though. You should have gotten out of my way, should have let me go. Maybe if you had...” He motioned vaguely toward her.

“Maybe if I’d let you dump me when you wanted to, you wouldn’t have tried to kill me?” she said, somewhere between outrage and disbelief.

“Maybe. I don’t know,” he said in the weird toneless way he had now.

Strangely, or maybe not, she glanced at Cotton, needing his assessment of that statement. “You were a kid,” he said, tone gentle. His hand slid onto her thigh, easing a soothing little trail back and forth. “You were *both* kids, kids who were trying to navigate mental illness and the painful end of a three-year relationship.”

She blinked and swallowed, pushing back the emotion with a little nod. How odd, to be soothed by Cotton. And yet how vital.

“What, so you’re like on the same team now? Team Keep Standish On His Rocker?” Standish said, and now he was the one who sounded slightly outraged and resentful.

“No one’s that powerful, Standish. It would likely take an act of God,” Cotton said and, to Elyse’s surprise, Standish puffed a laugh. It wasn’t his former warm laugh, more like a duck choking on a rough weed, but it was something. And it worked to push away his irritation. “Besides, you spent the better part of high school telling me I needed to see Elyse more clearly and let her in. Apparently I’m a decade late and a slow learner, but, huzzah and throw the confetti, I’ve arrived. So, yes, we are on the same side.” He pointed between himself and Elyse. “But it’s not the opposite of where you are. We’re all in this together, I’m pretty sure you know that, if you dig down deep enough.”

Standish bit his lip as he pondered. His lips were horribly chapped, his face and hands, too, raw and red from the elements. “Yeah, okay,” he said at last, and the tension in the room ratcheted down a few notches. His eyes narrowed in confusion as he continued to watch them. “You’re still touching her, though.” He waved toward the picture they presented, one of Cotton’s arms around Elyse’s shoulders, the other cozily on her thigh.

“Of course I am, she’s hot now,” Cotton declared, and Standish puffed another of those odd little laughs.



“That didn’t seem as calamitous as it might have been,” Cotton declared. They walked down the steps to her car. He reached up and nabbed a few pinecones off the tree above them. Cotton had always been one of those guys

who needed a physical outlet, who jumped to touch the ceiling, turned every doorway into an impromptu pull up bar, who tossed his trash at the can like it was the basket and he was LeBron. The continuity brought her a vague sort of comfort.

“It was... I don’t know. We’re all alive, I guess,” Elyse said. She felt exhausted by the events of the past twenty four hours and the toll they’d taken on her emotions. What she needed was time and space and rest to try and process all that had happened. The worst part was that the trip had already been so eventful, and yet it had absolutely nothing to do with why she came and she was no closer to finding her uncle.

They paused beside her car. Cotton faced her and rested his hands on her shoulders. “I don’t like sending you off like this. I’d feel better if I could drive you.”

Elyse smiled. “Can I take this opportunity to once again remind you that I am, in fact, a federal agent?”

He curled her collar in his fists and gave it a gentle tug. “I won’t believe it until I see the proof. Until then you’re just that geeky girl who’s good with a computer.”

“A girl can’t hear that enough,” she said.

“Hot, though,” he said, then leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers, whisper soft. Elyse, who momentarily forgot herself, leaned forward and gripped his shirt, closing her eyes before opening them abruptly.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. It seemed like the thing to do in the moment,” Cotton replied. His tone was nonchalant, but his eyes... Yeesh, she’d never actually seen a smolder before, but she was fairly certain that was what this was.

She let him go and took a step back, flattening herself against her car. “What are you doing? What is going on?”

“You’re having a full blown panic attack for nothing. It was an affectionate little goodbye.”

She sifted his words, trying to find the hook, but she couldn’t. Was that it? Had he been seized with a sudden affection for her? They had been an integral part of each other’s lives for many years, albeit as adversaries. It was possible that connection had forged a stronger bond between them than she realized.

“It’s not like I really kissed you,” Cotton continued unbidden, voice dropping to silky softness that mesmerized her. “It’s not like I picked you up, pressed you against that car, and took complete possession of your mouth, Elyse.”

Elyse stared at him in open-mouthed shock, heart thumping, unable to believe these words were coming from the mouth of Cotton Dupree and directed at her. When he looked like he might take a step toward her, she scrambled for the handle of the car door behind her.

“You’re inexplicable,” she whispered before hopping inside the car. She locked the door, drove away, and didn’t look back. Even so, she felt his eyes on her, long after she was out of sight.

CHAPTER 14



Sleep did nothing to alleviate Elyse's exhaustion or dispel her tangled emotions. As she arranged her flight and planned the trip a few days ago, she knew seeing Standish again would be difficult. Somehow she hadn't factored Cotton into the equation. If she had, she would have guessed they would give each other a respectfully wide berth. Never in her wildest dreams would she have guessed that Cotton would somehow shift his dislike and distrust to attraction, if that was what it was. And certainly never did she fathom that she would find herself attracted to the boogeyman, the villain of her adolescent life story.

I'm not attracted to Cotton Dupree, she assured herself.

Aren't you? another little voice asked.

What kind of person is attracted to her ex-boyfriend's brother? That's Biblical levels of grossness and wrongness, the first voice told her.

Welcome to Babylon, Jezebel, that insidious second voice sneered.

She descended the stairs to breakfast much sooner than she was ready and encountered a man seated at the table. She paused on the second to last step, frozen like a fawn with one foot aloft.

“Brody, hello.”

Georgette’s older brother was as cool, remote, and imposing as he was in her high school memory of him. Thankfully he had never participated in Cotton’s torment of her, even though the two had been thick as thieves and apparently still were. Not because he took her side, but more because he had been above having a side, too mature and world-weary for high school rivalries or hijinks.

She was about to take the final step when she saw the other man, the one who leaned around Brody’s imposing figure and smirked knowingly at her.

“Cotton, hello,” she croaked, reaching for the banister to avoid accidentally flinging herself down the remainder of the stairs.

“Elyse, hello,” he mocked, while Brody gave her a small, tight smile that had less to do with her and more to do with his buttoned up nature.

“Hi,” Georgette popped into view, beaming a warm smile that worked well to dispel all the simmering tension in the room. “I hope you don’t mind that they’re joining us. Brody has breakfast with me on Saturdays. Sometimes Cotton tags along.” The way she darted a confused glance at Cotton made it seem like a generous stretching of the truth. If he had “tagged along” more than once before, Elyse would be shocked.

“Of course she doesn’t mind. Elyse and I are the best of friends now,” Cotton answered for her.

“I don’t mind at all,” Elyse said, ignoring him as if he hadn’t spoken, hoping the lie sounded smooth and not self-conscious. She had planned to go upstairs and put herself

together a little more after breakfast, to try and do something with her hair and apply a dab of makeup. *At least you're not still wearing your jammies*, the kinder of her two voices encouraged her. *Not that it matters; he's seen the hedgehog*, the snarky voice replied. That voice caused her to smooth her hand down the length of her rumpled cotton dress. Dresses were good for travel because they were loose, comfortable, packed well, and felt slightly less dowdy. And when she saw Cotton's eyes follow the path of her hand with interest and approval, she thought he agreed.

Cheeks flushed now, she settled her eyes on the ample spread of gourmet delights Georgette had prepared.

"Oh, my lands, let me take a picture," she said as she reached for her phone.

"Of the food?" Brody said, sounding suspicious. Elyse didn't take offense. He had the sort of big brother protectiveness that always sounded suspicious.

"Don't bother her, this is important," Georgette admonished him. "Since she arrived and started posting pictures, my page traffic has gone up by thirty percent."

"That's because I tweaked the algorithm," Elyse said.

"Did I read your lips wrong, or do I not know what that means?" Georgette said.

"What does that mean?" Brody asked.

"Search engines use algorithms to determine what gets seen. I made sure your inn comes up first in every search."

"Is that legal?" Brody asked.

"Of course," Elyse said.

“Is that ethical?” Cotton asked in his favorite provoking tone.

“Ethical, smethical, I’m winning,” Georgette said, poking him. “Now everybody eat.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Elyse said, reaching for a plate. She loaded it with everything, not caring at all that she came off like a hoss. Now that she knew how good Georgette’s food was, she intended to indulge while she was here.

“Do you cook?” Cotton asked her. She guessed that was his attempt at pointing out how much she was eating without being blatant about it.

“I can cook, but I rarely do. I travel a lot, in case I didn’t mention,” Elyse replied, pausing to eat half an almond croissant.

“How much is a lot?” Brody asked. When even he stared at her in fascination, probably wondering how someone could fit so much croissant in such a small mouth, she dialed back her ravenous impulses and vowed to take tinier, more delicate bites.

She waited to answer until she’d swallowed and dabbed her mouth, hoping the delicate gesture would earn her some points on the ladylike scale, the one she’d likely obliterated by downing mass amounts of pastry. “Last year I think it ended up being about three hundred days.”

“Where did you go?” Georgette asked.

“Here and there,” Elyse evaded.

“Apparently it’s classified,” Cotton said. He was trying to sound offhand and amused but ended up sounding a bit awed. Elyse desperately wished someone would change the

conversation because they were all staring at her with what she thought might be fascination.

“It’s only a job,” she added. “After a while all the locations tend to blur together into one homogenous pile of no sleep and missed meals. I’ve gotten really good at packing, though. We often have to leave with no notice. I can assemble two weeks of supplies in about five minutes; it’s one of my greater talents.”

“Do you work with the military?” Brody asked with a hint of wistfulness that would probably embarrass him if he realized it. It was a not so secret secret that he had longed to go into the marines after high school. Instead he gave up his dreams to stay and care for Georgette after their parents were killed.

“Occasionally. Usually former military. My old boss was a former SEAL. You wouldn’t know it, though. He’s cheerful and sweet to the point of disturbing.” She shook her head with a fond smile, thinking of Gaines. She hadn’t been able to picture him outside of his capacity as a spy, thought maybe he’d wither and die from boredom. But family life and the private sector agreed with him. Now that she saw everything in retrospect, she realized how lonely he’d probably felt. Jordan and the kids had filled up all the empty pieces he’d kept hidden. He was a true grownup now, mature and settled. It was hard not to think of him as her surrogate big brother.

“Did you guys go out?” Cotton asked, some of his former sharp tone leaking through.

“What? No, ew. He’s about a decade older than me, and he was my boss. And he’s married and having a baby soon. We’re friends. Gross.” She shook her head again, pushing away the disturbing image. Pretty as he was, she had never felt even a

passing flicker of attraction to Gaines, a good thing since they'd worked so closely together on so many occasions.

"Cotton tells me you're concerned about Dante," Brody said, switching to cop mode, his eyes alight with critical intensity as he studied her.

"No one's heard from him in a while which, if I'm being honest, isn't all that unusual. It's more a feeling I have, an instinct that something isn't right." Gaines had taught her to trust her instincts because, more often than not, they were right. She tended to get a feeling about something bad right before it happened, usually giving them enough warning to get away. Why this was, she couldn't say. She wasn't quite bohemian enough to believe in "vibes," but she didn't know how else to explain it. Logan called it "a disturbance in the force." Elyse was nerdy enough to enjoy the comparison to a Jedi Knight. "What do you know about the new hydro company?"

Brody shrugged. "Not much. They keep to themselves and so far everything appears to be in order."

"A lot of people aren't happy," she noted.

"Then the sun must be shining somewhere," Brody said, using the same world-weary tone as Cotton had used. "If they weren't arguing over something, *then* I'd be worried."

"What's everyone doing today?" Georgette interjected into the thoughtful silence that followed Brody's comment.

"Boat," he replied, shooting his sister a grin. "Want to come with?"

"You know I don't," she said, then tossed an aside toward Elyse. "The wind is sensory overload. I can't focus enough to

read lips. It's too disorienting. Makes me feel unsafe." She wrinkled her nose.

"As if I'd ever let anything happen to you," Brody said, rolling his eyes. Georgette wrinkled her nose at him. In high school, Elyse had envied their dynamic; everyone had. Who wouldn't want a big brother like Brody, someone big, strong, and capable to watch out for her? But now she wondered at the constraints of their relationship. Some things Georgette said returned to the surface of her memory. *You have no idea what it's like to be the sibling that requires so much help and looking after.* Everyone always felt bad for Brody, because he had given up his dream to care for his sister. But the only thought anyone gave Georgette was an expectation of gratitude. Of course she was grateful for Brody's sacrifice; how could she be anything else? But what else was she? Did she feel the weight of guilt for things that were beyond her control?

"What about you, chick?" Cotton interrupted her. His hard stare told her he'd been observing her, probably knew she was lost in her head.

"What about me?" she returned, having lost track of the conversation.

He sighed, impatient. "Do you want to come out on my boat today?"

Now it was her turn to wrinkle her nose. "Why would I want to do that?" she blurted, and Brody covered a snort of amusement. She guessed, probably correctly, that not a lot of people said no to Cotton, women especially.

"Have you ever been on a boat?" Cotton challenged.

“I’ve ridden the ferry a few times,” she said, suddenly finding the hem of her dress enthralling.

“You can’t be a local and afraid of boats,” Cotton declared.

Her eyes met his, now snapping fire. “Pretty sure I can be anything I want.” It was the same tone that used to drive him crazy. Now, perverse weirdo he was, it amused him. A half smile tugged his lips.

“I think I woke the bear. It’s okay if the high and mighty spy is too frightened of a little water. I get it.” His smile was so aggravating she had to resist the urge to curl her fist and bop him.

She should definitely refuse; reason and maturity compelled it. She was here to find Dante, not revisit her dreadful past. But she had never been able to back down from Cotton Dupree, less so now that he was alternately sweet or flirtatious.

“Fine,” she said, sitting back with a stately air, as if it had been her idea all along. “Show me the Old Sow.”

“Play your cards right, Elyse, and I’ll show you the whole barnyard.”

Elyse’s jaw dropped and Georgette tittered. “Did I read your lips wrong, or was that the worst line ever?”

“Depends on if it works,” Cotton said, casting Elyse a little wink.

“Oh, my lands,” she muttered and tossed back the remainder of her coffee.

CHAPTER 15



It was a spectacular day to be on a boat. Everyone always said that, and now Elyse knew what it meant. The sun was bright, with only a slight breeze. Even so she put on her sweatshirt and tied up her hair. Just because she hadn't spent a lot of time on boats didn't mean she was ignorant of how much windier it would be away from shore.

Cotton had eyed her, when she came down wearing the sweatshirt from her college alma mater, hair in a loose knot on top of her head. His eyes began what was probably supposed to be a casual perusal but kept getting snagged. Elyse looked away, pretending not to notice his repeated inspections. She had no idea what to do with the new and shocking revelation that Cotton appeared to find her attractive, none whatsoever. On the best of days, she wasn't suave with men. When the man in question was her ex-boyfriend's brother and her former nemesis, it was enough to make her stupid.

They rode to the marina in strangely comfortable silence, and then it was her turn to watch him as he did all the mysterious things people did to make a boat leave its slip and ease into the ocean.

"How come you're scared?" Cotton asked at last.

It hadn't exactly been peaceful, with the wind and waves, but Elyse still jumped at the unexpected question.

"Who says I am?" she returned.

"Your face. Is it me or is it the boat?"

"Neither," she replied, tugging on the life jacket, testing its strength. "It's the ocean. It's so...immense. Doesn't the vastness make you feel insignificant or, I don't know, expendable?"

He blinked at her a couple of times, and then laughed. "Geez, Elyse, these are the thoughts that go through your brain?"

She glanced away, embarrassed. Standish remained the only one who could understand the depths of her brain, and he was certifiably insane. Not a good feeling, if she were honest.

"Come here," Cotton commanded.

"Why?" she demanded, nose wrinkled at his imperious attitude.

"Because I said so. Get over here."

Why did her feet obey him? She had no idea, but they did and she now stood beside him, feeling both awkward and annoyed.

He put an arm around her, turning her so her back was anchored to his front. "Close your eyes." His mouth was very close to her ear. Once again she found herself obeying, this time because it was easier than thinking or analyzing his motives. "Concentrate on the sun, the wind, the spray, the exhilarating movement. Isn't that nice?"

His hand was at her hip, his thumb smoothing over the bone, as his solid frame passed along the length of her back.

Elyse felt warm and safe and as if she belonged somewhere, for the first time in a long time. That was what she focused on, not the other stuff. He seemed to be waiting on an answer, so she nodded.

“We’re coming up on Old Sow. I need both hands.” Was that regret in his tone as he straightened away from her and put both hands on the wheel?

Elyse stood at the rail, staring out at the shore, thinking how life had suddenly flipped. One time she and Standish hiked in Penobscot to the reverse falls. They stood perched high on a cliff, overlooking the ocean, and saw a boat they recognized, one loaded with Cotton and his friends.

“What do you think it’s like on their side of the ocean?” Standish had asked.

“I don’t know,” Elyse said, heartened that they seemed to be thinking the same thing, as always.

“I like it better here with you,” Standish had said, squeezing her waist as he rested his head on hers.

Cotton nudged her, bringing her back to the present. “Old Sow,” he said, indicating it with a nod. Elyse scanned the mass expanse of water, the second largest whirlpool in the entire world. She expected to see one large swirl of water, as if God flushed a giant ocean toilet, but it wasn’t like that. There were a few swirls, but mostly it was large segments of mismatched water, as if teams of fish swam below, propelling it asunder.

“Those are the piglets,” Cotton said, pointing his head toward one of the smaller swirls.

“That’s so cute,” Elyse said, and Cotton tossed her a grin.

“Cute’s not usually the word used to describe her. She can open up at any time, suck you into the vortex, give you a spin

you won't ever forget."

"Then why are we here?" Elyse asked.

"You can't be a local who hasn't experienced Old Sow, chick. I won't allow it. And as long as the motor holds, we're fine."

There was a not-so-small part of Elyse that wanted the vortex to open, exactly as he'd said it might. She craved the adventure of swirling inside the whirlpool, getting tossed on the other side. There was a bigger part of her that knew she'd be safe, even if that happened, because of Cotton. He was that guy, the quintessential fixer and keeper of things and people.

When they were a proper distance from Old Sow, he slid an arm companionably around her and gave her a squeeze. She leaned into him, craving warmth or affection or maybe both. Her eyes landed on the shore, and it was impossible not to compare that long ago day with Standish. *Which side of the ocean do you prefer now, Elyse?* She questioned herself, but didn't find an answer.



They were nearing the marina when it happened. There was a whizzing sound, and a chunk of the boat flew into the air and lobbed into the ocean. Elyse and Cotton made brief eye contact, confirming their worst suspicions.

"Someone is shooting at us," Elyse exclaimed, needing to say it out loud to make certain it was real.

"Get down," Cotton commanded. He turned toward the throttle. Elyse braced herself for the burst of speed as she

crabwalked to the hold, grasping for the gun she'd watched him stash there.

Cotton caught sight of her in his periphery, did a double take, and scowled. Elyse ignored him, checked the gun, and scanned the shore. She saw no one, but a few birds took sudden flight. Her eyes remained fixed there, tracking for more movement, for the glint of a weapon, for any spark of danger or hint of something out of order.

She continued to stand watch, weapon at the ready, as Cotton returned the boat to its slip and tied it up.

He held out his hand for the gun, features set. Scowling now, she placed the butt of the gun in his waiting grasp. He transferred it to his right hand, grasping her elbow with his left. She shook free of the proprietary hold. Sighing, he stalked toward the building that housed equipment and a snack shack, now closed.

Purposefully, and with dignity, she marched beside him, head up, refusing to be cowed by his haughty demeanor.

He opened the door for her, turning behind them to make certain it closed properly before whirling to face her.

“What were you thinking? Someone *shot* at us. When I tell you to get down, you get down.”

Elyse put her hands on her hips and advanced a step. “I don't work for you. You must be on crack if you think I'll take orders from the likes of you, Cotton Dupree.”

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. For a few seconds it was as if someone removed his working parts. Meanwhile Elyse remained incensed, cheeks flushed, heart pumping overtime. And then his shock abated and he puffed a

laugh and took a step forward, placing both hands on her waist to gather her close and press her against him.

“You’re not normal,” he whispered, lips fervent against her hair.

“I know,” she lamented, not certain what to do with her hands. Should she return his hug? Push him away? In the end she settled for what was most comfortable, easing them gently around his waist.

He gave her a hard squeeze and let her go, resting his hands on her shoulders. “Let me get this straight: you have an existential dread of the ocean, but when someone shoots at you, you keep a calm head and respond like a cop.”

“Yes,” she agreed, nodding.

He squinted, studying her face. “How?”

“Training and experience.” She wasn’t a crack shot, not even close, but she’d had a lot of weapons training and, thanks to Gaines, a fair amount of field experience, more than most hackers and techs she knew. He’d put a lot of faith in her; she’d worked hard never to let him down.

Cotton blinked at her a couple of times. “You’re not a real spy.”

She blinked at him but otherwise made no reply.

Despite her lack of answer, reality seemed to be seeping in at last. “Elyse,” he rasped, tongue darting out to lick his suddenly dry lips, “That’s...”

“What?” she prompted when he once again trailed off. Had she done this to him, robbed him of coherence, or had he always been this way? She couldn’t remember.

“That’s so cool,” he said at last.

She tittered, both nervous and amused. “That’s me. *So cool.*”

“It’s taken me by surprise, too,” he said with a surprising amount of affection, the back of his hand stroking her cheek.

Inside, her nerves bubbled. Usually that led to a lot of incoherent babbling. While Elyse gladly accepted the part of her personality that made her occasionally awkward, she didn’t trust this new Cotton enough to reveal that side to him. Instead she forced herself to focus on the day’s priority. “I think it’s time to talk to Fred Inger.”

“Okay,” he said, then, “What?” when she squinted at him in confusion.

“I can’t reconcile Cotton Dupree with easy agreement.”

He tipped forward and brushed his nose on hers, his lips caressing hers gently as he spoke, “I’m such a pussycat.”

She drew in a ragged little breath that caused his hand to squeeze her hip reflexively, and they froze, regarding each other with wide, uncertain eyes. “So.” Her breath hitched. “Anyway.”

“Anyway,” Cotton agreed. His free hand came up again, fingers brushing the hair at her temple. The moment was loaded and they were frozen, both unable to extract themselves and unable to continue to the next inevitable conclusion, the one where he kissed her or she kissed him. Could she actually see herself kissing Cotton Dupree?

Yes, a little voice whispered in her head, and Elyse was so shocked and horrified she backstepped and pinged against the wall. Her hands came up reflexively behind her, to touch the wall. The cool cinderblocks felt good against her fingertips, a dose of reality to her overheated brain. Cotton stared at her,

waiting to see what she would do next, how she would play it. Ignore or dive in and address the elephant in the room.

“Lunch?” she croaked, and he gave a little nod. Apparently they were going to ignore it and pretend nothing happened, and that was fine, perfectly fine.

“Lunch,” he agreed and spun to face the door.

CHAPTER 16



Elyse couldn't seem to decide which was stranger: the fact that she and Cotton were now allies, the fact that she and Cotton were allies who were *attracted to each other*, or the fact that Cotton seemed so unfazed by both those things. Where was his epic freakout? Why was she alone in her dismay? Hadn't he hated her as much as she'd hated him all those years? Hadn't he probably vowed that, no matter what, they would never be on the same side? That he would never, ever, *ever* allow himself to get close to her? Because Elyse had vowed those things and then some. Cotton had been so unfair, had hurt her so many times, so deeply that she swore, *swore* she would have nothing more to do with him. In fact this whole trip was supposed to be proof of that resolve. She was supposed to waltz back into town, cool, successful, mature, and unaffected. Cotton's taunts and manipulation wouldn't affect her, not in the slightest. Every insult would ping off her newly hardened exterior.

But Cotton didn't insult her. Instead he bypassed all her defenses and started being sweet to her, started acting like he cared about her, like he *liked* her. And where was she to go with that?

"You're staring at me," he told her as he drove them to the restaurant in Eastport.

“Yes,” she agreed because denial was impossible.

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Wow. College made you eloquent,” he joked.

“Shaddup,” she said, then squawked when he leaned over and squeezed her thigh, hitting her tickle spot.

They ordered chowder for lunch. It was warming, filling, and comforting, wafting through the restaurant with taunting familiarity. Elyse couldn't remember the last time she'd had it, and she suddenly wondered how that was possible. When she left home, she left everything, all reminders, no matter how big or small. The iconic food—lobsters, chowder, blueberries—had been an all-too present and painful reminder. But she had thrown the baby out with the bathwater because she liked those things. How was it winning to punish herself by denial?

“You have serious Elyse face,” Cotton said, and she realized he'd been staring at her for some time while she absently mangled a sugar packet.

She wagged her brows at him, both because it would annoy him to be left out of the loop of her deep thoughts and because, after confessing her ocean fear to him and being mocked, she wasn't in the mood to share things. Cotton huffed an annoyed breath and flicked her knuckle, which was such a Cotton thing to do that Elyse laughed.

“You're so physical,” she said, recalling every time she'd seen him jump, run, punch or kick something to release his excess energy. Unlike Standish, who had used art as his outlet; he'd been more cerebral, like her.

“Yeah?” he said, and whatever was in his tone or look made her cheeks flush scarlet.

He leaned in a little and lowered his voice. “We should probably talk a little about what happened.”

“Okay,” she said and picked up a new sugar packet to mangle. Was she about to be rebuffed? Was he going to tell her that the attraction she’d sensed was one sided and all in her head? Why had she been so transparent, so naïve? *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, she chastised herself.

“Who do you think shot at us?” he asked softly, so softly that she had to lean in to hear him.

“Oh,” she said slowly, caught off guard by her own girliness. Of course he wanted to talk business; it was the entire reason they were here. How awkward and embarrassing to be a woman sometimes, to think of relationships before tasks, to battle private insecurities no one could guess.

Cotton slid his hand beneath hers and brought it to his lips, brushing them on her knuckles. His self-satisfied little smirk made her think he knew exactly what she had been thinking and enjoyed keeping her against the ropes. If there was one thing that would work to draw Elyse out of her insecure little trance, it was this: Cotton Dupree’s abject smugness.

She withdrew her hand, on the pretense of pushing her hair out of her face, and settled it in her lap, far out of reach of him and his newly easy affection that made her addled. “I have a theory about that.”

“What’s your theory?” Cotton asked.

“I don’t think the shooter was a hostile,” she said.

“The giant chunk of my boat that is missing might disagree,” he said, eyes narrowed.

“That’s what makes me think it wasn’t meant to hurt us, that it was a warning,” she said. “Most people who have long-

range rifles of that caliber won't miss a target from that distance, even a moving one. You don't buy that kind of gun, if you're a bad shot. If he'd wanted to hit us, he would have."

"Who is he?" Cotton asked.

"Dante."

He blinked, taken aback. "Why would your uncle fire off warning shots at us?"

She shrugged. "That's the part I can't figure. Was he telling me to back off or keep going? It's not like there's some kind of logical progression to his thinking that I can point to and understand."

Cotton blew out a breath. "Are you certain, absolutely certain, that he wouldn't purposely try to hurt you?"

"Positive. He would never." His expression seemed dubious, and that annoyed her. "What?"

"It's just that you don't have the best track record with believing the correct thing about that issue."

She gave an irritated little cluck. "That's not the same."

"How is it not the same?"

"Dante is my uncle," she said.

"And Standish was your boyfriend," he returned.

Her scowl deepened. "It's not the same."

Cotton regarded her, frowning. "Have you ever talked to anyone about it?"

She made a show of arranging her silverware, giving her eyes a reprieve from his too-keen probing. "No, but there's no need. I'm fine."

“When’s the last time you had a date?” he demanded.

Her cheeks flushed. “Not your business.”

“It most certainly is,” Cotton disagreed.

“Why would my love life be any of your business?”

“You made it my business when you wouldn’t leave Standish alone.”

“Wouldn’t leave Sta...” her outrage was interrupted by the appearance of their food, which was a good thing because it gave her enough pause to realize he was purposely provoking her and enjoying her ire.

They thanked the waitress and arranged their food. “Now, you were telling me about your love life,” Cotton prompted.

“What about your love life?” she rebutted.

“Easy. I don’t have one.”

“Pfft, that’s not possible,” she declared.

“Why, thank you,” he said, feigning embarrassment.

“I just meant that you always had a girlfriend. I find it hard to believe you’ve suddenly turned into a monk,” she said.

“It’s not a binary, chick. There’s a vast gray area between monk and monogamous. Sometimes I see people, but I don’t have a girlfriend. It’s not a Hallmark movie.” He rolled his eyes.

“Stop looking for Mr. Romance, ladies. I found him,” Elyse said, full sarcasm.

He leaned forward and dropped his tone to somewhere between cozy and suave. “Maybe I haven’t met the right woman yet.” His brows wagged.

“Maybe you met her and she ran far and fast after you tried to arrest her for some made up infraction,” Elyse returned, also leaning closer.

“That would be a first because I’ve never had a woman run away before,” he said.

She pressed a hand to her stomach and leaned back. “Please don’t make statements like that when I’m trying to digest things.”

He laughed, looking genuinely amused. “I’m still waiting on an answer from you.”

“Yes, you are,” she agreed.

He clucked his annoyance. “Elyse, come on. We go all the way back.”

She hated how hearing him say her name made her tummy flop. “Really? You want to invoke our past as a means to sway me? If so, prepare to see *me* run away.”

He rolled his eyes. “When are you going to let that go? I’m reformed, I told you.”

“I’m going to need more than a few hours of proof,” she said, only half joking. How much could she trust Cotton? She still wasn’t certain.

“How much time do you think you’ll need?” he asked, doing that thing where he gave her a look that made all the little nervous butterflies inside her wake up and flutter. Time to deflect.

“Are you smoldering? Is this a Cotton Dupree smolder?”

“Depends on whether or not it’s working,” he said and took a bite of his sandwich.

Elyse focused on her soup. It was better than pleading the fifth.

CHAPTER 17



They finished lunch and headed to the hardware store. Lunch helped to restore Elyse's resolve and buoyant mood and also clear the air between them. Things once again felt light and casual and she was glad. Cotton seemed to have given up on probing her over things she would rather not talk about. Not that she was naïve enough to believe he'd let them go completely, rather that he seemed willing to let them lay for the moment, in order to circle back to them later. The thought that he was planning a "later" gave her a cozy sense of familiarity, mixed with a slight dose of panic. Cotton had the sort of alpha personality that could only be dissuaded for so long. Elyse had little faith in her ability to hold him off, despite her new resolve. There was something both thrilling and terrifying about that.

Outside it started to rain, a lazy drizzle that made the inside of the car seem more intimate and self-contained. They sat in easy silence, watching the hardware store.

"How are we going to play this?" Cotton asked, then, "What?" when he caught her look of surprise.

"I didn't expect you to ask for my input," she confessed. It was Cotton's world, after all. They were all living in it.

“You’re the expert, chick,” he said, tossing her a little wink that made her cheeks flame. She faced forward to escape his amused inspection.

“Straight, I think. From the sound of it, he and Dante were on the same side.”

“What side is that?” Cotton asked.

“The side that didn’t want the dam to happen. Let’s align ourselves with Dante and see what shakes out. It might work to dispel any suspicion.”

“Okay,” Cotton said, sounding slightly...relieved? Was it possible that Cotton, for all his many bluster, might not want to always be in charge of everything?

“You and Brody still seem tight,” she noted.

“Yep,” he agreed.

Did he talk to Brody about things? Real things that bothered him? If she asked, he wouldn’t tell her; she would have to find a roundabout way to ask. “Georgette said he and his girlfriend broke up.”

Cotton gave a little nod.

“Did that bother him? Georgette made it sound like they’d been serious.”

“I don’t know,” Cotton said, shrugging.

“You didn’t ask.”

He puffed a laugh. “No. Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re friends,” she said.

“We’re also men,” he said, facing her with a horrified grimace. “I’d have better luck asking if he wanted to braid my hair than I would checking on his mental or emotional

wellbeing.” He shuddered. “Yeesh, girl, get a grip. Men and women aren’t the same.”

“Some men talk about their problems with others,” she said.

“None in my world,” he said, shuddering again.

She faced forward with a little sigh. That answered that question, she supposed. Whatever was going on with him, he was keeping well under wraps.

“What?” he asked, giving her shoulder a light prod with his index finger.

“What’s the point of having friends, if you don’t talk to them about what’s bothering you?” she asked.

“We do stuff together, fish and boat and important stuff like that. If I needed someone to help me rip off the deck and rebuild it, Brody would be the first guy I would call, and the same is true for him. But heart junk?” He shook his head. “That’s like revealing your soft underbelly to another lion.”

It was a fascinating glimpse, she supposed, and also another glaring difference between him and Standish. Standish had always been up front and vulnerable with his emotions, and yet he was the one who lost his mind. Society told her it should be the opposite, that the brother who stuffed down and hid his emotions as if they were a shameful secret should have been the one who fell off his nut and went on a spree. Instead it was the brother who’d had no problem crying in public at the end of a sad movie or confessing his faults and failures to Elyse.

“Huh,” she mused, wondering if maybe everything she’d ever learned about life was wrong. Maybe men and women

were different. Maybe men couldn't be pigeonholed into the same emotional mainframe and that was perfectly okay.

"Is that what you've done? Confessed all your deepest and darkest secrets to a friend?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned. It was that concern that prompted her to answer with a slow shake of her head.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't have any friends like that. I had a good work team, but it wasn't the sort of situation where I felt comfortable confessing my darkest secrets."

"Why don't you have close friends?" he demanded.

"Partly because of me. I don't warm up to people easily, never have."

"A Maine girl, through and through."

She gave a hapless shrug of agreement.

"You said that was only part of the reason. What's the other part?" he asked.

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

"If I didn't, I wouldn't have asked," he said.

"The other reason is because of you," she said.

He blinked, shocked, as if that was the last answer he suspected. "What? What do I have to do with anything?"

"Are you joking?"

"Are you?"

"You said it yourself; it's like exposing your vulnerable underbelly to another lion," she said.

“I was talking about other men, not you,” he said.

She tossed her hands wide in exasperation. “You were on the hunt for any vulnerability, and when you found one you used it to tear me apart and eviscerate me. I learned never to expose any vulnerability near you, or anyone else, for fear it would get back to you.”

He stared at her, unblinking now. The intensity of his gaze was disconcerting. She faced forward again and checked her watch. “Let’s get this over with before he closes the store.” Not waiting for a reply, she opened the car and walked to the store. Cotton caught up with her quickly and quietly. He remained a half step behind her until they reached the door, then he hauled it open, allowing her to go through first.

Fred Inger looked up curiously at them, squinting when recognition didn’t hit. Since it wasn’t high tourist season, he likely knew everyone who stopped in. Strangers must be an odd, but not unwelcome, sight. “Can I help you?” he asked, eyes darting toward the section of the store stocked with standard Maine fare—bug spray, rain ponchos, and touristy schlock.

Cotton remained silent, so Elyse took the lead. “I wondered if I might ask you a few questions.”

Fred’s brow lowered and he seemed to shrink protectively inward. “What kind of questions?” Now his eyes darted to Cotton, assessing him anew, probably observing the cop vibes he’d somehow missed. He had to be wondering if he was in trouble for something. Elyse let his discomfort linger a few beats before she answered.

When they were finally face to face, with only the counter separating them, she spoke, “I’m looking for my uncle. I wondered if maybe you’ve seen him.”

His shoulders sagged slightly in relief and his demeanor relaxed perceptibly. “Who is your uncle?”

“Dante,” Elyse said, noting his reaction with interest because he smiled.

“Ah, Dante. He’s quite the character.”

Elyse gave Cotton a side glance he ignored. She had never heard anyone describe her uncle that way before. Every descriptor she’d ever heard had been negative, even from family. *Dante is troubled, crazy, exhausting, wild, disturbed, insane.* “How well do you know him?”

“Not well. I mean, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?” he gave a smile that might either have been self-deprecating or self-congratulatory for his Sun Tzu reference.

“Who is your enemy?” Cotton asked.

“The hydro people, obviously. They’re all of our enemy.”

“I moved away a long time ago,” Elyse said, and her tone conveyed definite self-deprecation. “You’ll have to fill me in on what’s going on.” *Gee mister, I’m just a hapless city girl.* She tossed him a smile and a few innocent blinks that must have worked to convince him of her naivete. Either that or he was ready and willing to rant to anyone who would listen. Given his alignment with Dante, that was a distinct possibility.

“It’s the same old story. They come in here with their investors and government money making bold promises about free electricity for the locals, and then what? They realize the water can’t be tamed, and they abandon us, leave us to hold the bag and clean up. This time I want to stop them before they even start.”

“I heard Dante agrees with you,” Elyse said.

“He does,” Fred said, with a decisive nod. “He’s a good ally for the cause, really passionate.”

“When is the last time you saw him?” Elyse asked.

“Oh, whew, let’s see.” He squinted, trying to remember. “There was a meeting with the hydro people, got kind of heated. Dante got into it with a couple of the execs. Started screaming, pacing, demanding they come clean about their true agenda.”

“What did he think their true agenda was?” Elyse asked.

Fred’s expression turned sheepish. “He thought they were government spies, working with the Deep State. I thought he was cranked up, you know, hitting out and trying to get a reaction. Someone told me later he got kind of messed up in the war. Made me feel bad.” He brushed his hand on the back of his neck.

Elyse wondered if that were true, if he actually felt bad or if he was glad to weaponize Dante’s insanity for his own agenda.

“When was this meeting?” she asked, trying to keep her tone neutral and free of judgment. Maybe he had been innocent in his alignment with Dante. In any case, it behooved her to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Six months ago or thereabouts?” Fred said.

“And you haven’t seen him since?”

“Not that I recall. Usually if we saw each other, we stopped to commiserate, so I’d probably remember if I glimpsed him around town somewhere,” Fred said.

“How did the hydro execs react to Dante’s rant?” Cotton interjected.

“Smug amusement. Lots of smirks and condescending looks exchanged, you know what I mean?” Fred said, lip snarled in contempt. He called them a name, fists clenching.

“Was that how the crowd reacted? Were they amused?” Elyse asked, and she tensed, too. How much of an object of ridicule had her uncle become?

Fred shook his head. “It was interesting, the reaction. Sort of like he was stirring the crowd, like an old tent revivalist. What he said made no sense, but people didn’t care. He gave them an outlet for their anger. When the execs began to realize that, their tone changed.”

“How so?”

“They dropped the amusement and gave a nod to their hired thugs.”

“They have hired thugs?” Elyse asked. What kind of executives were these?

“Oh, yeah. And they needed them, too. We’ve had about enough of their sort.” His fists flexed again.

“They signaled to their thugs and then what?” Cotton asked.

“Then the meeting adjourned. They scurried back to their cars, like the cockroaches they are. And that was that,” Fred said.

“Did you see or talk to Dante after the meeting?” Elyse asked.

Fred tipped his head. “You know, come to think of it, I didn’t. I was pretty high on adrenaline by then, and I was trying to use it to rally some people who had shown similar signs of anger. Working the crowd, I guess you’d say. I

remember I wanted to say something to Dante, tell him he did a good job rousing everyone, but when I looked he was nowhere in sight.” He squinted. “I think that was the last time I saw him, before the meeting ended.”

They thanked Fred and asked him to call Cotton, if he thought of anything else. Elyse’s mind whirred as they trekked back to the car. Cotton was similarly quiet. She thought his mind was equally occupied with thoughts of Dante, until he put his hand on her elbow and herded her toward the alleyway around the corner.

“Wha...” she began, but he used his body to press her against the wall, cupping her face in his hands.

“You make me feel like the worst person in the world,” he rasped. His face was distraught, almost crazy with disquiet. “Was I really so bad?”

She pressed her lips together and nodded slowly.

His brow hitched lower. “Didn’t you understand it was never about you? That it was always about Standish and trying to keep him alive?”

She shook her head, eyes filling with unwanted tears. She couldn’t, wouldn’t cry in front of Cotton. She’d once made it her life’s solemn vow. She swallowed hard. “How could I have known? I was just a stupid, insecure kid.”

“You never seemed that way. You were aloof and untouchable. Bullet proof. And now you come back and you’re vulnerable and I...I feel like,” he paused and swallowed hard. “Pretty bad, chick.”

They stared at each other. Tension bounced between them, and neither could discern if it was the good kind or the bad.

“Can we move on?” he whispered. “Forget the past?”

“I...I don’t know.” She didn’t want to be that person, the one who wallowed in past hurts. But the hurts had been so big, had shaped her so significantly. She wasn’t certain how to move past them.

“What if I say I’m sorry?” he asked.

“Are you?” she asked, eyes darting between his, trying to read them.

“Yes. I...I felt like I could see what was happening to Standish, like it was a slow-moving train crash. I lashed out in fear because I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Was that the only reason?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“It wasn’t because you were an egotistical, self-centered jerk?”

His lips twitched. “Seventy/thirty.”

“Which part is which?” she asked.

“Depends on how this conversation goes.” He rested his forehead on hers. “Say you forgive me.”

“I do.”

“Do you mean it?”

“I’m trying.” It wasn’t that she didn’t forgive him. She wasn’t a child anymore, after all, and fully understood the implications of holding on to past wrongs. It was more that the mocking voice in her head always belonged to him. She had arranged her entire life around avoiding that voice. In a way, she probably owed him her career. Fear of Cotton Dupree’s loathing had driven her relentlessly to succeed. She didn’t want it to be that way anymore. Not only because it wasn’t

healthy, but also because she realized he had a side in this, too. For so long she had set herself up as the victim and him as the bully. True, he had been outrageously unfair and sometimes cruel to her. But he'd also been carrying the weight of Standish's illness on his shoulders, as a kid. He'd lashed out at her, in some wrong belief that she was responsible for Standish's decline and could do anything to change it.

"All that time, we were on the same side," she mused, gripping his shirt in her curled fists. They had both loved Standish, had wanted the best for Standish, had been hapless victims of Standish's illness. "What if we had been allies?"

He shook his head. "We would have been too powerful."

Elyse laughed, but it was probably true. Cotton had been cool and popular, part of the elite. Though Elyse had never been part of that crowd, she'd been formidable in her own right, seemingly tough and aloof, while also being smart and driven. Like a nerd, but weaponized by sarcasm and an indomitable spirit. "Probably so."

"Now, though," he said, his thumb stroking along her jaw. "I think the world is ready for us."

Am I? Elyse wondered and took a deep breath. Hadn't she come home with the intent of showing everyone how much she'd changed? This was her moment. "I'm not afraid of you," she said, holding steady eye contact, a thing that was harder than she wanted it to be.

"That's where you've always had it wrong, Elyse. I was always the one who was afraid."

His sincere vulnerability went a long way toward convincing her. "We were kids," she said. "Messed up, scared

kids who didn't know better, who were dealing with something way over our heads.”

“It's still over my head,” Cotton admitted. He picked up a strand of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers.

“Same,” Elyse agreed.

He gave her a sad sort of smile. “It's amazing how much we have in common.”

“I guess we're officially on the same side now,” she said.

“I guess so,” he agreed and something in her tummy started to squiggle. “Quick question, though.”

“Hmm?”

He used the end of her hair to tickle her nose. “What exactly are we fighting for?”

“Truth and justice?” she tried.

“So, we're Superman,” he said.

“Looks like.”

“What are the chances I could get you to be Lois Lane?”

“I'm willing to strike a deal,” she said.

“Yeah?” He took an impossible step closer.

“Pick me up, fly me around the world, and I'll let you be Superman,” she said.

“Step one.” He picked her up, a feat made easier because they were already chest to chest. Reflexively, her legs went round his waist. His hand rested on her hip. “Suddenly I can't remember step two, or why it matters.”

“Are you trying to distract me with charm and big muscles?” she asked.

“Are you saying you think I’m charming with big muscles?” he countered.

“Your conversational ninja skills have left me in the dust,” she said.

Instead of laughing, he frowned as he scrutinized her. “You’re doing that thing again, the thing I’m starting to recognize,” he said.

“Being cute and witty?” she tried.

“No, well, yes, actually, but I meant the thing where you pretend to be paying attention but in reality your big brain has moved on to something else,” he said.

“Oh,” she said slowly, not certain how she felt about his discernment. Elyse was more comfortable with secrets, it was why she became a hacker and a spy. Being known by people wasn’t something she particularly enjoyed. So it should have been off putting and maybe even scary that Cotton seemed to be putting forth his best effort to plumb her depths. Somehow, though, it left her with a sort of squeamish feeling she couldn’t figure out. Did she love it? Did she want to run away in terror? Maybe both things. “I was thinking that I need to spend some time with my computer, do some poking around on the hydro execs.”

“You haven’t yet?” His brows rose.

“I’ve been a bit preoccupied by one thing and his brother,” she said, giving the arms that held her a pointed glance.

He chuckled. “Good to know I rank as a distraction. Okay, then. What do you need to do your thing?”

“A good internet connection and a solid work surface,” she said, heart thumping because she had expected him to drop her

somewhere. But this sounded like more, like he was planning to be part of the process.

“I know just the place,” he said, touched his nose to hers, and then carried her to the car.

CHAPTER 18



“Here?” Elyse said when they pulled up in front of the bar.

“What did you have in mind?” Cotton asked.

“I don’t know, a library, maybe,” she said.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. Their town had neither a library, nor a post office. What it did have was three bars, which told you pretty much everything you needed to know about it. The one in question also served food, probably the best food in town. But they had already eaten, so she didn’t think he brought her there for that. “You want information, this is where we might get it. You can work on your computer stuff, and I’ll work on talking to people. It’s this thing I do, called investigating. As a computer geek, non-cop, I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” He pressed his palm to his chest with the façade of earnest humility.

“You think you’re pretty cute,” she noted.

He tipped closer, erasing the distance between them. “Do you think I’m cute?”

She held up her palm, warding him away. “I’m not feeding that ego.”

“Ha, you never did. Come on, chick. If we hurry, we can get the good booth.”

“Is that the one with or without the used chewing gum?” she asked as she scooted from the car.

He opened the door and stood aside as she swept by him. Once they were both inside, she paused and blinked, letting her eyes adjust to the dim interior. When she thought of her hometown, she thought of this—the poverty and depression that somehow culminated in a dim bar with dank smells. People didn’t really come to this bar to get drunk, at least not often. Maybe on a weekend someone young or stupid or addicted might overindulge. But on most nights it was a place to commiserate, to lessen the burden of hopelessness the everlasting winters seemed to place on them. It didn’t matter so much if you lacked sunlight, money, and a future, if everyone you were with lacked those things, too.

“Welcome home,” Cotton muttered, apparently reading her thoughts. He didn’t look at her when he spoke. Instead he stared around the dark bar, as if seeing it afresh through her lens. For reasons Elyse didn’t understand, that made her feel bad, like he somehow felt less in comparison to her. When she was a kid, that was all she wanted—to win, to bring Cotton Dupree down a few notches. But now that she’d gotten away, tested her wings, and returned home somewhat victorious, she didn’t want that anymore. Now she wanted... She had no idea what she wanted, but not this, not to make him feel sad about his life.

Shifting her computer bag to her side, she slid her arm companionably through his and gave it a squeeze. Cotton glanced down at her with an expression she couldn’t read. Surprise, maybe? She couldn’t imagine why he would be

surprised, unless he knew her so little that he was shocked by an affectionate gesture. He blinked the shock away and smiled, and it was so sweet and vulnerable that Elyse swallowed thickly and blinked the moisture away from her own eyes, suddenly glad for the darkness that acted as cover. The very last thing she ever expected to find on this trip was peace and healing, but that seemed to be happening as Cotton peeled back the layers of his destruction and spackled them over with kindness and care.

Those moments of tenderness made Elyse realize how high and thick her walls had become. Over the years she had worked extremely hard on her wisecracking outer shell, never letting anyone see how soft and sensitive she really was. After years of working together, she had let Logan and Gaines get close enough to see inside her, but that was it. Two friends, in the entire world, knew her secret. And now, thanks to real life and its abrupt changes, she never saw either one of them. At work she was surrounded by strangers all day, people who believed she was the snarky and standoffish hacker she pretended to be. Maybe that was what had her hating her job lately, and not merely her incompetent, competitive, backstabbing boss. *I'm so lonely*, Elyse realized. *And homesick*, she added as the smell of fried clams engulfed them on the short journey to the back booth.

Cotton slid into the same side as she did, but she didn't call him on it. Both because it was the side that would allow them to see who came and went through the door and because it was nice to have him close by. Who would have imagined that Cotton Dupree would begin to fill some of her empty pieces? Not her.

Elyse opened her laptop and began to poke around, first on the easiest and most obvious sites. She wasn't aware that

Cotton was watching her, until he spoke.

“How can your fingers move that fast?” he said, staring at her as she typed.

She blew on her fingers and tossed him a little wink, smiling when he gave an appreciative whistle. She gave herself points for not jumping when he reached out a hand and rested it on her thigh, possessively, she thought.

“Hey, Cotton, haven’t seen you in he…” the speaker broke off as he caught sight of Elyse, freezing as if he’d been apprehended with his hand in the cookie jar. “It’s Elyse,” he hissed.

Elyse supposed she should be insulted by the man’s tone, somewhere between shock and revulsion. He was an old high school buddy of Cotton’s, one who had been all too happy to do his bidding and make Elyse’s life a misery. But the look on his face was so genuinely appalled that she swallowed a laugh instead, smiling at him as she spoke.

“Hi, Steven.”

“What is she doing here?” Steven demanded. “Does Standish know she’s here?”

Cotton inspected Elyse with wry amusement. “I was hoping to keep her secret but, yes, Standish is aware.” He gave Elyse’s thigh a squeeze.

“Uh…” Steve stammered. In a strange way, his absolute shock and confusion were affirming for Elyse, who had started to wonder if the feud with Cotton had somehow all been one sided or bigger in her imagination than reality. Had she made it all up? Had Cotton been nice to her back then and she, mired in teenage angst and self-importance, made it something it wasn’t? Steven’s reaction, however, was confirmation that it

hadn't all been in her mind. Cotton, with the help of his many toadies, had been vile to her, had made her life such a misery that one of those toadies couldn't comprehend seeing her share a booth with him, maybe couldn't comprehend that she was once again in the same town as him. For her own amusement, she tipped her head and rested it on Cotton's shoulder, suppressing a snicker when Steven's eyes bugged.

“What's, um, what's going on? Is Standish okay?”

“As okay as Standish can be,” Cotton said. He moved his hand off Elyse's thigh and put it around her shoulders. Was that supposed to signify comfort to her or was it a message to Steven? Or was it merely a guy trying to find a more comfortable position? Cotton had always been one of those men who seemed to need to stretch out and physically dominate his space. Whatever his motivation, Elyse felt thankful for the cozy little buffer his arm created between her and Steven. While she had somewhat understood Cotton's ire, she had never understood how his underlings so easily made her a target, based on his orders.

“What are you up to these days?” she asked, trying to remember what she knew of Steven. Who had he dated in school, or had he? She had no idea. In her mind he was one of the homogenous followers who did Cotton's bidding. Much like a lesser character in a novel, she had assigned him no personal traits whatsoever.

“You know, working, stuff,” he said. The furrow in his brows lessened, but only slightly as his eyes dodged back and forth between Cotton and Elyse. “Are you and Standish back together or something?”

Cotton squeezed her shoulder. She took that to mean he was letting her have the lead on this one. “No, I came back for

a visit. You know I'm from here.”

Steven nodded, her sarcasm apparently lost on him.

“My uncle still lives here. Dante?”

He squinted at her. “That guy’s your uncle?”

“You know him?” It was a dumb question because the town was small enough and tight knit enough for everyone to know everyone, especially someone as notorious as Dante. But there was knowing someone, in the way you knew their name and possibly a pertinent fact, and then there was *knowing* someone, in the way that you kept up on their lives and knew personal details and personality quirks about them. She meant her question the second way but wasn’t certain if Steven was astute enough to distinguish.

“Yeah, we’ve talked a couple of times. He works the boats occasionally, when he needs the cash,” Steven said.

Those who made their living from the sea and its inhabitants occasionally needed seasonal help. Most people were lucky enough to have kids to fill that role. The ones who didn’t hire locals, usually unstable drifters like Dante, who worked on an as-needed basis for daily cash. The off-the-books payment system worked well for the employers who didn’t want to claim day laborers and day laborers who didn’t want to claim wages. The smelly, grueling labor was a high price to pay for those people who valued autonomy above all else. As for Elyse, she had no idea her uncle worked. As far as she knew, he received a small disability stipend from the military and subsisted on that. It wasn’t like he ever spent money on anything. But maybe he used the extra to stockpile ammunition and supplies, the sort that fueled his unending paranoia. Of course now that he seemed to be living off the

land and whatever he'd been able to stash, maybe his paranoia had been warranted.

"Do you know when you saw him last?" Elyse asked.

Steven squinted. The lines around his eyes made her believe he did that often, as if thinking was hard work for him which, knowing his history, it probably was. Steven was the sort of man who, two hundred years ago at the height of the town's whaling industry, would have been an excellent crewman. He was that sort who was forever happy to be the sidekick and never needed to be the captain. *Cotton would definitely be the captain*, she thought. Standish would have been the poet who stayed on land and wrote ballads and sonnets about sailing life. And her? Who would she have been? In order to answer that question, she'd probably have to figure out who she was now. She was closer than she'd ever been, but still didn't have the answer.

"Uh, I don't know," Steven said slowly, eyes darting once again to Cotton, as if asking permission to answer Elyse's questions.

"I'm helping Elyse look for him," Cotton explained. "She seems to believe he's missing and might be in danger. So if you think of anything, let me know."

Steven gave a little nod, relieved that he hadn't committed treason somehow by talking to Elyse.

"What do you know about the hydro company?" Elyse asked. In for a penny, in for a pound. While she had him here, she might as well try to pick his brain, meager though it was.

Steven blinked slowly at her. "Nothing." He shrugged. "They say they'll bring jobs, but that never seems to pan out. Or if they do bring jobs, they already bring the people needed

to fill them.” He scowled into the middle distance with the timeworn disdain of blue-collar workers everywhere. No matter the time or place, the situation never seemed to change: those in power stayed in power, those with money stayed in money.

“You haven’t heard anything bad about these particular ones?” Elyse clarified.

He squinted again. “Seems like I might have heard something, but I don’t know what.”

Elyse gave Cotton the side eye. How was Steven able to function in everyday society? Cotton curled his arm closer and brushed his thumb on her neck, a motion that seemed to say, *Hush, you.*

Steven, who seemed barely able to dress himself, somehow noticed the gesture and widened his eyes comically, eyes once again darting between them. “I don’t understand,” he said, pointing at them.

Elyse refrained very hard from guessing how many times he said that phrase in a day. This time she nudged Cotton with her elbow, letting him take the lead, a tiny bit anxious herself to hear how he’d respond.

“Elyse and I go way back. You know that,” Cotton said.

“Yeah, but...” Steven let the thought trail, but Elyse didn’t need to hear it to know what it would be. *Yeah, but you hate her,* was all too clearly written on his face.

“The past was a long time ago and we’ve all moved on,” Cotton said, now brushing his thumb on Elyse’s shoulder.

“Standish, too?” Steven asked, which Elyse thought was rather bold of him, considering how easily and for how long he’d been cowing to Cotton.

“The past was a long time ago,” Cotton repeated. If Elyse heard the tiny note of uncertainty in his tone, surely Steven must, too, but he seemed content to take Cotton’s word for it with a nod.

“Anyway, I gotta hit the head,” he said and slid from the booth.

“I’ve missed him,” Elyse said, and Cotton snorted a laugh. She gave him a little shove. “Seriously, how did you hang out with that guy?”

“Be nice,” Cotton said, shoving her lightly in return. “It’s not like our genepool for cultivating friendships was all that expansive. What about your friend, Rona?”

“What about her?” Elyse asked.

“She ate her hair.”

Now it was Elyse’s turn to snort. “Fine, but in my defense she was not my friend. She hung out with us because she had a thing for Standish.”

“Who were your friends, your real friends, besides Standish?” he asked.

She gave a hapless little shrug. “I didn’t have any. I had acquaintances. Standish was my world.” The statement devolved into sadness, but how could it not? First she’d built her life around her boyfriend, and then that world crumbled in the most epic way. Was it any wonder she had scars?

“It’s not like they were my real friends, except Brody. And if we didn’t work together, we’d probably have fizzled, too.”

As before, when they first entered the building, Elyse felt a flicker of hurt on his behalf. She didn’t like the loneliness she heard in his voice. Despite their differences, he and Standish

had been close. Standish's breakdown must have devastated him, even more than she realized. As much as it devastated her, maybe more. At least she had the hope of one day finding another love; Cotton only had the one brother. She slid her hand in his and gave it a little squeeze, and as before he gave her that inexplicable look, the one that seemed to take her measure and reveal surprise at what he found.

"Why are you staring at each other like that?" Standish slid into the booth across from them as he asked the question.

Elyse let go of Cotton's hand and faced forward, Standish's presence hitting her like a whipcord. It wasn't so much that she felt the pang of lost love as the pain of lost Standish. When they were kids, he had been all passion and romance, Maine's version of a broody Lord Byron, complete with shaggy hair that brushed his collar and ridiculously pouty lips. It was that same passion that spiraled to madness and had to be dealt with. Now his medicine made him almost clinically detached. She missed the old Standish, the one filled with warmth and humor. Of course she didn't want his mind to be tormented, nothing was worth that. But the medicine took him to the opposite end of the spectrum, so that he stared at them with cold, dead eyes, no sparks of humor or warmth or empathy or any of the things that made him the Standish she once loved.

It occurred to her then that this was what Cotton had wanted all those years ago when they were kids, for Standish to get control of his too-big emotions that often led him astray, led him to her. Was Cotton happy with the result? Or did he, too, see only the shadow of the boy they used to know and yearn for the original? Maybe someday Standish would find a balance, a way to keep his passion in check while still maintaining some shred of heart. There had to be some

balance between the two extremes, between madness and reason; they just hadn't found it yet.

"We're peering into each other's souls," Cotton answered.

"Why?" Standish asked.

"Making up for lost time," Cotton said.

"You're weird now," Standish excused.

"It's my turn," Cotton returned.

"That's fair," Standish agreed and let out a breath that sounded entirely too heavy for a conversation with family in the middle of the afternoon.

"What's wrong?" Elyse asked.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You sighed," Elyse said.

"Did I?" Standish asked, looking to Cotton for confirmation.

"He does that," Cotton told her, sounding a lot like someone who was trying to bright side an unending weariness.

"Probably," Standish agreed, unconcerned.

"Are you hungry?" Cotton asked.

"I don't know," Standish said slowly.

"His medicine makes him not hungry," Cotton explained to Elyse, who appreciated the aside because she felt like she was watching a conversation between strangers instead of two people she'd known half her life.

"Better than the alternative," Standish added. "Some people get really fat."

“You should eat,” Elyse said, slipping her hand forward to rest on Standish’s on the table. When he snatched his hand away and stuffed it under the table, she tried and failed not to be hurt by the rebuff.

“Probably,” he agreed, scanning the interior of the restaurant with a helplessness that made her stomach pitch. He looked like a child who didn’t know what to do. He might not have been the testosterone-laden alpha male that Cotton was, but he had always been capable and stalwart, the kind of person who took Elyse’s hand and led her boldly forward. That boy was a far cry from this man who looked so lost and confused.

“Go order something at the bar, I’ll pay,” Cotton said.

With a little nod, Standish slid from the booth and wandered away.

The silence in his wake was deafening.

“He...” Cotton began, as if to explain again, but then ran out of words and at last Elyse understood why it kept happening. Because life had robbed him of words. It was too hard now, to find meanings and explanations for things.

“Cotton,” she said, gently, reassuringly, reaching out to rest her hand on his leg. Unlike Standish, he didn’t shy away. Instead he faced her, composure cracking.

“I miss him so much,” he whispered, and Elyse understood completely. Standish was still there, hadn’t died, and yet was so unlike the boy they once knew that it was as if he *had* died, or had been cloned and replaced by a shell of his former self.

“I know,” she answered in her own croaky whisper, tears pooling until they almost but not quite spilled over and then he hugged her, or maybe she hugged him. All she knew was that

they now clung together fiercely and the combination of comfort and understanding seemed to bolster them both.

“Geez, I leave you two alone for one minute and you start making out,” Standish said with what might have been an attempt at a joke. It was hard to tell because his tone lacked inflection and didn’t modulate.

“It’s called a hug,” Cotton said. He gave Elyse a final squeeze, then released her and kissed the top of her head. “You might try it sometime, it might make you in a better mood.”

“I don’t like touching people,” Standish said, and that was something else that was new.

“You used to like touching people a lot,” Elyse said.

“Just you,” he replied, with the slightest hint of humor.

“This has become awkward in all the ways,” she said, straightening her shirt.

“Maybe if you branched out a little and didn’t poach people in the same family,” Standish suggested.

Elyse’s cheeks flushed hot then cold, not only with embarrassment that she was “poaching” people, but over the snideness. Standish had always been sweet and sensitive, never mean and provoking. That had always been Cotton’s M/O. Now however...

“Hey,” Cotton said, holding up a hand to halt his brother. Elyse steeled herself to hear him say nothing was going on between them. It was what she would say, after all. Instead he said, “Wouldn’t you rather it be me than some stranger you’d have to worry over and wonder about?”

“Cotton,” she exclaimed, pressing her hands to her cheeks.

“That’s actually a good point,” Standish conceded. “Better you than someone worse. At least that way it feels like I handed her off or something.”

“You *guys*,” Elyse hissed. “I feel like you’re ten words from putting me up on a pedestal and offering sheep for my dowry.”

“Be sensible, chick,” Cotton said. “This is a terrible climate for sheep.”

Standish snorted the sip of water he’d just taken and choked a few times, coughing hard. “Maybe I don’t like you again,” Elyse told Cotton.

“Yeah?” he said, leaning closer and resting his hand on her thigh again.

“Well,” she prevaricated. At the very least she was confused. Standish’s meal arrived and he slipped into his own little world of eating while Cotton and Elyse continued the staring contest she’d started.

What do you feel for me? his eyes seemed to say.

I don’t want to talk about it, her eyes told him in return.

“Why’s your laptop open if you’re on a date?” Standish said, breaking the spell, much to their mutual relief. She was so not ready to have the conversation with Cotton, even in her head.

“It’s not a date, I’m working,” she said, returning her attention to her computer screen and typing a few things.

“Spy stuff?” Standish guessed.

“No, I’m still looking for Dante. You don’t know anything about the new hydro company, do you?” She peered around her laptop to see him.

“Maybe.”

“You’re not sure?” she asked.

“Seems like I heard something or saw something, but it’s hard to know what’s real. Sometimes I don’t know if these hands are real or even mine.” He held them up between them. Cotton picked up a fork and gently jabbed Standish’s hand.

“Hmm,” Standish said. “Same thing with my lips and hair, though. They feel detached.” He touched his lips and hair, then began yanking at his scalp, rocking gently. “I wish I could remember.”

“Hey, don’t hurt yourself,” Elyse admonished. She put out a hand, but fell short of touching him again.

“Doesn’t hurt,” he said. “Helps me quiet the chatter and think.”

That may be true, but to Elyse it was a reminder of that night—Standish rocking and muttering, slapping a hand to his greasy hair. She shuddered, once again blinking hard to push back the unwanted tears.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Cotton said softly. She thought he was talking to Standish, but when she looked up, he was staring at her. He slid an arm around her, pulling her against him, his lips on her ear as he murmured softly. “It’s okay.”

Elyse closed her eyes and leaned, absorbing the strength and comfort he offered, a surprisingly massive amount.

After a few beats, she took a few deep breaths and opened her eyes, scanning the dim interior of the bar. “People are staring at us.”

“It’s almost like they’ve never seen a girl canoodle her ex-boyfriend’s brother before,” Cotton said and smiled when she

laughed.

“Clearly they are backwoods yokels who lack culture and sophistication,” she declared, using her fingers to push the tears back to their wells

Now it was Cotton’s turn to laugh, but it was cut short when he pulled her close and pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that leaned more affection than romance.

“I’m wicked glad you came home, Elyse.”

There was that word again. *Home*. But home was in DC now, wasn’t it?

Her thoughts strayed to her lackluster, too-expensive apartment on a crowded street. It smelled like garbage, not briny sea spray like Maine. All the people on her street sounded the same, boringly normal with no discernable accent. Certainly none of them had ever said they were wicked glad to see her.

Her heart squeezed with homesickness, but thoughts of returning to DC did nothing to alleviate it. *Where do I belong?* Elyse asked herself as Cotton slid his arm comfortingly around her and Standish finished his meal.

CHAPTER 19



When Elyse was in seventh grade, she attended a computer-themed summer camp. Not because she'd shown any interest or propensity for computers, but because she hadn't shown any interest or propensity for anything else. Her sister loved to dance and took ballet at a studio in downtown Portland. She had already learned to dance on her toes and twirl like a real ballerina while Elyse had found the tutus and leotards so itchy and uncomfortable she never made it to class. Her brother was a jock who hadn't picked a particular sport, mostly because he was good at all of them. Elyse had nothing, no particular talent or aptitude that stood out, and both she and her parents had started to become anxious about that. Surely she couldn't float through life with no distinguishing talent, could she?

There were two other girls at summer camp, who both seemed to be there for the same reason, because their families had sent them for lack of anything better. Elyse did better than they did with computers. In fact she did better than all the boys in the class and, on two projects, better than her teacher. She felt, during those two weeks at camp, that something inside her had finally turned on. A switch had been flipped. The same way some people were inexplicably gifted at singing or painting, Elyse was gifted with code. Why? She had no idea.

She wasn't particularly good at math or engineering or any of the other things people who were good with computers seemed to be good at. But she and computers spoke the same language, both literally and figuratively.

When she returned home from camp, where she had won enough accolades and praise to see her through the rest of middle school, she began researching what to do when you were good at computers. That was when her heart began to sink because most things she found were dull to the point of seeming like a brutal punishment. When she tried to picture herself working in an office cubicle all day, typing and fixing people's computers, she wanted to cry. And then she saw it: government hacker. Cyber security. Espionage. At that moment Elyse felt like an angel beam should be directed on the career assessment pamphlet she'd been perusing. Computer spy for the government, that was her future, for certain.

Far from being put off by the odd choice, her parents were amused. *Aim big*, they seemed to say, convinced her interest would wane and she would find something else.

Elyse did not.

For years she worked tirelessly toward that one goal. She knew it when she met Standish and told him in their first conversation. She knew it when she went to college and selected her major. She knew it every day and in every way, down to her marrow, and absolutely nothing had ever dimmed her enthusiasm for her goal.

Along those same lines, she had never lost interest in her computer or an investigation, never had trouble concentrating on work. Until this moment when, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to make herself focus on the task at

hand. Why did it matter who the hydro people were or what they had done? Did she really believe they'd done away with Dante? Who else would have shot at Cotton's boat, if not him? Few people had the capacity, as well as the rifle.

Those thoughts jangled around in her head as she closed her laptop and sat staring into space inside the bar.

"Find anything?" Cotton asked, jarring her back to the present.

She shook her head. "I can't concentrate." It was an embarrassing admission, but it also seemed pointless to lie.

"Then let's get out of here," Cotton said. He scooted from the booth and Elyse followed, stuffing her computer in her bag. Standish remained, and she paused. "Aren't you coming?"

"Nah," he said. He stared into space, sounding vague. "Think I'll walk for a while."

Cotton gave her hand a tug, pulling her away. She tagged after him. "Should we try to get him to come with us?" she asked.

"No such thing. He does what he wants, goes where he wants," Cotton said.

Elyse took another glance over her shoulder and saw Standish, still frozen and staring. It was hard to leave someone who was obviously so unwell, but what recourse was there with an ill adult? Standish's mind was broken, but his body was six feet of solid muscle. He might not know where to go or what to do, but he certainly knew where he didn't want to go and what he didn't want to do. "It must be exhausting," Elyse noted.

Cotton paused before he answered. "It is."

She gave his hand a squeeze. He squeezed her hand in return, tossing her a little smile as he opened the car door for her. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see.”

“Cryptic.”

He didn’t reply, merely got in the car and started to drive. Elyse thought nothing of it until they pulled up in front of their former high school. Then she froze and gripped the seat with both hands. “No.” She shook her head.

Cotton sighed. “Elyse.”

“No,” she said, more vehement as she shook her head harder.

Cotton faced her. “You need to deal with it.”

“I’m fine,” she snapped.

He refrained from pointing out how hard she gripped the seat, until her knuckles popped and fingers turned white. He didn’t take note of her tone, high and brittle. She braced herself for those things. What she didn’t brace herself for was the sigh that made him sag. “Elyse, I need this. I need to know, to hear everything.” He paused. “Please.”

She swallowed hard and got out of the car.

Cotton led her to the door and unlocked it, standing aside to let her inside. Instead of flicking on the lights, he used a small flashlight from his pocket to lead the way to the art room.

They both stared into the corner. “Start from the beginning,” Cotton said into the heavy silence.

Elyse was tired of fighting. It was too much to carry around. Maybe letting go of it to him of all people would work to finally let it go completely. “My dad worked as a janitor here in the summers. I got the key from him.”

Cotton clucked and shook his head in teasing disapproval. “Deviant.”

She chuckled and shoved his arm. “It’s not like we broke in to vandalize. We wanted a safe place to hang out, somewhere other than the treehouse that my boyfriend’s older brother menaced.” She glared at him. Toward the end of their relationship, Cotton began patrolling the treehouse, popping into view at the unlikeliest moments so Elyse was always on edge, waiting for him to appear. Now he twisted his lips, trying to push back his amusement so he didn’t further her ire. He lost the battle and laughed into his hand, turning it into a cough.

“Should have known you’d be a cop, you had so much practice,” she muttered. “Anyway, we wanted a safe spot to hang out, and being around all the art supplies made Standish happy.” The mood shifted and dimmed. Back then keeping Standish happy had been everyone’s goal. His mood, which had always had valleys and peaks, began dipping and slipping toward full-fledged depression and nothing had worked to pull him out again. When he broke up with Elyse, in the midst of it, she blamed the depression. It was the sort of breakup that didn’t seem to stick, that kept them talking and kissing and crying for a month before the final end.

“Your mom called me,” Elyse said, tone turning raspy. “She asked if I knew where Standish was, wanted to know if he was with me.”

“You were broken up then,” Cotton interjected.

Elyse nodded. “Yes, but in name only.” She thought of Standish’s earlier proclamation. *If you’d let me go, maybe it wouldn’t have happened.* Had he been trying to protect her from himself? Doubtful since rational thought hadn’t been possible back then, for either of them, it seemed. “I thought if I hung on, if I tried to be steady and pull him out of it, he would come back. I guess I didn’t realize, or maybe I refused to see, how sick he’d become, how far gone.” In true teenage fashion, she’d wrongly believed it was all about her, that Standish’s sadness and depression were due to the problems between them, and if they could only fix those problems, then he’d be well. That was why she had refused to accept their breakup and kept trying to erase the space between them.

“My mom called and you told her...” he prompted.

“That I didn’t know where Standish was, which was true. I hadn’t seen him in a few days at that point, hadn’t talked to him or heard from him. I kept waiting and hoping he’d show up at my window, as he did sometimes, and we could talk through everything and it would be okay. I wanted it to be okay; I wanted *him* to be okay.” Back then she’d believed she’d had the power to make it so, based on how much she’d wanted it. “I didn’t want to tell anyone about this place because I would get in trouble for breaking in, and I didn’t know if he was here. But I thought it would be a good idea to check.”

“So you came alone,” Cotton said.

She nodded.

“And Standish was here.”

She nodded again, picturing in her mind that day. She had opened the door in the dark, exactly like now, and shined her

light around. Standish sat huddled in the corner, squatting like a frightened animal, his arms wrapped around his legs.

“Standish,” she’d whispered.

His eyes widened impossibly farther and he started rocking, hitting himself, and muttering. Elyse had swallowed her panic and taken a step forward, arm outstretched. “Standish,” she’d tried again.

“Why didn’t you let me go?” Standish asked, sounding anguished. “I wanted to break up, Elyse. I needed to break up. They won’t...they won’t let me have you.” He had gripped his hair with both hands, yanking and tugging until the strands came free and frittered between his fingers.

“Standish, hey,” she said, tone gentle as she knelt beside him. “What’s going on? Who are ‘they’? Talk to me.”

He had mashed his hands over his ears, rocking harder. Close up, Elyse could see how disheveled he was, and that wasn’t like him. He liked to joke that Cotton was the only stinky male in their house, the one who always smelled like boy sweat from sports. I’m always fresh as a daisy, the upside of being artistic. “When is the last time you slept?” she’d tried. He’d had trouble sleeping the last few months. Part of her, the hopeful, idealistic part, believed if he had a good night’s sleep, everything would be okay again.

He hadn’t answered, though, just kept rocking, and then she realized he was crying but it wasn’t normal tears. It sounded more like a wounded animal than a teenage boy. That was when she began to feel the first real prickles of fear. “Standish,” she said, turning his name into a frightened question. She loved Standish, her best friend, her boyfriend, her whole world. But she had no idea what to do with this

iteration of him, no idea how to put him back together when he was so obviously more broken than she realized.

For a moment, when he turned to her and pelted himself into her embrace, she thought everything would be okay. She held him and petted him, cradling him impossibly close as he sobbed, wetting her shirt with his tears.

“Tell me how to fix it, tell me how to help,” she pled, and now she was crying.

“You can’t,” Standish said. He wrenched out of her embrace and stared at her, suddenly angry. “You can’t fix it, Elyse, it’s broken.”

“I don’t want to lose you, to lose us,” Elyse whispered. For the first time, she started to hear him and understand what he’d been trying to tell her. They might be over; this might be the end. This, whatever it was, was bigger than her, bigger than them.

Standish had laughed harshly and dragged a hand over his face. “It’s not about us, it never was.”

“Okay,” she said softly, quietly, sadly.

They sat in heavy silence for a moment, and then Standish looked at her, in a way he never had before, and it was like staring into the eyes of a stranger. She couldn’t see him then, only the madness that had taken him. Just like that the prickles of apprehension she’d felt blossomed into full blown fear, and then terror and panic.

“It has to be over;” Standish said, decisively, coolly, nodding now instead of shaking his head.

“Okay,” Elyse said softly. She inched backwards a little, uncertain of the odd change in him. Agreement seemed like the best option, but that only seemed to upset him.

“No, you don’t get it, Elyse. I can’t have peace with you, knowing you...” he trailed off and motioned to her.

“We can still be friends,” Elyse hastened to say, panicked for reasons she didn’t know. Some internal alarm was pinging, and she didn’t know why, but she knew enough to listen to it. “We’ll always be friends.”

Standish snorted. “That’s not going to work, not with how it is between us. We can never let each other go, never. The love is too deep. And I want out, need out. I’m done with this, done with everything, but you...” He looked at her again, studied her as if trying to find the solution to a problem. “You’ll have to go, too. We’ll go together.”

“No.” She barely eked out the word before he was on her, his hands like a vise around her throat, cutting off her air. Her brain screamed at her in total confusion. This was Standish; Standish wouldn’t do this to her, would never hurt her. Why was Standish hurting her now when he would never hurt her? This isn’t Standish. That was the final message her brain sent her, and it brought immediate comfort. Standish, the real Standish, would never, ever hurt her. And now at last she realized what Standish himself had tried to tell her the last few months: something was terribly, horribly wrong. The illness had won, had taken over his brain and body and forced him to do things he would never do. Even as he snuffed the air from her body, she understood that his mind had tricked him into believing he was doing it for her good, that he genuinely believed he was helping them both. Elyse was not afraid of Standish, could never be afraid of Standish. But Elyse was terrified of the illness that had taken control of him because it was an unknown entity, and something even worse: it was her enemy.

She saw that now, so clearly and sadly too late. Because surely he was going to murder her, he with his bigger size and strength. And then, unbelievably, he let go and sat back, sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” he said, over and over, shaking and weeping as she sucked oxygen and struggled to breathe. And even as she lay in that hazy in-between, half conscious, she reached out a hand to Standish, trying to calm him and ease his misery. You would never hurt me, she wanted to tell him. Throughout the three years of their relationship, Standish had treated her as if she were made of precious glass, had treasured her, had cherished her. This person was not Standish or, at least, not her Standish.

Some part of her heard the flick of a knife, but it barely registered. She was beyond fear by the time Standish scooted next to her, lying prone beside her on the ground, the knife at her throat.

“I can’t do it like that, Elyse. I can’t watch you suffer like that, I love you too much. I’m going to do it quick, then I’ll do mine quick, and then we can be together.”

At that point Elyse was too insensible to argue, so insensible that half of her agreed with him. Maybe it was better this way, to go out together. At least then she wouldn’t have to live with the aftermath. She felt the point of the knife slip under her skin, the first trickle of blood, and then Cotton was there, filling the space with his own rage and fear.

“At what point did you text me?” Cotton asked now, interrupting the flow of her words. They were on the ground, on their knees, Cotton’s hands around her biceps. She had been so lost in the flow of her words and the memories that she didn’t realize she’d sunk to her knees, Cotton beside her.

She swallowed hard and made herself come back to the present and answer his question.

“As soon as I got here and saw him and realized...” She swallowed and wiped her face, finding it wet. She was crying. Huh, she’d had no idea. “Realized how much trouble he was in.” If she hadn’t texted Cotton, she would have died that night, by Standish’s hand. She had no doubts about that. Cotton had saved them both when he arrived and tackled Standish, subduing him until the police and ambulance arrived. They took Standish away and committed him to a mental facility where he spent the next eight months trying to put his shattered mind back together again, trying to find the right mix of medicine that would help him function again. Elyse had left two days later for college, taking all of her unresolved trauma with her, stuffing it into a little box she only occasionally peered into.

Instead she threw herself into college and her career, succeeding beyond even her wildest dreams. As long as she kept her past tied into a neat little bow, she was fine. But now here it was, gaping wide open for everyone to see, and Cotton was the one responsible, just like he’d been the responsible one that night, rescuing her and Standish and incurring who knew what trauma of his own.

“Why me?” he asked, tone ragged. “Why did you text me that night?” They had been enemies, dire enemies who never had a kind word for each other, who couldn’t pass a moment in each other’s presence without lashing out. And yet he was the first and only person she’d thought of when she needed help.

“Because, despite everything, I knew you’d come, and I knew you’d help, and I knew you loved him as much as I did,” she said.

They stared at each other, shards of their mingled past settling around them, as a sort of healing balm eased back and forth, mending their broken pieces because they'd shared them with each other. Cotton put up a shaking hand and eased it over her temple.

“When I walked into this room and saw you lying there, blood oozing from your neck, I thought you were dead, Elyse. And I felt...regret doesn't begin to cover what I felt. The terror and remorse and *sadness*. Nothing,” his voice broke and he took a jagged breath, “nothing has come close to that feeling, except the relief of knowing it wasn't true, that you were alive.”

He'd held Standish in his strong grip until reinforcements arrived, which hadn't been an easy feat because Standish had been almost supernaturally strong with rage, confusion, and fear. But Elyse remembered taking a breath and looking at Cotton and seeing that terror and relief on his face when he said, “You're alive. Thank God.”

They had shared a look of understanding then, their first, without any rancor, hatred, or resentment. Just pure understanding and regret: *Standish is gone now. This is who we have left, and where do we go from here?* And then the police and medics arrived and the moment was over, never to be repeated again until Elyse arrived home a few days ago. In the interim she convinced herself it was a fluke, that she and Cotton hadn't shared a connection, that he hadn't saved her, that he'd saved Standish. She'd even gone so far as to tell herself Cotton probably wished Standish succeeded in killing her, but of course that was a lie, one borne of teenage resentment. As much as Cotton had been her nemesis, he had never wanted her dead. Would, in fact, have been heartbroken if she'd been killed, especially at Standish's hand.

“You have to let this go,” Cotton said, giving her biceps a squeeze. “It’s hurting you, holding you back. What happened then,” he shook his head. “You did the best you could have, Elyse, better than anyone else. You gave and gave and gave, more than we had a right to ask of you. My parents wanted you to be the solution to Standish’s problems, and you helped for a time, but he was always too far gone for that, too ill to be saved by love alone. It’s time for you to find healing and absolution.” He made another tender pass over her head that felt like a touch from a mystic healer, and Elyse felt the weight of something potent depart her soul and disappear into the air. She hissed out a loud breath and sagged against him. He took her weight, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed the top of her head.

Elyse wrapped her arms around him and clung, breathing deeply, letting his words and the solid weight of him imbue her soul with strength. She had no idea she needed absolution until she felt it. He was right; she’d done the best she could. She had been a kid, wrestling with things that were too big for her to comprehend, let alone handle. She had loved Standish as hard as she could, but it hadn’t been enough, could never be enough. Standish had an illness. She loved him still, would always love him, but in a different way, in a healthy way that reserved proper boundaries, for her safety, as well as his own. Someday maybe he would be able to find love again, the kind of love that would allow him to be in a relationship. But it wouldn’t be with Elyse. *I’m letting go of my past*, Elyse told herself, and felt another weight slip free.

CHAPTER 20



Eventually they shifted until they leaned against the wall, side by side. Elyse rested her head on his shoulder, too weary to hold it aloft. They sat in cozy silence for a long time.

“It’s always weird to be in school after hours,” Cotton noted eventually. He took a deep breath. “Smells like paint in here.”

“Standish’s favorite smell,” Elyse noted. He used to say it soothed him, the same way making art soothed him. Once upon a time he’d been a talented artist, but as he dwindled, his talent did, too, until eventually he began making furious scribbles. She supposed that should have been a big hint, but she saw what she wanted to see. “What’s it been like?”

“Exhausting. What you said about finding this place because the treehouse became unsafe, never knowing if I was going to pop my head through and bust you. That’s how it’s felt since Standish got out of the hospital. Everything seemed okay, but would today be the day he suffered another breakdown? Would today be the day he actually killed someone? He’s been in the hospital three times, since the first.”

Elyse winced. “I had no idea.”

“It hasn’t been as severe since that first time. We’ve gotten better at reading the signals and seeking help. But I’m always on edge, always waiting for the worst.”

She turned her head to study his profile, resting her cheek on the cool cinderblock behind her. “You must be exhausted.”

His head swiveled to face her. “I am.”

They studied each other as the tension ratcheted and began to arc between them. She could feel it, the same way she could feel both of them resist it. Neither of them wanted it to happen. Both of them could list a million reasons it shouldn’t, couldn’t, wouldn’t. But at the same time it felt inevitable, as if they’d been careening here since Elyse rolled down the window of her rental car and Cotton realized it was her. Or maybe longer, since that moment Cotton tackled Standish in this same spot a decade ago and their eyes met with some kind of mutual understanding. *We’re in this together now. Maybe we always have been.*

“I’m sorry,” she rasped, heart thumping.

“For what?” he rasped in return.

“Everything.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he said. His hand eased to the side of her face, cupping it.

“You should be,” she said, grasping his shirt in her hand and tugging him closer.

His answering chuckle was cut off by the press of her lips, or maybe he kissed her first. Elyse didn’t know. All she knew was that in her limited experience, no kiss had ever been like this. She thought of what he’d said earlier, about taking possession of her mouth, and realized that was what was happening now. And her unhelpful brain made her question if

it was always like this for him because he had loads more experience than she did. Though she'd had a few dates, she hadn't had a real kiss since Standish, his brother. *Yes, brain, choose this moment to remind me of that. Helpful, thanks.*

With effort, she pushed her torturous thoughts aside and allowed herself to feel without thought. No thoughts about her past, present, or future, nothing beyond the sensation of this moment. And what a sensation it was as Cotton slid his fingers in her hair and pulled her closer, halfway into his lap as the kiss went on and on and might have continued except Cotton pulled away and why did he pull away?

Now that her brain had gone to autopilot and stopped thinking, it wanted to continue that trajectory, but now it was Cotton who seemed to be overthinking things as he jetted away from her and held up his hands, warding her off when she would have advanced.

“What are we doing here?” he blurted, breathless and dazed.

“I...” Elyse began but didn't know how to finish. She thought they agreed on the not thinking or talking part of the evening, but apparently not. Apparently she was the only one who'd been able to find total abandon for possibly the first time ever. “Um.” That was all she had, she who was never without sarcasm and snark, could only come up with “um.” *Thanks, brain. You've been a great help this evening, in all the ways.*

“You're my brother's ex-girlfriend of three years and you guys have all this history and I...” He swiped his hands over his face, his beard stubble making a rasping sound.

Elyse stared at him, her brain still unable to compute the current scenario. Why did it seem like Cotton had been low-

level pursuing her, only to back out when it came to this point? And why wasn't she freaking out? She was *always* the one who freaked out. It was kind of her thing, and she resented him for taking it away from her and for putting her in this position in the first place. She'd been fine without all his sweetness and flirtation, had been perfectly happy to loathe him before he went and made himself desirable and now that he had, now that she liked him, where was she to go next? How was it possible that the first guy she'd been interested in in ten years was Cotton? And how was it possible that he was rejecting her?

He caught sight of her frown, which must have been fierce, because he once again put up his hands, as if she was about to pounce and begin scratching at his eyes. *Maybe I should*, she mused, repressing a smile when the thought gave her a bit too much satisfaction.

"Don't look at me like that, Elyse. I know. I *know*, okay? I can't...help it. Obviously I've been attracted to you for a while."

A while? Wait, what?

"But I thought I could handle it. I didn't think anything would come of it. But..." he motioned helplessly to her again, as if to say obviously something had come of it because she was so darn irresistible, what with her copious amounts of weeping, overthinking, and emotional frailty. Truly, she was a prize to be won.

Elyse stared at him in silence because she had no words, none whatsoever. Was she supposed to be hurt? Flattered? Shocked? Insulted? She had no idea, and therefore no response. She looked at him as the foreign and deranged creature he was, as if he had washed up on shore from some

far land and needed to be studied by scientists with specialized instruments in order to be categorized.

When it became clear that she wouldn't, or maybe couldn't, speak, Cotton let out a sigh. "Come on, then, I'll take you home." He stood and put down a hand to help her up. She stared at the hand, not certain what to do with it. With another sigh, this one more typical of their relationship for its annoyance, he bent and hefted her up by the biceps, dropping his hands and taking an immediate step back when she was in striking distance. Was he afraid he couldn't keep his hands off her? Or, a more likely scenario, was he afraid she was going to leap onto his back like an enraged lemur and begin biting his exposed flesh?

Elyse crossed her arms and followed him to the car, not saying a word when he opened her doors, not uttering a syllable when they pulled up in front of Georgette's inn, not issuing a peep when he slid from the car and walked her to the door.

"Elyse, come on," he said and put out a hand to halt her. "Not like this."

Oh, there are my words, she thought as she whirled on him. "Are you even kidding me right now?" She tossed her hands wide and he jumped back as if she'd decked him. "You have gone from full on monster to blowing hot and cold to low key hitting on me since the second I stepped foot back in town. You have given me emotional whiplash, you kissed me, and then I'm supposed to hop on board and be fine with it? What do you want from me, Cotton Dupree? Do you want my assurances that I haven't read anything into this? Do you want a free pass for all the flirtation? Or do you want me to be

honest and admit I think you're messing with my head and also my heart?"

He didn't answer, unless looking stunned and speechless and vaguely guilty was an answer, which it most certainly was not. Elyse felt deflated, like an actual pin wandered along and pricked whatever air had been holding her aloft. "Go away," she whispered brokenly, then turned and let herself into the inn without a backwards glance.



“Elyse.”

Someone was in her room whispering her name, except that couldn't be possible because she'd only closed her eyes sixty seconds ago, hadn't she? After pushing past Cotton and muttering a vague hello at Georgette, Elyse had stumbled to her room, taken a hot shower, and crawled into bed, hair and skin still sopping wet. Her brain let her fall asleep without cataloguing her day for once, and for that she felt she owed it some kind of thank you. Being awoken after such a short interlude was definitely not the way to tell it she was thankful.

“Erngh,” she muttered, not certain if that was supposed to be a word or a growl.

“Elyse, baby, wake up.”

Who called her baby? Absolutely no one. She had to open her eyes, if only to satisfy her curiosity. She pried them open and saw Cotton perched on the edge of her bed.

“Hey,” he said.

“Cotton,” she said.

“Yes?”

“What time is it?”

“Three. Wow, you wake up cute.” He reached out and tugged on the edge of her sloth pajama shirt.

“Cotton.”

“Yes?”

“Are *you* having a mental breakdown? Because it sort of feels like it.” She tugged her shirt free of his grasp. “What are you doing here?”

He swallowed hard, turned away from her, and sat on his hands. “I think Standish is missing.”

“What?” she asked, leaning closer to hear him.

“I think Standish is missing,” he repeated.

“What makes you say so?” she asked.

“He didn’t come home.”

“Does he always?”

“No.”

“Okay...” she drawled.

He shrugged loosely. “It’s a gut feeling.”

“Why are you telling me?” she demanded.

This time he faced her full on. “Who else do I have?”

The statement made her so sad, and yet so aggravated. A few hours ago he’d made it abundantly clear that he didn’t want her, and now this? “You know that you’re making me crazy, right?”

He nodded and bit his lip. If he was trying not to laugh, she honestly might punch him. Not that it would do much good. He was a wall of muscle, comparatively. Tight and compact with the build of someone who spent a lot of time on a boat, pulling knots and doing all the boat things that seemed to require muscles. Elyse had no idea, not being waterborne herself. But all the guys she'd known in high school who boated had muscles like that, especially the lobster guys who'd spent their pre-dawn hours helping their dads haul traps. If she remembered correctly, Cotton had helped some of his buddies and their dads on those early mornings, arriving at school smelling like fish and ocean, a scent that should have been off putting but somehow wasn't.

"Fine, I'll come help you look," she said, but neither of them moved.

"About before," he said into the heavy silence.

"What? What could you possibly do to me? Insult me? Pull me close, then push me away? You're going to have to think of something new, if you want to run the gamut of emotional psychosis, Cotton Dupree."

He pulled her close, but didn't push her away. Instead he kissed her, doing the thing again where he made her forget everything else, including her irritation with him. He was the first to break free again, but this time he didn't shove her away in panic. Instead he rested his forehead on hers and tried to draw a breath. "It should not make me want you more when you get sassy."

"Why does it?" she asked, having trouble drawing a breath of her own.

"I don't know. It's probably like you say, I'm sick in the head." He ran a finger down her cheek.

“Thanks so much for that,” she said. Her tone was sour, but she couldn’t quite manage to push him away and withdraw completely.

“I’m sorry about before, chick. I just...”

“Freaked out?” she supplied.

He nodded. “This is new for me; this is different.”

Before her heart could indulge in any flutters, he continued speaking.

“But it’s not like it matters anyway.”

“How so?” she asked, and congratulated herself on keeping her tone even and free from any hurt or rejection.

Cotton swallowed hard and touched his thumb to her lips, staring at them as he spoke. “You live far away in DC, with that fancy, important job. Maybe this is insanity, but it’s only temporary, right?” His eyes flicked to hers. Whatever he read there must have reassured him. “Right.” He tipped forward and brushed his lips softly on hers. “Get dressed, I’ll meet you downstairs.” Despite his words, he reeled her impossibly closer, pulling her into his lap as he kissed her again.

Elyse should be the one to stop it, she knew. At the very least her self-respect demanded it. This was a dangerous path they were on, one that would end in heartache for her, and yet she clung to him. Not because the kisses made her crazy, though they did, but because there was something more there, something she had never felt before, not even with Standish, an exciting buzz of potential that felt addictive and dangerous. Cotton could hurt her in ways Standish never dreamed. And yet the potential payout felt larger, too. All she really knew was that she felt helpless to stop whatever this was, like trying to use her hands on a runaway semi.

An owl hooted right outside the window, and that was the impetus they needed to break apart. She pressed her face to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. “This time for real.” He kissed the top of her head and eased off the bed, backstepping to the door. Only when he finally slipped through and closed the door did Elyse snap free and close her eyes.

“This is a really bad idea,” she whispered to herself.

That was completely true, but so was what she whispered next. “And I don’t care.”

CHAPTER 21



Something transformative happened between the time Elyse threw on clothes and the time she walked out the door of the inn. *I am a spy with one of the most elite teams in the entire country, and I'm acting like I'm still a fifteen-year-old with a crush.* True, she'd unpacked a lot of trauma and bad memories since she'd been home. But that part was over now. She'd made peace with her demons, and now it was about to get real because this town hadn't yet seen the new and improved Elyse. It was high time they met her.

Her decision was cemented when she saw Cotton leaning on her rental car, keys in hand. She approached and stopped short in front of him, hand outstretched. He took that hand and kissed it. She yanked it free and poked his shoulder.

"Don't try to charm me, chump. It's three in the morning and you are not driving my car."

"Easy, tiger." He dropped her keys into her waiting palm and rubbed his shoulder. "Did you call me chump?"

"You heard me," she said as she eased behind the wheel and adjusted the seat back to the perfect position he'd lost when he adjusted it for himself.

"You're wicked scary tonight," he muttered, watching her in profile as she frowned at the road.

She could use the excuse that it was three in the morning, but she'd passed plenty of all nighters with less grumpiness. "There's a lot of...everything going on, and I don't like all these loose ends and missing pieces. I feel like I should have this figured out by now."

"You're only human, chick," Cotton said, resting a hand on her thigh that was possibly supposed to be comforting and instead made her feel three IQ points dumber and exponentially more distracted. She put her hand on his to move it away, but ended up leaving it there, their fingers twining together. "Talk me through it. What's going on in your oversized, deep-thinking brain?"

"I can't figure out the Dante thing. Why did he go missing? Why did he shoot at us? Did he shoot at us? Is he even missing or in danger? And now Standish. If he's missing, how would that connect to Dante? Does it? And, most aggravating of all, I haven't been able to do what I do best, which is to hack into people's private data and piece together the unspoken clues of their hidden lives."

"Why not?" he said.

"Because I can't concentrate," she said.

"Why not?"

She tossed him a narrow-eyed glance, wrinkling her nose when he gave her a cocky smile and eyebrow wag in response.

"How about this, after we find, or don't find, Standish, I promise I will find a reliable connection for you so you can do your thing?"

"Okay," she said, taking it for the olive branch it was. "Thank you." Her shoulders relaxed their warrior pose a little.

Why was it so easy to fall into the defensive mode of enemy combatants with him?

They drove by the park Standish sometimes frequented, as well as the wharf and the municipal building, all his favorite haunts, according to Cotton. An easy silence had descended between them. Elyse warned herself not to break it, but when had her brain ever cooperated with her?

“Cotton.”

“Mm.”

“What did you mean before?”

“Before what?” he asked, but she had the feeling he knew what she meant.

“Before, when you said you’d been attracted to me for a while.”

“Elyse, as Jack Nicholson said, ‘You can’t handle the truth.’ Leave it.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound like me. Let’s have it.”

He faced forward and crossed his arms over his chest. “I noticed you, okay? First day, I noticed the new girl with the black t-shirt, ripped jeans, moto jacket, and too much eyeliner. I thought you were cute. So cute that I almost hit on you, until I heard you were a freshman.”

He was right, she couldn’t handle the truth. Shock exploded through her, reverberating through her body. “I was so not your type.”

He tossed her a grin. “True story. We were almost a teenage rom-com, jock and weird artsy geek.”

“But, alas, our love could not survive a two year age gap,” she said.

“You’ve got to have some standards,” he said, pretending to straighten his cuffs.

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. She thought that was the end of it, but he continued.

“It, uh, didn’t go away.”

“What didn’t?” she asked.

He poked her shoulder. “The attraction, dummy.”

“What? Of course it did.” She laughed, shoving his hand away.

He blinked at her, stone faced.

She did a double take, swerved, and pulled to the curb. “You’re not serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“No, Cotton. Come on, you hated me.”

He nodded his agreement. “A lot. And part of that hate was the anger and resentment I felt about being attracted to you.”

“You cannot be serious. You were horrible to me.”

“I was also young and stupid. Look, a lot of reasons went into my loathing, and all of them were made up in my head. I tried to pretend you were a delinquent, even after I found out you wanted to be a Fed. I told myself you were bad for Standish, when he was only happy when he was with you. But of all the lies I told myself, the one I could never make myself believe was that I wasn’t attracted to you, didn’t...” he paused and swallowed hard. “Want you.”

She shook her head, robbed speechless by shock.

He reached out a hand and touched her hair with two fingers, tentative and gentle. “Did you think it was coincidence how often I popped up whenever you were around?”

She nodded.

He shook his head. “I couldn’t stay away. I tried. I hated myself, and I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t stay away. And when I walked into that class and saw you lying there, pale and bleeding...” He paused and swallowed again. “Elyse, I’ve been a cop for ten years and seen a lot of stuff, but that’s the image that haunts my nightmares, that brings me to my knees.”

He pressed shaking hands to his eyes sockets. Elyse unbuckled her seatbelt, sat up on her knees, and reached for him, tucking him firmly into her embrace. He was bigger, but not in that moment. In that moment she sheltered him. She held him and rubbed his back, letting him pull himself together, allowing him to let go of the trauma of their shared history, the way he did for her a few hours ago. He didn’t cry, but she felt like he was cracking, and she couldn’t stand it.

“You think you had it bad? I had to be heroically rescued by my arch nemesis. Try living with that.”

He snorted a laugh and eased back, bringing their faces in sharp relief. “Who says nemesis? You’re such a nerd.” He said it affectionately, tenderly.

“Too bad I’m still two years younger,” she whispered.

“It’s okay, I’ve lowered my standards,” he replied.

“Good news, so have I,” she said, sliding her arms around his neck.

His chuckle was cut short when she kissed him. After the confession she’d just heard, it seemed like the only appropriate

response. *Note to self: never become a counselor or priest.*

The back door opened and someone slid inside. They expected to see Standish, but instead saw a man Elyse didn't recognize.

"Harry," Cotton said, nodding to the man like it wasn't four in the morning and he hadn't been caught canoodling a woman at the side of the road.

"They took him," Harry said, wild-eyed and unfocused. "They took Standish."



They ended up back at the inn. Elyse retrieved her computer and set to work while Cotton paced nervously for a while, pausing to squint every once in a while and dart Elyse glances. Eventually he tired himself out and curled up on the sofa beside her, his head pillowed in her lap. That was how Georgette found them when she rose to prepare breakfast, Cotton curled on the sofa like a sleepy kitten, Elyse's fingers in his hair as she used her free hand to type.

Georgette froze with one foot in the room, eyes alight with surprise and curiosity. At the sight of their little tableau, she darted Elyse an amused glance, brows aloft. Elyse shook her head and mouthed, *Don't start*, forcing Georgette to press her hand to her mouth and dart out of the room to avoid laughing.

Elyse gazed down at Cotton and shook her own head, amused by the odd turn of events. How did she get here? Furthermore, did she want to be here, wherever here was?

The power of her gaze woke him, or maybe it was because her fingers had stopped their steady rhythm on the computer.

“Find anything?” he murmured, voice and eyes heavy with sleep.

“Some stuff, but I’m not sure what any of it means,” Elyse said.

He sat up and she shuffled her notes between them. She’d created a scaled down version of a white board with the headings “Dante” “Standish” “Hydro Company.” Since they knew everything pertinent about Dante and Standish, she had concentrated most of her efforts on the new hydro company.

“There are two founders of the company, guys who fancy themselves as small time venture capitalists. Kurt Ravensbruck and Theo Thorn. They’ve tried and failed a number of investments over the years but currently seem stuck on green energy initiatives. Seemingly not for idealistic purposes, whatever they claim to the contrary. Both of them have pretty big carbon footprints with no sign of attempting to ease them. They’re in it for the cash grab, especially the government bonanza in the form of grants, tax incentives, and kickbacks. One of them has been wooing a senator and a few congressmen, trying to get a little pork thrown this way in the next budget bill.”

“That sounds like a massive windfall,” Cotton said.

“It would be, if it worked. Jury’s still out on how much sway he’s been able to have.”

“If Dante kicked up enough stink, he could put a little cog in that machine. But enough to get him off the map? And where would Standish fit into that scenario?” Cotton mused.

“He wouldn’t,” Elyse said, eyes on her paper. She felt like she was missing something, but she had no idea what.

Cotton studied her while she studied the paper. “You investigate differently than I do.”

“You mean I don’t use my fists?” she asked, amused.

He rolled his eyes.

She poked him. “I’m joking. I’m sure you’re a good cop, but in addition to being different people, we have different objectives. Yours is more immediate, I tend to play the long game. Sometimes I plant seeds that I’ll never bring to fruition. I pass the ball to others who will do that sort of thing. Sometimes I harvest what others have worked on before me. My job is a collaborative effort. You don’t have that luxury.”

“You’re being very nice to me. Should I be concerned?” he asked.

“Maybe I like you a little,” she conceded.

He sat up. “Yeah? How much?”

Enough for this temporary arrangement. His earlier words came back to haunt her, and she didn’t know why because she agreed with him. This thing between them had to remain temporary. Didn’t it? There were myriad reasons why it should and none she could think of why it shouldn’t.

“Uh-oh, your brain is doing the thing again and I’m losing you to deep thoughts. Stay with me, chick,” he said, shaking her shoulders gently.

She laughed and shook free. “Get off, crazy.” His words had the desired effect of lightening her, and she wondered about that. She and Standish had fed off each other’s sensitivity. Most of the time it had been up to Elyse to try and lighten the mood and keep him from sinking. Toward the end of their relationship, she had started keeping so much from him in order to try and keep him afloat that it felt like a

burden, a full time job that put a blight on her senior year of high school. Cotton felt like a more natural balance. He might not understand half of what she said or thought, but he seemed to like her and find her interesting anyway, or maybe because of. Standish had known her so well he could read her thoughts by a flick of her expression, and it had been the same for her with him. But there was something exciting and fun about being with someone whose mind made no sense, who caused you to want to plumb the depths and get to know them better for the sheer thrill of discovery. That was what Cotton was to her, a fascinating thrill ride. What made him tick? She had no idea, and she really wanted to learn. There was an addictive quality that kept her coming back for more, and she wondered if it was the same for him. Based on the simple, straightforward girls he'd dated in high school, the artsy geek would be a definite switch, if not a fascinating draw.

"I've done as much as I can do here. We're going to have to talk to them in person, to see if I can connect anything they say to what I've dug out of their pasts," Elyse said.

"You want to go to Boston?" Cotton asked.

"No. I hacked their calendars. They're both in town today, for a meeting with the commissioners," Elyse said.

"You think you're pretty clever," Cotton said.

"Yeah, I do," she said.

"So do I," he said, cinching her close and touching his nose to her cheek. Cotton was cuddly; who would have predicted?

From the doorway, Georgette cleared her throat. "Breakfast?"

"Yes, please," Cotton answered.

“Believe it or not, Cotton, I was talking to the person who is paying to be here,” Georgette replied.

“Georgette, you wound me,” Cotton said.

“If only Brody would let me,” Georgette replied. “But I guess since you’re here you can eat, too.”

“I knew being pathetic and needy would pay off eventually,” Cotton said.

“In more ways than one, it looks like,” Georgette said, motioning to Elyse.

“Brutal. I love it,” Elyse said.

“Don’t gang up on me when I’m in the minority,” Cotton complained. “Where my bros at?”

“They’re probably somewhere making fun of you for calling them bros,” Elyse said.

“I’m going to assume that’s the hunger talking,” Cotton said.

“Then apparently I’ve been hungry since I learned to use sarcasm,” Elyse said.

“I did not have Elyse and Cotton being cute on my bingo card today,” Georgette noted.

“I know, right?” Cotton said, hooking an arm around her neck and giving it a squeeze. “You guys start without me, I’ll be right back.” He excused himself. Georgette waited until he was gone to speak.

“He looks happy. I haven’t seen him like that since... I’ve never seen him like that.” She turned big, wondering eyes on Elyse. “You must be magic.”

“Nah, we’re working through some stuff. Not to be cliché, but we’re unpacking a lot of trauma this weekend.”

“Whatever you’re doing, it’s working. Keep it up.”

“I’m going home soon,” Elyse said.

“So?”

“Long distance stuff never works out,” Elyse said.

“It’s not like he’s some guy you met at camp. He’s a guy you’ve known half your life. Elyse, this could be something. This *is* something.”

Elyse could hear Cotton’s footsteps echoing down the hall, announcing his return. She doubted Georgette could, so she turned to her and mouthed, knowing Georgette could read her lips. *I’m not the one who needs convinced.*

“What?” Cotton asked when he entered the room, but there was no good way to explain why Georgette was now scowling at him.

CHAPTER 22



“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you seem very non-stressed for two people who just learned Standish was kidnapped,” Georgette said as the three of them shared a leisurely breakfast. The sun was barely up, and it would be a while before the hydro execs arrived for their meeting.

“We don’t know if he was,” Elyse explained.

“Harry’s not exactly a reliable witness,” Cotton agreed. He’d been certain Harry was high; Elyse thought so, too.

“The facts in this case are shifting sand,” she said, swiping a weary hand over her forehead. When it came down to it, they had only an itchy feeling between them that something was wrong. Standish was missing, but Standish was often missing. Same with Dante. If they attempted to enter a missing person’s report on either man, they would be laughed into oblivion. But neither Cotton nor Elyse could let it go until they assured themselves everything was okay.

“What do we know about the hydro execs?” Cotton asked as he loaded his plate with bacon and fruit. “Tell me everything you’ve got, chick.”

“Not surprisingly, they were born rich. The only difference between them is how new the money is. One has been rich

since the pilgrims, one only goes back a couple of generations. They met in college, Harvard, obviously, and started brainstorming ideas to make money. They've dabbled in everything from aerodynamics to pharmaceuticals, doing well each time, but nothing that would break out and put them on the map. They seem to be gunning for Bezos and Musk levels of notoriety."

"Providing renewable energy to the entire east coast would definitely help with that," Cotton noted.

"Enough to protect their investment at any cost? I guess that's what we need to find out," Elyse said.

"This is so exciting," Georgette added, her eyes bouncing between their faces as she read their lips. "Like being part of a movie. Can I have a gun?"

Cotton gave her a look.

"It was worth a try," she said in an aside to Elyse.

"It really wasn't," Cotton disagreed.

They finished breakfast, thanked Georgette, and headed for the car. Elyse handed Cotton the keys.

"This feels like a trap," he said, eyeing them with suspicion. "Didn't you just rail against the patriarchy and assert your driving independence?"

"Yes, but now I need to put on my makeup and get pretty," she said.

"I'm confused about whether I'm supposed to meekly submit, insist you drive, or say you're already pretty," Cotton said.

"Who hurt you?" Elyse said as she rounded the car and slid inside.

“How are we playing this?” Cotton asked. He darted Elyse a glance as she removed a bag and began applying makeup. He’d thought she was joking about that. Apparently not.

“You be exactly as you are, stern and intimidating cop,” she said.

“Who will you be?” he asked.

“I’ll be your girlfriend.”

“I like this plan.”

She hid her smile. “I won’t tell them what I do, obviously. I’m going to pretend to be a journalist who is writing a feature on them. Instinct tells me they’ll like any notoriety they think they can draw to their project. I’ll pretend to give them some, soften them up while asking some pointed questions.”

“Questions like did you kidnap our uncle and brother?”

“Should I start with that one or begin screaming, ‘I know what you did and you’re going down’?”

“Those are both so good. I guess you’ll have to feel it,” Cotton said. He darted her a glance again and saw her applying lip gloss. “Exactly how pretty are you trying to get?”

“As pretty as it takes,” Elyse replied.

They arrived at the office building of the new hydro execs, a tiny brick structure in the middle of nowhere. Elyse unclipped her hair and shook it out. “Cotton.”

“Mm.” He stared at her, mesmerized. Growing up with only a brother made women’s beautification rituals a fascinating oddity.

“Do me a favor,” Elyse said. When she turned to him, he noted she’d gone all in on the makeup, with something that

made her eyes and lips bigger and sparkly, making him wonder if she hadn't been wearing any the past few days. If not, did it mean she was naturally that pretty? How was that possible? Were all women like that? If so, what was the point of makeup?

“What?” he said.

“Ignore everything that’s about to happen in there.”

“What’s about to happen in there?” he asked.

She didn't answer. He trotted dutifully behind her while she opened the door and stepped into the lobby. They didn't have an appointment. If necessary, he was going to pull the cop card to gain them entrance, but it wasn't necessary. The two men inside the building looked up at Elyse and perked considerably. Cotton hadn't paid attention to her outfit, but she wore a tiny t-shirt with the name of her alma mater with a well-fitting pair of jeans and nubby cardigan. With her long hair and made up face, she looked like a college co-ed on her first assignment for the school paper. Next to her cuteness and newly bubbling enthusiasm, Cotton felt even older and sterner than usual.

“Hi,” she said, adding a frantic wave that was nothing like the calm and cool Elyse he knew in real life. “I’m so sorry to drop in on you like this, but I’m a reporter, well, I mean, an aspiring reporter. Freelance. And I am so completely fascinated by your efforts here. I wondered if you’d have time for an interview. A teensy one. I will make it super quick, I promise.” She clasped her hands together under her chin and gave them puppy eyes that made him a little jealous because she’d never used them on him.

Before they answered, their combined gazes landed on Cotton, who must have been glowering because they both

shrank back a tiny amount.

“This is my boyfriend,” Elyse said. She rested her hand on his forearm and yanked it back when a zap of heat and electricity shot through her, threatening to distract her and make her break character. “He’s pretty much a stereotypical cop who didn’t want me to come meet two strange men alone, but don’t worry. He’s a total teddy bear.”

Cotton squinted harder, if possible, but the men bought Elyse’s glowing reassurances and relaxed, smiling.

“I guess we have a while,” one of them said.

“If it’s fast,” the other added, aiming for stern but unable to mask his approval.

“So fast,” Elyse promised, slipping into one of the proffered chairs. Cotton took the other and the four of them made an uncomfortable square, or at least Cotton found it uncomfortable. Elyse seemed to have entered her dream haven, if her enthusiasm level was any indication. *Ignore everything that’s about to happen in there.* Her warning made a lot more sense now, and he sat back, determined to watch and enjoy the show.

“So, obviously I’ve done my research and tried to prepare, but I would love to hear your story in your own words.” Her hands never stopped fluttering, clutching her pen, playing with her hair, twisting her fingers together. Elyse, the real Elyse, was not a person who fidgeted. And she also wasn’t an uptalker, someone who made the end of each sentence a question, whether it was or not. But this Elyse did those things while making copious amounts of eye contact. If they were the couple they were pretending to be, Cotton would have to be a fool not to be jealous over her overt flirtation. As it was, he was only mildly jealous, which made him an actual fool

because he knew it wasn't real. And yet he begrudged how much fawning attention these frat boys were getting from her.

"You met in Harvard," Elyse prompted, beaming at them when they beamed at her. "Was it magic from the beginning? Did you know you were destined to be business partners? Tell me about your meet cute."

"Meet cute," the one named Theo said. "Kurt loves that." Kurt was the old money and Theo the new, but that seemed to be the only discernable difference between them. They both had the air of guys who'd received some type of elaborate sports car for their sixteenth birthday.

Kurt rolled his eyes.

"Whatever you want to call it, yes. We met as sophomores and realized we worked well together. Right away we started dreaming of future projects. We," Theo paused and glanced at Kurt. "We started a business in school, but it's kind of embarrassing."

"Oh, please, oh, please, oh, please tell me, please?" Elyse said, clasping her hands again. "I won't even use it, if you don't want me to. But I'm dying to hear the details."

"Don't," Kurt choked, but a laughing Theo ignored him.

"We baked cookies."

Elyse blinked, the shock making her momentarily revert to her true self for a second. Then she plastered the beaming smile back on her face and tipped forward. "You're joking. Like real, actual cookies? Going to need the details on that, please."

"On Thursday nights we mixed up mega batches of cookies. On Fridays, while everyone else was partying themselves to oblivion, we took our cookies to the frats and

sold them to all the drunk and high people.” Theo kissed his fingers and released them into the air.

Elyse clapped her hands in delight. “That is the *best*. I might have to renege on my promise and add that in because I’m sure my readers would love it. *I* love it. Did you actually make money?”

“We cleared, what, three, four thousand a weekend?” Theo asked Kurt.

“Sometimes five. Six on homecoming,” Kurt said.

“You must be the serious one,” Elyse said, pointing to him. “Which means Theo’s the fun one. Like me and Cotton.” She tossed Cotton a little wink. “Is that why you work so well together, do you think?”

“I think so,” Theo said. “We bring balance. But don’t let that frosty exterior fool you, Kurt likes to have fun. And I can be serious, when I need to. And we’re both serious about business.”

“So, was the cookie money how you got started? Did you roll that into other investments?” Elyse asked.

“That was what we intended to do,” Kurt said. “We were going to be so independent, to make it on our own without any help from our families.”

“But in the end it was a pipe dream. The cookie money was a tiny pittance. I used mine to buy a motorcycle. I think Kurt bought a boat or something. Reality set in after graduation and we turned to our families for help.”

“For an investment, not free cash. They receive shares of our earnings. We set it up like a real business, but that gave us the capital to do bigger and better things,” Kurt said.

“Bigger and better than cookies? Impossible,” Elyse declared, earning smiles from the two men and a squint from Cotton. “Your investment portfolio is impressive.”

They nodded their acknowledgement, or maybe agreement, though that was doubtful since they seemed to be playing it humble. “The new green initiative intrigues me. I mean, who doesn’t want to save the planet, right? Has that always been a passion of yours?”

“We haven’t always invested in green initiatives, but I think our human interest work speaks for itself. Some of our pharmaceutical investments have been groundbreaking, really revolutionary.”

“And now green energy,” Elyse said, with a beaming grin.

Theo tipped his head, acknowledging and receiving her accolades with a humility that seemed as false as his veneers, at least to Cotton.

“It’s obviously a grand project, so ambitious. Pardon me for saying so, but others have tried and failed. What makes you different?” Elyse asked, and Cotton could swear she batted her lashes. The girl was giving him hives.

“I’m glad you asked,” Theo said and immediately busted out a pat and practiced answer about advances in technology and concern for the local ecology. Kurt nodded his agreement in the background.

“Wow,” Elyse breathed, and Cotton wondered if she was also wondering how anyone’s teeth could be so shiny. He must keep a hygienist on standby to polish them at random intervals throughout his day. “So, so great. But,” Elyse wrinkled her nose, as if hesitant to inject any reality into the love fest she’d

created. “I know my town, and we Downeasters are slow to accept change. How have you handled the pushback?”

Clever girl, not allowing them room to deny the pushback, only to answer how they’d handled it. Cotton tossed her an impressed glance that was lost on her as she kept her eyes fastened on the hydro bros, as Cotton was starting to think of them. If Trust Fund had a picture in the dictionary, these guys would be it.

“There’s been some grumbling, but we’ve tried to meet it head on with logic. We are glad to debate the merits of this project, because we know it will hold up. Especially for the locals,” Theo said.

“They’re about to receive a windfall,” Kurt interjected. On his own he wouldn’t be considered stoic, but next to Theo’s enthusiasm he appeared austere. “When this project goes live, Maine’s tides will be like Texas’s oil fields; it’ll be a bonanza.”

“Obviously I think it’s amazing. I mean, I’m fangirling over here,” Elyse said. “But I know my people. I have to doubt logic will make a dent, and money means nothing.”

“Money means everything,” Kurt deadpanned.

The room went silent with a sudden chill.

“I think what Kurt is trying to say is that money can be a good inducement in the proper circumstances. When used correctly, it can grease the wheels of progress. Look, we’re not claiming eminent domain here. No one is losing their homes or lands. We’ve proved—repeatedly—that no wildlife will be harmed, and the fish and lobster industry won’t be affected. All we’re doing is staking our tiny claim in a very vast ocean. Has there been pushback? Of course, I’d expect nothing less.

People are distrusting of outsiders, especially two guys from Harvard with big dreams. But has it been bad? Nah. A very small minority is upset and suspicious. Given time, I think they'll come on board, like everyone else has come on board."

"Wow, are you running for something? Because you have my vote," Elyse said and gave him a little round of applause.

"Not yet, but give it time," Theo said, then tossed her a politician's smile and a wink. *A wink.*

Cotton didn't realize how tightly his entire body was clenched until Elyse turned to him and said, "That's all I have. Anything else you want to add, babe?"

There were several things, but he tried hard to push them away and focus on the scenario she'd created. "You said there's been pushback. What's your protocol for handling the unrulies? As a cop, I'm vested in keeping a lid on it."

"I appreciate that," Theo said, nodding in a way that felt entirely too condescending. Cotton almost expected him to reach out a hand and pat his head. *Try it, Harvard, I dare you.* "We have a security team that handles everything. They make us aware of the worst offenders and, to be honest, none have been brought to our attention. I'd be happy to set up a meeting with them, if you'd like to discuss."

Cotton nodded. "I would, thanks."

"I'll text Keith now, that's our security guy, and have him set up a meeting. If you have a card?"

Cotton froze, but Elyse reached in her bag and suavely handed him a card. "Thanks for taking one of these, I have a thousand," she said, with a little self-deprecating eye roll.

Theo laughed, thoroughly charmed by her. Cotton thought if he wasn't there, Theo would ask her out. "New jobs are

always exciting. Maybe we could have coffee sometime, talk more in depth about the article.”

Was this guy for real? Was he actually shooting his shot while Cotton sat right there? Elyse had introduced him as her boyfriend for this scenario, she couldn't have made it any clearer that they were together.

“We'll have to check our schedules,” Cotton said easily, refusing to let any emotion eke through. Hydro Bro didn't deserve it.

Elyse didn't respond, but she did tuck her hand in his and give it a squeeze as they rose. Warning him to keep his temper or congratulating him on keeping it this far?

He squeezed her hand and kept it while she thanked the men and made their goodbyes. He didn't trust himself to speak again, but it didn't seem necessary to do so. Relieved to exit the stuffy building, he opened the door and led Elyse to the car.

CHAPTER 23



“**Y**ou are not seeing that guy again.” Cotton waited to speak until they were on the road. In response, Elyse tittered a laugh. He shoved her leg, his irritation ratcheting down in light of her cute laugh. “What? You think it’s funny that I’m jealous?”

“I think it’s funny you’re jealous of him when the last guy I dated was your brother,” she said, reaching over to squeeze the back of his neck.

He chuckled because what else could he do? The situation was ridiculous. “Someday someone’s going to write a play about us, and I haven’t figured out if it will be a tragedy or comedy,” he agreed. “How did you have a business card ready to go?”

“I have five different business cards, depending on who I need to be. All the numbers ring to separate voicemails I’ve rigged as part of my cover.”

“Can I hear the one you gave him?” he asked.

She pressed a button on her phone. It rang a few times and then her perky persona said, “Hey, It’s Elyse Walker and I’m probably out working on my Pulitzer. Leave a message.”

“Huh,” he said, feeling an equal mix of impressed and devastated. When he was with her, it was easy to remember that she was Elyse, the girl he’d known and alternately loathed and secretly adored since he was sixteen. But she wasn’t that girl anymore. She was a woman with an important job, one that kept her tied to Washington DC. For that reason alone she wasn’t his, could never be his.

“What were your impressions of them?” Elyse asked.

“Very shiny,” he said, drawing his mind away from her inevitable departure.

“I thought so, too. So polished. They really had all the right answers ready. Beneath that, what did you think?”

“I was hard pressed to see any corruption or hints of a cover up, in regard to the hydro project. If Dante has caused a problem, they’re remarkably cool about it.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too. There was something smarmy about them, but I couldn’t connect the dots to the dam or to Dante. And certainly not to Standish, who couldn’t care less about the hydro project.” She tapped her fingers on her thigh. “What are we missing?”

“I don’t know,” he said, sharing her frustration. There was something there, they could both feel it. But neither could see or find it. For an investigator, nothing was more maddening.

Elyse yawned. “I might nap. I’m reaching that point of too much missed sleep, where my brain is becoming mushy. I feel like if I could rest a couple of hours, I might be able to kick my brain back into action.”

Cotton didn’t believe her brain ever went out of action. She had always been one of the sharpest people he’d ever known, quick and witty and sarcastic. No matter what he

threw at her back in the day, and he'd thrown a lot, she had always tossed it back at him. Sparring with her had been a driving force through most of his adolescence, and he hadn't realized how much he'd missed her until she returned.

He tossed her a glance and found her asleep, head tilted toward the window. His heart gave a preemptive yank of pain. It hadn't been hard to let her go the first time, all those years ago when they were kids. It had been a relief. They were in the midst of Standish's breakdown and subsequent attack on her. Cotton had been up to his eyeballs in terror and trauma, trying to keep his family afloat. Back then the loss of Elyse had been a reprieve, one less emotional minefield to navigate, especially in light of his blatantly inappropriate crush on her.

But now.

Elyse was everything he could possibly want. The unwanted attraction he'd harbored for her as a kid had grown into a blazing inferno, in light of the things he'd learned about her. She was smart and tough, but tender and funny. He would never be bored with her, as he was with so many women he'd tried to date. They were different, but those differences intrigued and fascinated him. And there was Standish who, when they were kids, pushed them apart and, now that they were grown, pulled them together. How could Cotton be with anyone who didn't understand that Standish was his forever responsibility? He couldn't, wouldn't. Elyse not only understood, she loved Standish, too, cared deeply about his wellbeing. Their shared history had created lifelong bonds, whether they wanted them or not.

But there was her job, always her job between them. He'd observed her meteoric rise, knew exactly how hard she'd had to work to get where she was because he'd watched her strive.

He took vicarious delight in her ascent, was so proud of her he felt like he might burst, and yet resented her job so much he might burst for other reasons, most likely from the pain of it all. Long distance wouldn't work for either of them. Some people could pull off evasive detachment and call it a relationship; he and Elyse could not. It was an either/or scenario, either they would be all in or all out. Elyse was tethered to DC, Cotton was tethered to Maine. It was a lose/lose proposition with no solution.

His mood sank all the way to the bottom, so that by the time they returned to Georgette's inn, he parked the car and stared at Elyse, watching her sleep a stalkerish amount of time, wishing to bottle these moments to carry him through another long, dark winter alone.

The power of his dark stare woke her at last, blinking in confusion. "We're here already?"

"Yes," he said and faced forward. "Why don't you go in and sleep a while longer? I'll go home and try to do the same. We'll meet up later, once we've both had some time to process."

"Okay," she said, still sounding groggy and dazed. "You'll let me know if Standish is there, when you get home?"

"I'll let you know," he promised and, unable to avoid looking at her again, faced her and felt something more powerful than attraction sizzle through him. He knew she was smart and capable, but in that moment of sleepy confusion she looked so vulnerable. He wanted to gather her up and bundle her close and protect her from every bad thing forever, never mind the fact that most of the bad things in her life had come directly from him or Standish. *Fresh start*. He had promised himself when she rolled back into town that this time would be

different, that he was no longer that immature kid who had no idea how to handle his too-big emotions and secret crush, lashing out in lieu of being her friend. What he hadn't realized was exactly how different this time would be, how much care and affection he'd been storing for her, how much it would explode being in her radius again. How hard it would be to deal with when she was still out of reach for other, newer reasons.

"You okay?" she asked, voice scratchy with sleep.

He forced a smile and nodded, tipping forward to brush his lips on hers, resisting the urge to cling when her lips clung to his. "Call me when you wake up."

"Kay," she murmured and stumbled from the car, pausing to glance back at him with lowered eyebrows before facing forward and going up the stairs.



Once inside, Elyse collapsed on the bed, certain she would sleep the day away. Had she ever been this exhausted? Probably. She'd worked a lot of crazy assignments, most featured missed sleep as a key ingredient. But this felt fresh and unnatural, the sort of exhaustion that comes from slaying old demons and facing things and people she'd rather have left alone.

Three hours later, she woke with a start, half expecting to see Cotton perched on her bed. Had he woken her? She sat up and looked at the clock, but Cotton wasn't in the room. Neither was Standish. Elyse was alone, but something niggled in the back of her brain, something she couldn't bring to the

forefront but had burned its way through her subconscious in an attempt to gain her attention.

She pulled her knees to her chest and took a deep breath. *What? What are you trying to think of? Is it the Hydro Bros?* Her mind reviewed their earlier conversation, searching for anything that pinged on her internal radar, but there was nothing. Nothing to suggest they were lying about the project or the town's reaction to it. True, Dante had been upset. But Dante was often upset about things. He was a diehard conspiracy theorist who hated the government and anyone in power. Most of his reasons for that stemmed from being a soldier in an endless war. Unlike Standish, whose illness came from a body and brain that rebelled, Dante had been a normal guy who decided to become a marine. That marine became a scout sniper and spent years being shuttled from country to country, doing his country's bidding. Over time the constancy of his job, the stress of it, the shifting sand of not having a home base, of being a pawn, of being subjected to chronic and extreme stress, took a toll on his mind. There was also the possibility that he'd been exposed to toxins that physically damaged him, as well as mentally, but no one knew if the stories he told about chemical exposure were real or a result of pre-existing psychosis. Whatever the reasons, Dante's brain was as damaged as Standish's and people in town had learned to give both of them a wide berth, to not lend credence to Dante's outbursts or wild theories. No one but Elyse ever seemed to listen.

I'm the only one who listens, she repeated to herself, gripping the sheet tighter in her curled fists. Had she listened, though? She was sympathetic, certainly. Her relationship with Standish had given her a better empathy for Dante's struggle, knew he couldn't help the tricks his mind played on him. But

she had also discounted many of the things he told her as simply that: tricks of the mind. What if they weren't, though? What if he'd been telling her the truth all along and she chose not to listen or understand?

She reached for her laptop, yanking it close as she reviewed the thread of the messages they'd shared the last few months. And there, right there, was the elusive answer she'd been seeking, written in black and white, spelled out by her uncle's own hand.

CHAPTER 24



“Cotton, baby, wake up.”

Elyse’s soft voice, plus her gentle hand on his forehead, jerked him out of a sleep so hard it felt like concrete. He blinked up at her, smiling and pretty, perched on the edge of his bed. It was a special kind of torture to finally realize exactly what you wanted, only to also realize it was completely out of reach. “You taking a page from my book?” he rasped.

“Maybe,” she said.

“Kay.” With lightning reflexes he reached up and snatched her close, rolling as he deposited her beside him and nestled, one arm snuggled over her waist.

“Wait,” she said, squirming to put some space between them. “I actually came here for a reason.”

“You didn’t have to,” he said, happy to have her beside him, as long as possible.

“Oh,” she drawled. “That’s sweet.” She reached out and petted his head.

He pressed his face to her shoulder, smothering his smile. “That’s me.”

“Ha,” she exclaimed before she could stop it, but he wasn’t offended. People on his bad side tended to be there for a reason. He’d rather be feared than fawned over, except by the people in his innermost circle. *Elyse Walker is in my innermost circle*, he thought, giving his head a little shake at the shock of it all.

He nestled her closer, erasing the distance between them again. “What?”

“What what?” she said, still petting his head.

“You said you came here for a reason.”

“Oh, right.” Now she was the one to shake her head. “I’m pretty sure I figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” he asked. The gentle petting of his head was making him slip rapidly toward sleep. Between that and her soft warmth, it was an irresistible invitation to lose himself to unconsciousness again, this time with Elyse. Maybe she would stay while he napped; maybe she would stay forever.

“Dante and Standish, why they’re missing, who has them.”

That registered. He sat up and blinked down at her. “What?”

“Are we doing the what what thing again?”

“Elyse,” he said, toeing her shin.

She sat up and reached for her laptop. “I went back over the messages Dante sent me, and I think I found the missing link that will tie everything together.” She clicked a few screens on her computer and handed it to him. He zeroed in on the message stream at the bottom of the page.

i think they're kidnapping ppl and using them for experiments.

Cotton paused and regarded her. “This is the missing link?”

“Keep going,” she prompted.

He scrolled down to Elyse’s response. *Who do you think is kidnapping people? What experiments?*

Some shady characters up here, lots of strangers and a building in the woods. Lights, noises, people going missing. IDK what experiments, but medical, probly. It's always medical, with people like us.

Have you talked to anyone about your concerns? Elyse had asked.

I'm talking to you, Dante had replied. There were no more messages for a few weeks and the next thread started a new topic.

Cotton re-read them, still squinting. “I feel like I’m missing something. This is the kind of paranoid rambling Standish does when his meds need adjusted.”

“Exactly, it’s the kind of stuff Dante is famous for. So I tried to listen, albeit patronizingly, and then I ignored it, figuring he’d moved on. But I went back and really made myself listen and try to take seriously what he was saying.” She leaned over him and flipped tabs on her computer. “The Hydro Bros invest heavily in pharmaceuticals, they have for years. There’s a particular drug one of their companies tried to bring to market a few years ago, a guaranteed anti-depressant, anti-anxiety med that showed amazing promise.”

“What happened to it?”

“There were some safety questions. They pulled it off the market until they could work out the bugs. No one’s heard a peep about it in three years, which is crazy because before that it had been getting a lot of buzz. People said it would be the next Prozac, something so groundbreaking that it would be an overnight best-selling miracle pill. Some rumors on the dark web popped up, saying that the initial side effects were bad, like really bad. Strokes, brain bleeds, massive brain damage, swelling, and death. How they managed to sweep that under the rug, I have no idea.”

“Knowing that, or even hearing rumors to that effect, who would sign up to be a guinea pig test subject?” Cotton asked.

“Who, indeed?” she returned.

It took a lot to shock him, but when her meaning became clear, his jaw dropped. “You think they’re doing it, what Dante said, you think they’re stealing marginalized people and experimenting on them.”

“It’s the perfect setup. Most people aren’t like Dante and Standish—they don’t have safe places to sleep and families who care. They live on the street with no oversight. No one’s paying attention. I spoke to the heads of some shelters in Portland who said maybe some of their regulars have gone missing, but it’s hard to say. And maybe there have been some rumors of bad stuff happening, but there always are. Furthermore,” she clicked another tab, “the Hydro Bros own a massive plot of land about an hour north.”

“In the middle of the forest,” Cotton said, picturing the map. “In the middle of nowhere.”

“Yep. I tweaked some satellites and tried to get some images, but still couldn’t get much beyond a glimpse of a razor wire fence.”

“Razor wire fence, in the middle of the forest. Could be to keep out bears and moose,” Cotton said slowly.

“Or could be to keep something else in,” Elyse finished.

“So, there’s really nothing sinister about the dam project?” Cotton said.

“Nothing I’ve been able to find. The Hydro Bros have a lot of irons in the fire. The government is funding a big chunk of the hydro project. It would bring them a lot gravitas, but they don’t have a lot of financial skin in the game. The pharmaceutical investments, however, are from personal funds, their own, friends and family. If that project goes south, it could ruin them. I’m guessing their visit to the hydro facility today was also a chance to stop in and check the progress of the other, more clandestine project.”

“How can we find out?”

“How are your breaking and entering skills?” Elyse asked.

“Average. How are yours?” he returned.

“Better than average. We’re going to need to stop at a hardware store and pick up a thermal imager.”

“Okay,” he said, because already he was over his head. He dealt with petty crimes and the occasional violent assault. Never murder or kidnapping or whatever this was. This was Elyse’s ball, and he was glad to handle it in whatever fashion she wanted. “I need to give Brody a heads up.”

“Probably a good idea,” Elyse said. “Do you have a gun I can use?”

He blinked at her, certain no other woman had ever said those words to him. “Yes. But we’re going to be on our own up there. Brody can’t stop me from going, but he also can’t

provide backup in another jurisdiction, especially not on suspicion of foul play.”

“Okay,” Elyse agreed, calm and collected.

He hauled her close and kissed her. “You’re a lot cooler than I’ll ever be.”

“Probably, but you’re doing all right, Cotton Dupree.” She draped her arms on his shoulders and brushed his lips.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Now please go and get me my gun.”



It took a while to find a hardware store that carried a thermal imager. “How do you know about these?” Cotton asked as she drove and he familiarized himself with how to use the thing.

“My former boss, Gaines, was a SEAL. They used them all the time on raids, to figure out if a house was occupied, by how many occupants. It saves a lot of guesswork and, potentially, saves a lot of lives.”

“Sounds like you learned a lot from him,” Cotton noted.

“Everything, honestly. He was a great boss and mentor, the best. He had a knack for teaching without talking down, for bestowing enough responsibility to make us grow without dumping so much that we were over our heads and bogged down. All I ever wanted to be was a hacker. Gaines’s faith in my instinct and abilities made me so much more, an integral part of the team.” Talking about how it used to be made her realize how bad it had become. She dreaded work now, always

wondering if this would be the day her arrogant boss's incompetence got one of their team killed.

Cotton didn't hear her anxiety or trepidation, though. All he heard was how much she loved her job, how important and necessary it was, not only to her, but maybe also to the world.

They made the rest of the trip in heavy silence, each lost in his or her own thoughts and worries.

The drive was long and GPS konked out long before they reached their destination. Thankfully Cotton was familiar enough with the terrain that he had a good idea where they were headed. After a couple of wrong turns, they finally passed what could only be described as a compound, a warehouse in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a few acres of razor wire. They parked somewhere hidden and studied the building for a while.

“What if Standish is in there?” Elyse murmured.

“Then we'll get him out,” Cotton promised.

“Can you do that? Without losing it?”

He made himself pause before he answered. “Yes.”

“Not sure I can say the same,” Elyse said, surprising him. “I've never done a personal mission before. I guess that's the advantage of being a cop. All the people you deal with are locals. You've built up a callous of sorts.”

“Yeah, well, it's that same callous that makes people believe I'm heartless. That used to make *you* believe I was heartless.”

“Used to, Cotton, used to. Now I'm all too acquainted with your squishy interior.”

He grunted. “Can we go back to when you thought I was a monster?”

“Nope, no going back. The secret’s out. You’re a big softy, and I like it.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be a big softy if they’re holding my brother captive. As for you.” He faced her. “I know you have a different code, but this is not a military op. Real world laws apply. Don’t go all vigilante on me. Only use this.” He tapped the gun he’d given her. “If you have to.”

“Trust me, I will. I’m not a great shot.”

“Such a comforting statement from my backup,” he murmured.

“It’s okay, I’m really good at screaming frantically. Like, epic.”

He laughed and swiped a hand over his face. “Awesome. Loud and hysterical screaming is a handy skill to have during a black op.”

“The best,” she agreed. She picked up the gun and they eased from the car, soft closing the doors behind them. When they were close enough, Cotton held up the thermal imager.

“Can this be right? Am I doing it wrong?”

Elyse stood on her toes to see over his shoulder. He brought it down to her level. The screen lit with red. Either there was a mass of humanity inside or they had it wrong and they were making something. “Meth lab? Glass blowing studio?” she tried.

“I don’t know. Let’s ease in closer.” No one was guarding the perimeter. Minus the thermal image on their screen, there were no signs of life whatsoever. Did she have this wrong?

Had she taken an unhinged rant from her uncle and tried to connect too many pieces that didn't fit? For a few beats she waivered, wondering if she should call the whole thing off and back away.

Cotton had taken a few steps forward and paused, turning back. "Elyse? You coming?"

Trust your gut, Elyse. She heard it in Gaines's voice, and it gave her the courage to take a step forward and keep pace with Cotton.

They advanced closer to the perimeter. Elyse could see each outline of each razor curling over the wire and had no solution for how to get around it. This was the part of the plan Gaines always handled, with some sort of SEAL mojo that was prepared for any contingency, cutting wire, defusing a bomb, planting a bomb, using duct tape to seal a leaking raft. He had done it all, some of it she'd witnessed in person and some she'd only read in his files, the ones that were supposed to be classified but she had managed to hack as part of her first test at the agency.

Before she could confess her misgivings and lack of plan to Cotton, because she definitely needed to, no matter how it might lower her status in his view, he spoke first. "No windows," he said, and that was all because suddenly he dropped, the upraised arm of Theo and his weapon now hovering over him.

CHAPTER 25



“Well, hey, we meet again,” Theo said, as if they’d bumped into each other at the local coffee shop and he hadn’t just incapacitated her partner with a vicious blow.

Elyse did what she told Cotton she was best at: she screamed, so loudly that Theo dropped whatever he’d been holding and pressed his hands over his ears, grimacing. Elyse darted away, toward the vast woods, but it was no use because Theo’s goon soon caught her and dragged her back.

Cotton, who was unconscious but breathing, was dragged along beside her by Goon One, who was worth his weight as a pack mule because he also held on to Elyse. As they trudged toward the warehouse, Cotton’s heels made tracks in the loose dirt and rocks. “What is going on?” Elyse demanded, incensed past the point of being able to play the fawning journalist any longer. Cotton had been bashed *in the head*. Head wounds were serious, potentially fatal. What if he died? It would be her fault, all her fault.

“We’re going to slip inside and figure out a plan,” Theo said. He texted as he walked, not even looking at the path.

Elyse gaped at him. “Are you actually conducting business while you’re in the middle of a kidnapping?”

“No rest for the wicked,” he said, tossing her a little wink that made her either want to gag or punch him. Maybe both things.

“You’re psychotic.”

His smile slipped. “No, I’m not. What I am is a man with a massive amount of money on the line and a massive amount of pressure on my head to meet a deadline. I cannot have you or your friend messing that up. Believe me, it’s better this way.”

“Better for you, you mean,” Elyse clarified.

“Yes, obviously. Why would I care what’s better for you?” He tapped his temple as if to signify that she was lacking in brain power.

They reached the warehouse where the door was yanked open by Kurt, who emitted a few expletives at the sight of them. “What is going on?” he demanded.

“We had some visitors,” Theo explained, motioning to Elyse and a still-out Cotton. Elyse wanted to check on him but Goon One had her arm wrenched tightly in his grasp, angled aloft as he frog marched her.

“Oh, man, oh, man, oh, man,” Kurt said and began pacing a tight circle. “This is bad, this is bad, this is bad.”

“Relax, it’s fine,” Theo said and returned his attention to his phone.

Kurt stopped short and scowled at his partner. “It is not fine, Theo. How is it fine?”

“We’ll get rid of them.”

Elyse was relieved to see Kurt do a slow blink. “We can’t get rid of a cop and a journalist.”

“Why not?”

“People will ask questions, at the very least,” Kurt said and resumed pacing.

“It’s Maine, Kurt. Accidents happen up here in the wilderness. The happy couple was looking for a cozy spot, swerved to avoid a moose, and plowed into a tree. The end.”

Any hope Elyse had for Kurt being an ally evaporated when he gave a satisfied little shrug and stopped pacing. If they were going to be taken to another location, she’d better make use of the time she was here while it lasted. She craned her neck, peering around Goon One.

Elyse had worked in espionage for six years, since graduating college. She’d seen things, enough to believe herself impervious to man’s depravity. But when she peered into the interior of the warehouse and saw dozens of pairs of eyes staring back at her, she had to press her lips together to stop her gasp. “You’re really doing it,” she blurted. “You’re really kidnapping people and testing your medicine on them.” She’d thought so, but a big part of her still expected to be proved wrong because how could they? How could anyone?

Kurt followed the line of her gaze and stared around the building as if not seeing what she saw. Theo waved his hand dismissively. “Come on, these guys? They’re better off, trust me. We found most of them living in squalor, hungry, cold, alone. At least here they’re getting meals, warmth, and—most importantly—medicine.”

“Are any of them here of their own volition?” Elyse asked, voice rising.

Theo snorted. “Do you think any of them even know what volition is?”

“They’re not animals,” Elyse exclaimed. “They’re men.”

“Are they?” Kurt asked, once again sounding calm, reasonable, and rational. While at other times she might appreciate those qualities, now they came off as chilling and detached. “Are you a man if you can’t hold a conversation, let alone a job? Are you a man if you hurt everyone you love because the voices in your head told you to?”

“Yes,” Elyse practically yelled. “You’re still someone’s son, father, brother, boyfriend, friend. Your worth is not measured by your bank account or all the letters that follow your name or the stock price of your company.”

Theo snorted. “Yes, it is.”

“Shut up, Theo,” Elyse said, fists balled. “You both disgust me. If we’re measuring worth, real worth, neither of you have any. You’re cavernous shells, pale imitations of what a man should be. No real man could treat another human being this way, caging them like wild things and performing experiments against their will.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “Next comes the line when she compares us to Joseph Mengele. Save your sophistry, Elyse, if that’s your real name. What you fail to realize is that we’re doing this for the greater good. Sure, maybe some of these guys will suffer, but their suffering will help thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of others. We have the power to end mental illness, at our fingertips. Isn’t that worth a little bit of injustice in the short term?” Theo demanded.

“Wow, has Mao heard about you? Because I think he’d be really interested in this collectivist ‘the rights of the masses outweigh the rights of the individual’ thesis. It’s groundbreaking stuff, except every dictator and mass executioner in history, you white-toothed Pol Pot wannabe.”

“Okay, I’m tired of you now. Can we get them out of here? Have we covered all the bases?” Theo turned to survey Kurt as he asked the question, and that was when Cotton sprang up and karate chopped Goon One, dropping him with some kind of high school wrestling move that took him down and kept him there.

“Get his gun,” Cotton told Elyse, and he didn’t have to say it twice. She held it on the Hydro Bros who stared back at her with what could only be described as boredom.

“Really, Elyse?” Theo said, full in on the condescension. “The entire building is surrounded by razor wire, and you think that guy is our only security? We have more guards here than the Pentagon.”

“You don’t, actually,” Elyse said.

“Do you even know how to use that thing?” Kurt asked. It was clear they thought they could talk her down.

“Not well,” Elyse confessed. “But do you honestly think you can get away with killing us and making it look like an accident?”

“A hundred percent,” Theo said.

“I told you, Elyse. Money means everything. Enough of it changes hands, it will be like you never existed.”

“What about them?” Elyse asked, motioning to the men locked in their cages. “Are you going to kill all of them so they don’t talk?”

“No,” Theo said and actually laughed. “Who is going to believe a bunch of crazy people? They are nothing. It’s like they don’t even exist.”

“You’ve really got it all figured out,” Elyse said.

“That’s what guys like us do, Elyse. We run the world. Always have, always will,” Theo said.

“That’s so impressive and intimidating. I mean, I’m dirt poor with no family connections whatsoever, no real talent besides a solid work ethic. Tell me, though, do you have a connection in the National Security Council?”

Theo blinked at her, looking confused. “Not yet, but I’m sure we will eventually.”

“Too bad you’re a little slow on that because I actually do, and I had him on standby.” Overhead the thwack of helicopter rotors sounded. “I’m just a girl from nowhere Maine, but around here we always plan for contingencies. My contingency plan included tripping an alarm I keep in my watch to let my contacts know I’m in trouble and need a pickup. It also triggered a leak of all the evidence I gathered on you two to every major news outlet in the country, as well as multiple prominent members of congress and one member of the Supreme Court who owes me a favor. Yikes.” She shrugged. “I guess sometimes that Yankee pragmatism pays off.”

Their combined looks of abject panic were priceless and something Elyse would remember forever, Cotton, too. Soon the team that Elyse’s contact sent burst through the doors, weapons aloft, and took control of the scene, securing Theo and Kurt, who demanded their lawyers, along with all of their goons.

Cotton, relieved of the goon he’d had in a stranglehold, stood and pulled Elyse into his embrace. “If I live to be a thousand, I think that will be the best, most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. I freaking love you.” He gave her a perfunctory

kiss, one that said he was aware they were in a sea of heavily armed military guys.

“How’s your head?” she asked, touching gentle fingers to his goose egg.

“Not as bad as you might think. Apparently they don’t teach people how to hit in Harvard. I faked being out and used it to my advantage, waiting for a time to spring.”

Hand in hand they began to meander through the small cells that contained each man. The men stared back at them in various states of confusion. Some yelled and pounded on the door, some cried, some stared straight ahead in a catatonic stupor. One thing they all had in common was that none of them was Standish.

They approached Kurt and Theo and asked about Standish, but they had both lawyered up and invoked their right to remain silent. They wouldn’t utter a peep about Standish, and their expressions gave nothing away.

Eventually Elyse and Cotton were released. They drove home in oddly heavy silence. They should feel good that they accomplished their mission and released all the men who’d been held captive, but in actuality the night had been a reminder of their shared reality, that they loved people the world viewed as less than human because their brains didn’t work correctly. How many people would agree with Theo and Kurt that a few worthless, crazy people should be sacrificed for the greater good? The thought of how many would be in that camp kept them from celebrating what should have felt like a victory. Instead it felt like they’d won a small battle in a much larger and more exhausting war.

Cotton pulled into the small gravel parking area for Georgette’s inn and shut off the car. Now, with the end so near,

the silence turned cozy and intimate.

“When do you have to go?” Cotton asked, keeping his eyes on the rhododendrons in front of him.

“Tomorrow,” Elyse said. “I’ve stayed away as long as I could, already pushing the envelope of my time off.”

Cotton reached for her hand and held it, twining his fingers through hers. He wanted to say they could give it a try, but he couldn’t because it wouldn’t be fair. Neither of them could survive an arrangement like that. “These last few days have been incredible,” he said at last, because that was true. He’d found with Elyse what he’d never dreamed he’d find with anyone.

“Yeah,” she said. Her voice broke and she tried to be secret when she swiped beneath her eye.

Now he was the one to make a sound, a wounded animal sound, as he reached for her and crushed her to him. “Don’t, don’t cry, chick. Please. Let’s leave on a high note, okay? There’s been too much sadness. I...I can’t with that.” He swallowed hard, pushing back the bile. He couldn’t go on and resume his normal former life if he thought she was hurt or had regrets.

“I’m just a little melancholy. It’s been a lot, but I’m fine. I promise. Better than fine. For the first time in a decade, I’m healthy. It’s still a little unbelievable that it’s because of you, Cotton Dupree.”

“The source of all your former bad health?” he guessed, kissing her fingers.

“Only half,” she said. They shared a smile as the back door opened and the other half of her bad health slid into the seat.

“Hey,” Standish said, his tone casual as if they’d been mid conversation already. “What?” he asked when they stared at him in mute surprise, mouths gaping.

“Where have you been?” Cotton demanded in a roar that made Elyse wince. Standish, however, was used to his big brother’s bluster and merely shrugged.

“With Dante.”

“What?” Now it was Elyse’s turn to exclaim.

“Yeah, he picked me up last night, took me camping, said we needed to be away for a bit so you’d have time to think. He said to give you this.” He handed Elyse a letter, her uncle’s familiar untidy scrawl plainly visible. Elyse turned on the overhead light in the car, unfurled the letter, and started to read.

Dear Elyse. I knew you’d get there eventually, especially if I gave you some incentive. Sorry about the boat, I was trying to prod you along. I tried to do something myself, but no one would listen. No one ever listens to guys like me, but you do. Don’t lose that. Stay sharp. The world is full of bad people, but good ones, too. You’re one of the good ones.

There was no endearment and he didn’t sign it, but it still made Elyse cry. She passed it off to Cotton and reached in the glove box for a napkin before remembering this was a rental and she hadn’t had a chance to stuff any in there yet.

“I should go in,” she said, suddenly exhausted. She both wanted and didn’t want Cotton to accompany her, but he was similarly exhausted and he had Standish to attend to. Standish had already curled in the back seat and, catlike, fallen immediately asleep.

“I should get him home, and myself, too,” he said.

“Okay,” Elyse agreed.

“I’ll take you to the airport tomorrow,” he offered.

“You don’t have to.”

He quirked a brow at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, bossy brow. I’d appreciate it.” She glanced at the inn. “How do we say goodbye?”

“We don’t. We just say goodnight.” He cupped her jaw and kissed her, then kissed her again when pulling away was harder than it should have been. “Goodnight, Elyse Walker.”

“Goodnight, Cotton Dupree,” she whispered and, on trembling legs, exited the car and wobbled up the steps.

CHAPTER 26



T*wo Months Later...*

Elyse left work, but the tension didn't leave her body. Her boss had been on her like fleas on a stray, alternately micromanaging her and freezing her out. Recently he'd been called to the carpet on a budgetary issue, which was ironic, considering it was probably the thing he was doing best at the moment. But now that he was under pressure, he was taking it out on everyone else. Today, due to a time-sensitive project, Elyse had been the closest at hand. She was exhausted and stressed and, if she would admit it, a little sad.

As always lately her mind drifted to her last day in Maine and the goodbye at the airport, Standish and Cotton standing side by side as they said their goodbyes. It had been a surreal throwback to homecoming her sophomore year. Their parents forced Cotton and his date to drive Standish and Elyse, who were both too young to have their licenses and drive on their own. For whatever reason they came inside with Standish when it was time to pick up Elyse. She had descended the stairs and paused, seeing them both stare back at her, both

looking dapper and handsome in their hastily assembled dress clothes.

Back then Standish's eyes had been laser beams of love while Cotton oozed resentment. That morning at the airport two months ago had been a mixed up sort of repeat, with Cotton oozing adoration and Standish wearing what had become his go-to flat affect, eyes darting cagily away from Elyse and toward the press of strangers around them.

She'd hugged them both, loving them in vastly different ways. Her past and present, but not her future, not with either of them. Standish was incapable, and in any case Elyse's feelings for him had shifted so drastically that they could never go back, even if Cotton wasn't in the picture.

And Cotton wasn't in the picture, not really. He'd made that perfectly clear when he kissed her goodbye and held her close, whispering in her ear, "No regrets, chick."

"None at all," she'd agreed, lying through her teeth. She did regret, though. She regretted not taking a chance, laying it on the line, and telling him how she felt. The insecure part of her, the part that would always believe *the* Cotton Dupree was out of her reach, repeatedly told her that her job was a handy excuse for him. He might have been attracted to her in the short term, but he didn't want her on any permanent basis.

She was zoned out, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise when the lights and sirens whooped behind her, but it did. Had she been speeding? Not likely in the stop and go DC traffic. Whatever it was about, she didn't have time or energy for it tonight. But neither did she have time or energy to try and worm her way out of it. Maybe it was a warning. Maybe her taillight was out.

She spent so long pondering the possibilities that she failed to roll down her window until the officer knocked. Then she did so and literally jumped off her seat as Cotton Dupree stared back at her.

“What?” It was all she could manage.

Cotton stood upright again and waved to the guy in the car, an actual officer who beeped his horn and took off.

“What?” Elyse repeated.

“Buddy of mine I met at a conference once, did me a solid.”

“What?” she repeated, louder and more emphatically this time.

He grinned. “You really like that word, chick.”

“Cotton,” she exclaimed.

He affected a pout. “You didn’t Dupree me. You mad?”

“Am I mad? I don’t know, am I even lucid? What are you doing here, four blocks from my home? In my city? Away from Maine? In Washington DC?”

“I’m aware.” His eyes flicked to the heavy traffic around them. “Can I get in the car? I feel like road kill out here.” Not waiting for an answer, he rounded the car, slipped inside, and buckled his belt.

Elyse stared at him, speechless and numb.

Cotton touched his fingers to her leg. “You should pull in the lot of that restaurant so we’re off the road.”

She did so, if only to have something to do. Once she was re-parked, she turned off the car and faced him. “Talk. Explain.”

“I’ll get to it. First how are you? You feel good? You look good. Like, really good.” He tipped forward and would have kissed her, but Elyse reeled back.

“Cotton,” she exclaimed.

“Uh-oh, that one means business. Okay, where to begin, where to begin.”

“Um, the beginning?”

He did the quirked eyebrow thing. “To when we were kids? I believe I already did that.”

“Cotton,” she said, changing her tone again to convey more annoyance and a warning. She was rapidly losing patience with whatever this was.

He took a fortifying breath and, for the first time, she realized that possibly he wasn’t torturing her; possibly he was afraid. She reached out and touched her fingers to his hand. He glommed on, and it seemed to settle him a bit.

“Okay. The thing is that it took the first half of my life to realize you were the best thing that ever happened to Standish, and it took the second half to realize you were the best thing that ever happened to me. But me, slow learner I am, assumed we couldn’t be together because you live here and I live there and you have this job and I have that job, plus Standish, and... The thing is, Elyse, I never asked, a very real fact our mutual friend, Georgette, pointed out to me oh-so-eloquently. I assumed you would choose this job over me because it was your dream. But I never asked. So I came here to ask.”

He squeezed her hand and faced her full on, an earnest expression on his face. “Elyse, I wasn’t lying when I told you I love you, I do. Maybe I always have or maybe it was something that grew. The thing is I do. So much, you have no

idea. I want to be together, to build a life together, but we both know for me that has to be in Maine. Family trumps job. I can't leave, can't commute. I know it's a big ask..."

Now she squeezed his hand. "Cotton, *ask*."

"Elyse, will you come home? Come back and save me, and let me save you, too. Be mine and come home to me?"

Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked them away. Cotton steeled himself, certain she was gearing up for a rejection. "This job was my dream. It was everything I thought I wanted, everything I've worked for the last decade. But it turns out, in the end, that even the best job is no good if the people beside you aren't. I miss my people." She pressed her palm to his chest. "Turns out you're my people. I miss home, and I'm finding out that it's possible to have more than one dream in a lifetime, and I found a new one; I found you."

He tipped his head, a curious puppy. "Is that...are you saying yes?"

"So much yes," she agreed, nodding.

He gathered her close and pressed his face to her hair, murmuring against her ear. "I didn't get to use any of my follow up material."

Elyse smiled. Would she ever get over the shock of Cotton Dupree? "Out of curiosity, what was it?"

"I was going to wing it by selling you on Maine's stats, with lots of stuff about the ocean and blueberries and lower violent crime."

"Stop it. You know talking about blueberries and violent crime turns me on," she admonished and he chuckled, at once deliriously happy and feeling no small amount of his own

shock. Who would ever have guessed that his entire world would begin and end with Elyse Walker?

He pulled back and rested his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t get me wrong, this is my idea, and I’m happy. But what are you going to do about your job? How can you stand to leave it?”

“Well, actually, my former boss has all but begged me to come on staff and join his startup private security firm. I’ve wanted to ever since he left. The freelance work I’ve done for him has been the most fun I’ve had in months, present company excluded. But I couldn’t afford it.” She motioned outside the car. “Living here, the housing is so expensive. In Maine, though...” She wagged her brows.

“Elyse, please tell me it was not the lower cost of living that won you over to my side,” he said.

“Don’t forget the blueberries and violent crime rate,” she said.

“You’re right, that is sexy talk. Let’s save it until we’re not in public.” This time when he tipped forward, he did kiss her, and she kissed him back.

“I love you,” he said, his lips moving against hers.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I love you, too, Cotton Dupree.”

“We’re going to have to work on your moves. Not suave at all, Miss Walker.”

“Yeah,” she said, scraping her fingers along his scalp as she eased her arms around him and pressed herself close.

“Well,” his voice actually cracked. “Some of your moves are all right, I guess. This one can stay.”

“What about the one where I love you forever and make you deliriously happy?” she suggested.

He pretended to think it over. “Throw in a pint of blueberries, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

In answer, she bit him, and then they sat in the car talking and laughing, long after the sun set. Two months later, Elyse moved back to Maine, back to everything she’d tried so hard to leave behind, back to Standish and Cotton and Dante and Georgette and Brody, back to early sunrises and sunsets, the briny smell of sea spray and lobster shells. Elyse moved back home.

*T*hank you for reading *Hacked and Jaded*, the second book in the Private Spies series. For more books, please check my website at www.vanessagraysbartal.com.