

ARIANA JONES BOOK 5

LIE
WIN
WAIT



STACY CLAFLIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lie in Wait

Ariana Jones

Book 5

Stacy Claflin



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Chapter One

Isabella Fuentes pulled the dark, heavy curtain aside and peeked down into the driveway. The large pickup truck pulling up to the house had seen better days, with its forest green paint chipping in the front and several dents on either side.

She tried swallowing, but her throat was too dry. Her shaking hands made the curtain brush against her hair. To get a better view of the driver, she pressed her forehead against the cold glass.

Tonight everything would change. And the man who just arrived would decide how.

The truck pulled to a stop next to her father's car.

Squeal!

Bella grimaced at the piercing noise. If it was that loud inside the house, it had to be even worse outside.

The headlights cut, and the man fiddled with things in the cab. In Washington, dusk fell early in mid-October, cloaking his movements in shadow. If only he would turn on the dome light, or better yet step outside. Then she could see him. The man who—

“Isabella!” Her mother's sharp tone grated even more trust than the truck's brakes.

Bella turned around, her heart pounding. “What?”

“Excuse me?” she snapped.

“I mean, yes ma’am?”

“Better.” Her expression remained pinched. “Get downstairs. You can’t leave him waiting when he gets inside.” She turned around and grabbed the doorknob. “And fix your hair first. Now!”

Slam!

Bella jumped before turning to the cracked mirror in her vanity. The curtain had barely messed up her hair. One quick swipe of her fingers through the curls fixed it.

“Hurry!” Her mother pounded on the bedroom door.

Normally Bella would be annoyed, but her nerves were off the charts tonight. She couldn’t get her hands to stop shaking.

She’d give anything to go back in time to when she was a little girl and hardly had a care in the world. Anything to avoid meeting the man in the truck. She hurried back over to the window to see if she could get a quick peek. Prepare herself before meeting him.

The door flung open, hitting the wall behind it.

“What are you waiting for?” Her mother tapped her foot rapidly.

“Nothing.” Bella’s shoulders slumped as she followed her mother down the staircase.

No voices below. That meant he wasn’t inside yet.

She hadn’t kept him waiting.

“Faster!” Mother nudged her hard.

Bella stumbled and grabbed onto the railing. She couldn’t wait for the evening to be over.

Unless the man wasn’t as bad as she feared. But given what her sister Margarita had been through, Bella had every reason to dread meeting the driver of the pickup.

He would change her life forever, for better or worse.

When she reached the bottom step, her dad glared at her and waved her over to where he stood next to the door. “You

very nearly left him waiting, Isabella.”

Ding-dong!

Knock, knock!

“But I didn’t,” Bella said. “I’m right on time.”

“No backtalk.” His eyebrows drew together. “You need to be on your best behavior tonight.”

“I know. We’ve gone over this.”

For hours, every day of the last week.

Ding-dong!

Bella bit back a comment about how her dad was the one making the mystery man wait.

He shot her a glare before opening the door. “Neil, we’re so glad you could make it.”

Bella tried to look around her father, but he blocked her view of the man.

Neil.

Hopefully he was better looking than his name implied. It made him sound like someone her parents’ age, not hers.

She tried even harder to get a good view of him.

Mother pinched her arm just below the armpit.

Bella started to cry out in pain but stopped herself. She knew better.

Not that it kept her mother from glowering at her.

She was getting a lot of that tonight, though the dirty looks were the least of her worries.

Dad finally stepped aside and allowed Neil in.

Bella’s stomach sank.

The man standing in front of her *was* almost as old as her parents. He was nowhere near her age, not even close. Neil’s hair was a mass of frizzy waves, his brows too bushy, and he had deep lines around his eyes and on his forehead.

He was the person her parents had chosen for her to marry — before the end of the year. She wouldn't be able to finish college unless Neil gave her permission. There was no way he would approve of her studying pre-law, a plan she'd hidden from even her parents. They thought she was on the path to become an elementary teacher.

Neil's gaze roved over her body before he finally made eye contact. Something dark in his expression sent an icy chill down her spine.

Her stomach lurched. She resisted the urge to hide behind her parents like she'd done as a little girl. They wouldn't protect her.

They were going to push her toward the wolf.

Mother pinched her again.

Bella swallowed and stepped forward. "Hello, sir. I'm Bella—"

Another pinch, this one harder than the other two.

"I'm Isabella," she corrected herself.

A fourth pinch.

She turned and glowered at her mother.

Her mother gave her a threatening stare.

Bella turned back to Neil, her mouth dry. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

His only response was to look her over again, now taking more time to rake his gaze over every inch of her. Finally he nodded in approval. "You'll do."

Her skin crawled.

Neil turned toward the kitchen. "What did you make to eat, Camila? It smells acceptable."

Bella's mother scurried toward the dining room with an eager-to-please smile. "I heard you love pot roast, so that's what I made. The meat is fresh — Diego got it on a hunt this morning."

He gave a barely visible nod before taking a seat at the head of the table. "Bring it out, woman."

When her mother reached for Bella, she moved out of the way to avoid another painful pinch.

"It's time to serve. Now." Mother's eyes narrowed as she gestured toward the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am." Bella followed her in then carried dishes out to the dining room table.

Her father and the guest discussed the merits of certain guns over others.

While she didn't look directly at Neil, she could feel him leering at her, mentally undressing her. If her parents wouldn't punish her, she'd put on her winter coat to keep him from staring.

Imagining his thoughts and desires made her stomach churn acid. With any luck, he'd leave right after the meal. Now that he'd seen Bella and had deemed her an acceptable future wife, hopefully he would be eager to go back to wherever he came from.

And maybe change his mind about her.

But that was wishful thinking. Her future was nothing more than a business transaction for her parents. They didn't care if she'd be happy or not. According to them, suffering built character, which was far more important than frivolous trivialities like being fulfilled or feeling safe.

She rushed back into the kitchen, unable to leave Neil's lascivious attentions fast enough. All too soon, she and her mom returned with everything needed for the meal.

Her father said a quick prayer before they dug in. Bella could hardly take a bite.

"Aren't you hungry, Isabella?" Neil asked, staring at her chest. He didn't even try to hide it with her parents right there.

Not that they showed any inclination to defend her.

She slunk down in her chair. “I’m just... I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“Sit up straight!” her mom barked.

Bella obeyed.

Neil smiled slowly and kept his gaze below her neck. “You’re too skinny. You need to eat more so you can fill out. That would be more to my liking.”

Her face flamed.

Father glared at her. “You heard the man. Eat!”

She stuffed a forkful of food into her mouth. Her stomach lurched even worse than before. How she would get the food down was a mystery.

Thankfully her father and future husband returned to their conversation about guns. Neil’s watchful eyes pulled to his plate, away from her chest that apparently needed ‘filling out.’

Bella managed to swallow the food in her mouth, but no more. Luckily nobody noticed. Her parents were too busy sucking up to Neil, who hadn’t stopped talking about how great he was. She covered her full plate with a napkin and gathered other empty dishes to take into the kitchen.

When she returned, Neil held out his empty plate for her. After she took it, he cupped her butt.

She gasped, and almost dropped the plate.

“What’s wrong?” her father asked.

Neil leaned forward. “Your daughter is jumpy. Fix that before I marry her.”

“Of course.”

Bella raced into the kitchen before she said something that would surely earn her a harsh punishment. Her patience was wearing thin, but she couldn’t afford to give into her humiliation and anger. She just needed to get through a few more minutes of torture, then she’d be fine.

Until the wedding.

Her marriage to that creep out there.

She shoved the thought from her mind and filled the sink with soapy water. They didn't have a dishwasher, as her father believed it would make the women in the house lazy — while they were serving him. The double standards never ended with him.

Neil didn't appear to be any different.

After a few minutes, footsteps sounded behind her.

Bella braced herself for a lecture from her mother.

Instead, hands rested on her waist, then fingers gripped her tightly. Soon, Neil pulled her backward until she firmly pressed against him. He brushed his rough beard against her cheek. "I love seeing you hard at work. Remember what I said about eating more, because I wasn't kidding. You need to be hardy so you can handle your chores when I bring you home. Wait until you see how much there is to do. I'm so relieved to see you already have a good work ethic."

She swallowed, couldn't find her voice, so she nodded.

"I'm glad we understand each other." He breathed in deeply then moaned before walking away.

With her heart in her throat, she spun around, trying to blink her tears away.

Her father leaned against the doorway, a smug look on his face. He'd seen the whole thing and didn't care.

She needed to find a way out of the engagement.

Where could she turn? No matter where she went, Father would find her. He had cameras all over the property, so sneaking away would be impossible.

If there was a solution, she would find it.

Her life depended on it.

Chapter Two

Ariana rewound the video again. It was the third time in ten minutes.

“Focus.”

She stared at the screen, trying her best to listen to everything the teacher said. It was a good thing these classes were recorded and not live, and also that she didn't have a deadline. If it took her two years to get through the material, it didn't matter. At this rate, it would likely take that long.

Knock, knock!

She paused the video. “Come in!”

Damon entered with a tray of snacks. He set it next to her.

Ari leaped from her chair and threw her arms around him. “How did I manage to get the world's best husband?”

He chuckled. “It's just cheese and crackers.”

“But you knew I'd need them.” She squeezed him. “You're the best!”

“If I'd known you'd react this way, I'd have brought better food for you.” He gave her a kiss that made her weak in the knees. “Can I do anything else for you?”

“Anything.”

He lifted a brow. “Are you okay?”

She sighed. “I can't focus on my class.”

“Looks like you’ve taken a lot of notes.” He nodded toward her spiral notebook filled with things she’d written down.

“Those are ideas for the Halloween party. That’s all I can think about. At least until you came into the room.” She pressed her lips on his, pushing aside thoughts of both her class and the upcoming party.

He pulled back. “As much as I’d love to continue with this, I promised Charles I’d be over” — he checked the wall clock — “in three minutes to help him pack.”

Ariana’s heart sank. It was just as well that he was busy. She needed to get back to her private investigator class. If there was an award for taking the longest to get through it, she would get the gold medal.

He gave her a quick kiss. “We can pick this up when I get back.”

“I’d like that. Is Lia back in town with him?”

“No, she’s still in LA at their new house. Apparently the previous owners last updated the house in the eighties, so she’s tearing up carpet and picking out hardwoods. Things like that.”

“Right. I remember her telling me about taking down curtains and installing blinds. Will she be back before they move everything out? I’d love to throw them a going away party. After everything they did for us earlier this year, it’s the least I could do.”

Damon squeezed her hand. “I’ll mention it to Charles. I’m not sure what their plans are, but you could send her a text.”

“Good idea. *Then* I’ll get back to my class.”

He handed her the notes for the Halloween bash. “Or you could gather your friends and work on this instead. Obviously that’s what’s on your mind.”

She could hardly deny that.

“Rita’s car is in her driveway. I bet she’d love to get in on the action.”

That went without saying. Their friend loved planning events. Between her and Ariana, they could probably put together the biggest Halloween party Rosy Hills had ever seen. After everything their gated community had been through this year, the whole neighborhood would appreciate the lighthearted fun. That was one thing Ari had always loved about the holiday — it was a night of unlimited imagination and creativity. A time to temporarily pretend to be someone else.

Of course there was also a darker side to the night. When she was a kid, she'd been abducted that time of year. It took a lot of work, but she'd mostly moved on from the horrific experience, other than the occasional flashback or nightmare. She was beginning to accept she'd never fully put it behind her. Some things were too traumatic for complete healing, and this was one of them.

At least it hadn't squashed the love of her favorite holiday. As soon as summer ended, she began counting down the days in the same way some people counted down to Christmas.

"Babe?" Damon's voice brought her back to her home office.

"Sorry. My mind keeps wandering."

"All the more reason to head across the street." He kissed her cheek. "If you need me, I'll be helping Charles."

"Sounds good. Thanks for the cheese and crackers." She popped some into her mouth, realizing just how hungry she was. Had she even taken a lunch break?

"My pleasure." He gave her a lingering gaze before heading out of the room.

Ariana ate half of her snack before sending a text. Rita was at the end of her second trimester and could be resting, so she didn't want to go over unannounced.

Her friend responded right away, inviting her over.

Smiling, Ariana closed her laptop. It would be much more fun to plan the neighborhood party with Rita. Maybe after a good brainstorming session, Ari would get everything out of

her mind and onto paper. Then she could finally focus on her class, which was only supposed to take a few months. But given everything that had happened since she enrolled, nobody could blame her for taking such a long time to get through the material.

It also wasn't like she and Damon were hurting for money. Between the money his father had left him and what they made with their books, speaking engagements, and revenue from their joint podcast, becoming a private investigator was more of an ambition than a need.

Thankfully their bills didn't depend on her ability to concentrate.

She scarfed down the rest of the cheese and crackers, grabbed her notes, then made her way downstairs. With Rita's expertise in event planning, this party was sure to be the event of the year.

Chapter Three

Bella glanced behind her as the bus's brakes squealed to a stop. This was it. She'd made it this far. It didn't seem like anyone was following her, but how would she know? She'd never done anything like this before.

She'd never done anything dangerous, period.

If her dad or Neil caught her running away, the consequences would be dire. Once her father had locked her in the family shed for an entire week for an offense far less than this.

Clutching her backpack, she leaped to her feet, hurried to the nearest doors, then glanced behind her again. Nobody in the city bus was familiar, but that wasn't to say a car hadn't followed. Though with as many transfers as she'd had to make to get to Rosy Hills, it wouldn't have been easy for someone to keep up.

Both Father and Neil would have the patience to track her.

They thought they owned her. The impending wedding wasn't a romantic event to them. No, it signified a transfer of property.

Bella shuddered at the thought. If she had anything to say about it, the wedding would never happen. She would start a new life with just the items in her backpack. It wasn't much, but hopefully her sister could take her in.

Otherwise, she'd find another way to keep her freedom. It didn't matter what she had to do, she would never show up at that wedding. If or when she got married, it would be for love.

She darted behind a tree, waited for the bus to leave, then scrutinized every other vehicle on the street. They all continued on their way, none slowing or acting strange.

That didn't mean she was safe. She wouldn't let her guard down until she was inside Rita's house. Even then, she wouldn't be able to relax. Not until the date of the wedding passed. Or maybe not even then. It wasn't like her father or Neil would ever stop trying to recover what they thought they owned.

A lump formed in her throat at the thought of them never giving up. Maybe Neil would. He could easily find another bride from the church, someone who wouldn't be so much trouble. But how long would that take?

He might find Bella before reaching that point. Then what?

She'd have to deal with that later. For now, she needed to get to her sister's house.

Holding her breath, she glanced at the traffic again. Vehicles zipped by as expected. It was hard to believe she'd actually made it this far unnoticed. With any luck, her mom would think she went to the library to study after her classes.

That would buy Bella time before Mother called Father to let him know she was missing. They would eventually learn she left her phone at school, but hopefully they ping her location first and think she'd stayed on campus. It would take them a while to figure out what really happened.

By then, she'd have a plan in place. Rita and her new husband would know what to do. Grayson was an investigative reporter with his own show, and he was always trying to help people. He would know what to do.

But first to get there, a task more difficult than it would seem. They lived in a gated community, and Bella's name might not be on the approved guest list. Her parents' names weren't even on it.

She would find a way in, one way or another.

Rita had to help her. She knew exactly what Bella was going through. Her parents had made her marry Boone. He'd

paid them even more money than Neil offered for Bella. Rita's ex-husband was now in prison for murder, but even so, their parents still saw Boone as Rita's legitimate husband. They were that heartless.

The only reason they'd even gone to Rita and Grayson's wedding had been to convince her to change her mind before the vows. Even though the ceremony had gone on, and Rita finally found her happiness, her parents refused to accept it. In their church, unmarried daughters were property of the parents and had to obey their wishes no matter how old they were.

That was why they expected Bella to marry Neil.

She would never let that happen. It had been convenient to stay with her parents while going to college because they paid for everything, but the price was too high. Neil only wanted a servant, and he would never let her finish her education let alone leave the house to work. He might even be a murderer too.

For all Bella knew, everyone in the church was one. All of the men were for sure scary enough to be.

She shoved her thoughts from her mind and marched the three blocks to Rita's neighborhood with her head held high. This was the beginning of her new life. A life where *she* called the shots. From this day forward, she made her own decisions.

Bella adjusted her hood over her head. She wasn't stupid. If she didn't try to disguise herself, she ran the risk of someone recognizing her. It was bad enough she carried her normal, recognizable backpack, but that couldn't be helped. Her timetable had been elevated by her mother's proclamation as she headed out the door — Neil was coming for dinner again, this time to officially propose. That would be the moment everyone in church saw them as pledged together. In their eyes, that was as binding as the marriage itself.

She wouldn't be able to get away at that point. Neil could decide to take her home with him to spend their engagement together.

No way would that happen.

When she reached the gate, Bella's heart leaped into her throat and threatened to choke her.

The moment of truth had arrived.

Hardly able to breathe, she stumbled toward the entrance meant for cars. She tapped on the window to get the attendant's attention.

He turned to her and gave her a funny look. "Can I help you?"

Chapter Four

Ariana stared at the notes for the party spread across Rita's table. It looked more like a detective's bulletin board trying to piece together a complicated murder mystery than the plans for a Halloween bash.

Between the two of them, they had more ideas than they could use for three parties. It was a good problem to have, but narrowing down what to do was a monumental task. It was no wonder she could hardly focus on her class. Her mind was too busy trying to piece this mess together.

Knock, knock! Ding-dong! Knock, knock!

Ari glanced at Rita. "Are you expecting someone?"

"No."

The frantic knocks continued.

Rita rose, pushing out her chair. "It sounds like an emergency. I better see what's going on."

Ariana flashed back to the night her house burned down. It hadn't been that long ago. In fact, she and Damon were still getting used to their newly built home. The Halloween party was going to double as their housewarming party, as they still hadn't had one of those.

She shoved aside the images of the house fire and hurried to join her friend. Maybe something had gone wrong at Charles's house. But why wouldn't Damon call?

Ari caught up with her friend just as she flung open the door.

Rita's sister stood at the door, her face pale and her knees knocking together.

"What's wrong?" Rita pulled Bella inside then slammed the door shut.

"You have to let me stay here!"

"Whatever you need. Is someone after you?"

Ariana glanced back and forth between them, trying to understand what was going on for Rita to jump to such a conclusion.

Bella clung to her sister. "I'm supposed to get engaged tonight."

Rita's face lost as much color as her sister's.

Ari was definitely missing something. "Isn't an engagement a good thing?"

"Not in our family." Rita guided Bella to the living room. After settling her on the couch, she covered her with a blanket.

"I don't follow." Ariana took a seat across from them on a recliner.

Rita glanced at her. "They're trying to set her up with someone similar to Boone."

Ariana's stomach dropped at the mention of her friend's murderous ex. She turned to Bella. "Can't you just tell them no?"

"No!" Bella and Rita said in unison.

"Why do they think they have a say in who you marry?"

"Because they *do*." Bella shuddered.

Ariana threw a questioning glance to her friend.

Rita's shoulders slumped. "I wasn't a hundred percent honest when I told you about the reason I married Boone. It wasn't a business deal to save my family's finances. He *did* pay my parents a huge sum of money when we got engaged, but it was because of the church we belonged to. Calling it a

business deal was the only thing that didn't make it seem crazy. Most people buy the story."

It took Ariana a moment to take it all in. "It was all because of religious extremism?"

Rita nodded. "My parents still see Boone as my husband."

"But they were at your wedding to Grayson."

"They don't see it as legitimate. They believe I should've stayed faithful to Boone and waited for him to be released from prison."

"He's never getting out."

"I'm supposed to hope and pray. Never give up, never stop fighting for him."

"That's sick." Ariana's stomach churned acid.

Bella's eyes filled with tears. "They're trying to put me in the same position."

"Why would they do that?"

"They think they're following the path to enlightenment," Rita said.

Ari rubbed her temples. "Don't they care about your wellbeing?"

"They believe suffering produces righteousness, which is more important than happiness or safety."

"I don't know what to say." Ariana tried to make sense of it. "I'm sorry you've both had to endure that. What can I do?"

Bella sniffled. "Don't tell anyone where I'm staying."

"Never. In fact, you can come to my house anytime. Damon and I have plenty of room, and your parents would never know to look there."

"Really?"

"Yes. We're just across the street. You're welcome at any hour. If you hear they're coming to find you at two in the morning, come to our house."

Bella leaped up and threw her arms around Ariana. “I can’t thank you enough!”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about marrying someone you don’t want to — especially if he’s anything like Boone. That guy is a monster.”

“So is Neil.” Bella flopped back on the couch. “He’s just horrible. When he came over so we could meet, he kept staring at me like he was already ravaging me in his mind. He grabbed my butt and told me he couldn’t wait to get me home so I could wait on him.”

Ariana’s stomach lurched. “With your parents there?”

Bella nodded and looked down at her lap.

“I can’t believe they didn’t say anything!”

“They were just glad I met his approval.” Bella wiped her eyes. “Well, mostly. He said I needed to put on some weight because my chest was lacking.”

Ari’s mouth fell open. No words would come.

Rita rubbed her sister’s back. “Sounds like when I met Boone. Remember him telling me to lose weight before the wedding? He demanded it.”

Ariana could hardly believe her ears. It was like she’d stepped back in time at least a hundred years. How could this type of thing still be going on in this day and age?

Someone’s phone rang.

They all exchanged wide-eyed glances.

Rita grabbed her phone and looked at the screen. Her face paled even more than it already was. “It’s Dad.”

Chapter Five

Ariana pulled Bella across the street and through her front yard, where she quickly unlatched the side gate then rushed to the side entrance. She fumbled with her keys for a moment before unlocking the door. Slamming it shut behind them didn't feel emphatic enough.

Didn't feel safe enough.

Ari twisted the deadbolt. They both gasped for air as she led Bella up to the main level where she and Damon kept their keys. She quickly found the spare house key and shoved it into Bella's palm. "Keep this. Whether you stay us or with Rita, you can get in here whenever you need to. Your parents are more likely to look for you there. They'd have no reason to think you'd be at our house. They don't even know us."

"They met you at the wedding."

"We were one couple of many, and they don't know where we live. They have no reason to look for you here."

"Are you sure Damon won't mind?" Bella trembled, nearly dropping the key.

"He'll be happy to help. Trust me."

Bella nodded. "What now?"

Ari checked her phone. "We'll wait for Rita to call one of us."

"I don't have mine. I worried my parents would find a way to track me if I kept it, so I tried to use it as a diversion and left it at school. I guess they caught on pretty fast."

“Not fast enough. You got here. That was good thinking on your part.” Ariana led her upstairs and showed her to a spare bedroom, the one farthest toward the rear of the house. Its location was extra security in name only — if Bella’s father or the man he sold her to made it inside, the back bedroom offered little more protection than any in the front. “This will be your room if you need it. If Damon and I aren’t here, let yourself in and make yourself at home.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. You don’t need to keep asking. We’re more than happy to help. I hate what Rita went through with Boone, and I’ll do whatever I can to make sure you don’t have to deal with the same thing.”

“I appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem.” Ariana pulled out her phone and called Rita. She put it on speakerphone.

Her friend answered right away, sounding out of breath. “I was just about to call you.”

“What’s going on?”

“My parents are already looking for my sister. Mom’s freaking out because she isn’t answering her phone.”

“Should I stay here?” Bella asked. “With Ariana?”

“No,” Rita said. “I told her I hadn’t seen you. I’m sure they don’t think you’d come here on your own. It’s too far to come without a car.”

“Aren’t you worried I’m going to put your stepkids in danger? And what about you? You’re pregnant.”

“It won’t be a problem. Our parents are already on the list of people not allowed inside the gate. The security guard would call the police if they tried to get in.”

Bella didn’t look convinced.

“We’ll come back over,” Ariana said. “I gave Bella a key to my place in case she needs it.”

“Thank you.” Rita sounded near tears.

“What are we going to do?” Bella asked.

Ari gave her a reassuring smile. “You’re going to help your sister and me plan our Halloween party while we gorge on candy and hot apple cider.”

“A Halloween party?” Bella’s eyes grew as wide as saucers.

“Yes,” Rita said over the speaker. “Regardless of what our parents taught us, it isn’t evil. These parties are actually a lot of fun — Ariana always makes sure of that.”

Ari couldn’t help smiling despite all the stress. “To be fair, I’ve been putting on Halloween parties since I could talk. My parents joke that ‘Halloween’ was one of my first words.”

Bella’s mouth curved up slightly.

“Come back over,” Rita said. “I’ll get the apple cider started.”

“Y-you’re sure Father isn’t headed here?” Bella asked.

“Like I said, there’s no way he’s getting in. That’s the whole point of a gated community — keeping out the trash.”

“We’ll be right there.” Ariana ended the call. “You ready?”

Bella licked her lips and her gaze darted around the room. “I think so.”

“You can trust the security guards. They keep a tight ship and have a direct line to the police, and the station isn’t far from here.”

“Hopefully you’re right.”

“I am. Keep that key somewhere safe.”

Bella nodded and stuffed it into a pocket.

They made their way in silence. Ariana tried to process all the new information. Rita’s story about marrying Boone as a business transaction had always seemed odd, but she’d never guessed it was anything as nefarious as her friend growing up in what sounded like a cult and being forced into a marriage she didn’t want. It never failed to surprise her how poorly

some religious groups treated their own people, but given the fear in both Rita's and Bella's eyes, she had no doubt that was the truth.

That was far more frightening than any of the scares the upcoming Halloween promised to bring. But Ariana, more than anyone, knew Halloween wasn't always good fun.

Despite everything that had happened to her and still suffering recurring flashbacks from her abduction, she somehow had managed to keep her love for the holiday. Surviving had made her the person she was today, and if she hadn't gone through that she might not have connected with Damon and eventually married him.

Everything had worked out somehow, and she needed to hold out the same belief for her friend's young sister.

Chapter Six

Bella rolled over, pulling the covers over her ears and squeezing her eyes shut. But it was useless. No matter what she tried, she couldn't sleep. Every time a car drove by, she bolted upright, sure it was either her father or Neil coming to get her. If anyone could worm their way inside the gated community, it would be them.

Nobody ever got between her father and his plans. He was a force of nature, and people always regretted crossing paths with him. But other people were lucky because they could put their negative experiences behind them and never have to think about him again.

For every night of Bella's life, she'd had to go home to him and face his wrath. Not that he rampaged every night, but there was always the chance. And it set her nerves on fire. She'd spent her entire life never knowing when the next blow up might be. Would it be that night? Or would he be in a good mood? A toss of a dice was more predictable than her father's moods.

But she was out of the house now. She didn't have to worry about him punishing her tonight. Hopefully, she wouldn't ever have to live through that again. Rita had managed to get away and now had a good life. Grayson was kind and funny, and his kids were a ton of fun.

If only Bella had grown up in a house like this with a dad like him, then her life would've been so different. She wouldn't be lying in bed, tossing and turning, her stomach a wreck. Her body was like ice, and she was nauseated. It was

like any other night at home, knowing Father's anger would turn on her at some point.

She'd always imagined getting away and finally experiencing relief, a rush of safety, freedom. It was like her body wouldn't let her forget. Probably because she wasn't safe yet.

Not really.

Back at home, Father was sure to be furious. She could imagine him pacing and screaming. Or he could be keeping control of his temper and speaking in slow, calculated tones. That was almost always worse, because then Bella knew one of his cruelest rages brewed.

Tears slid down her face. What was wrong with her? Now that she was away from him, from his terror, she couldn't stop thinking about him. That was what had happened earlier in the evening. Even though her sister's family was having a great time and everyone was being so nice, she couldn't relax. It had been impossible to enjoy the time.

Just like now. She *should* be able to have the best night's sleep of her life, but she hadn't gotten a wink. Couldn't relax at all.

She'd have to ask Rita what it had been like for her when she was finally free of the sadistic men who loved making their wives and children fear them. Maybe Rita had felt the same way.

It was probably expecting too much of herself to think she could flee home and just forget everything because she was out from under his roof, his control. She'd lived in a constant state of stress for as long as she could remember. Even as a child, she never knew when the next punishment would come. It all seemed so random.

Probably because it was.

People in the books she read didn't have to deal with any of that. Maybe fiction reflected fact more than she'd thought. Maybe the way she'd grown up wasn't normal. If that were the

case, then she really did have hope of finding a happiness like the characters in the novels. Like her sister.

Bella squeezed her eyes shut. “This is my new normal. This is my new normal.” She repeated the words over and over. If she could get herself to believe it, then maybe she could get some sleep and move on with her life.

Her muscles started to relax a little more with each repetition of her mantra. The next thing she knew, sun shone through blinds and brightened the room. She’d actually fallen asleep! It had likely only been for a few hours, but even that paltry amount felt significant.

She had pushed her father from her mind enough that her body had granted her sleep.

The familiar smells of bacon and coffee wafted up the stairs. Her stomach rumbled, and she sat up, yawning. Maybe her new nephews and niece would be downstairs laughing and enjoying the meal.

Bella rose and donned a fuzzy pink bathrobe lying on the chair next to the bed. It was luxurious, like the one she’d worn at the hotel for Rita’s wedding. Her clothes at home were always thin and flimsy. Father often spoke about the value of saving money, which nearly always resulted in threadbare dresses and drafty rooms.

Nothing like this house.

How long would Rita and Grayson let her stay here? Obviously at some point, she’d have to go out on her own, but if they let her live with them until she could get on her feet, it would be like a dream.

Downstairs, Rita sat at the kitchen table behind a laptop. She gave Bella an easy smile. “Good morning. How’d you sleep?”

“It was hard to relax.”

“I remember those days. Don’t be hard on yourself. You’re basically escaping a war zone, and it’s going to take time to recover.”

Bella sat across from her. “What was it like for you?”

“Let’s talk over food. Do you want bacon and eggs with coffee?”

Her stomach rumbled loudly, answering the question for her.

Rita laughed and got up. “I’ll take that as a yes. Grayson made extra of everything this morning, so there’s plenty. Probably more than you can eat, so don’t be shy.”

“Grayson cooked?” Bella could hardly imagine a man doing such menial work.

“He loves it. I practically have to fight him if I want to make anything for breakfast.” She grabbed a plate and loaded food onto it.

“It doesn’t make him question his manhood?”

“He’s confident in who he is and doesn’t feel the need to prove himself to anyone. Making breakfast helps him get into the right mindset for the day.” Rita put the full plate in front of Bella, grabbed a mug, then went to the coffee machine.

“It must be nice to live with a man who’s so happy and generous.” Bella ate some of the scrambled eggs. They melted in her mouth.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’m glad you got out of the cult, so you can look forward to the same one day.”

Bella jolted. If she’d had food in her mouth, she’d have choked. “Cult?”

Rita didn’t even hesitate. “That’s what it is.”

“You really think the church is a cult?”

“I know it is.” Rita set the mug of frothy coffee in front of Bella.

“A *cult*?” Bella could hardly wrap her mind around it.

Rita nodded and sipped from her own mug.

“Don’t you think that’s a little harsh?”

“They’re harsh. A real church wouldn’t be cruel and sadistic.”

“But... but what about all the good they do? Some missionaries just returned from building an orphanage in South America. And Mother serves at the food bank every month.”

“You can dress up a pile of steaming garbage, but it’s still a pile of steaming garbage.”

Bella opened her mouth to say something, but no words came. Mostly because her sister was right.

The fact that Bella was as terrified of her father and Neil proved as much. Dealing with a cult made her situation more dire. She wasn’t fighting her family and so-called fiancé. She was fighting a whole organization with warped values and no compunction for breaking laws to get their way.

Breaking free of a strict family was nothing compared to escaping a cult.

Chapter Seven

Damon checked the toiletries and gift basket in the back guest room. He was still trying to wrap his mind around everything Ariana had told him about Bella's situation. When he'd met her at Rita and Grayson's wedding, he'd have never guessed everything she was going through at home. But then again, he'd also had no clue about Rita's upbringing. Every time her ex came up in conversation, her story was always that their marriage had been a business deal.

Thinking about it now, her growing up in a cult made sense, but it was still a lot to take in. Rita and Bella's upbringing was hard to imagine since Damon hadn't been exposed to any religion as he grew up — at least none that he remembered. Going to church seemed like something his mom might've done with him, but his dad killed her when Damon was a young boy. All he had to go on were his memories and the lies his dad had spewed when he was alive.

Although Damon couldn't relate to having grown up in a cult, he knew all about a deranged and controlling father. His dad's arrest had been the best thing that had happened to him. He no longer had to live in fear in his own house. Home was supposed to be the one place where you could relax and be yourself.

That was impossible with a tyrannical man living there.

Because of everything he'd been through, he was more than happy to help Bella if she needed it. Given her dad was trying to force her into a marriage she didn't want, the chances of the poor girl needing somewhere else to stay were high.

Rita's house would be the first place their dad would look. Getting past the neighborhood's gate would be a challenge, but for someone desperate and at the end of his rope, anything was possible.

Rosy Hills would soon face another deranged lunatic. Damon was up for the task of protecting the innocent. Letting Bella stay in this room was the least he and Ari could do.

"Are we missing anything?"

Damon spun around to find Ariana standing in the doorway. He'd gotten lost in thought, which often happened when his mind wandered back to his parents. "Do you know what she has with her?"

"I'm pretty sure she only has the bag she took to college yesterday morning."

"Wow, okay. In that case, we'll need more. Do you have anything to hang in the closet that might fit her?"

Ari laughed. "I think I can spare a few outfits."

He chuckled despite the lingering thoughts of his mom and dad. His wife's wardrobe took up about three quarters of their walk-in closet. If anyone could spare clothes, it was her.

They discussed what else they could add to help Bella feel at home, and Damon made a few notes for later when he went out.

"What's your plan for the day?" he asked.

"I was going to work on my class, but then I realized that isn't going to happen. In all reality, I won't be able to think about it until after the Halloween party so I'm going to Rita's restaurant in a little while to meet with her and the twins."

"And Bella?"

"I'm sure she'll be there too, unless Rita wants her staying home, out of sight."

"Let me know if I can pick up anything for the party while I'm out later."

She gave him a kiss. "You're the best."

“It’s the least I could do. Her situation sounds so much like mine.”

“Except her dad isn’t a killer.”

“That’s yet to be seen.”

Ari arched a brow.

“Men like that are violent in word and deed. They think they have the power and control over people they see as weak, and now he has not one but two daughters who have defied him. He’s only going to be able to hold himself together for so long before he snaps.”

“He does have two other kids who have stayed in their cult. I’m sure he’ll turn his attention back onto them.”

“And do what? Harm them? Move onto someone else? Somebody should check on his wife and make sure she’s safe.”

“I can ask Rita about that.”

“That’d be good.” He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a lingering kiss.

She headed down the hallway.

His mind wandered back to his father then to Rita and Bella’s dad. A familiar fire flamed in Damon’s chest whenever he thought about men like them. He knew what it was like to be victim to that behavior, and he wanted to protect everyone in that position.

Sometimes he wanted more than that. He wanted to not only stop the men harming others but to give them a taste of their own medicine.

That scared him. These fervent desires and powerful urges weren’t anything new. He was used to fighting them or trying to ignore them. But pushing them down didn’t work the way it once had. They were growing stronger, clawing their way to the surface.

Given his dad had been a notorious serial killer, Damon had to be diligent — vigilant — in not letting those stirrings

rise in him. If anyone stood a chance at giving in to thoughts like those, it was him. The darkness was in his blood. Not only had his father been a monster, but he'd been the one to raise Damon.

Sure, his mom had played a big part in his early childhood, but she was completely absent for most of what he could remember. He'd clung to what he could, poring over her pictures and writing down everything she'd taught him.

Maybe what he needed was to find his old boxes and refresh his good memories. Her legacy was just as important as his dad's. It was what he needed to cling to so he could avoid becoming his father. He'd always promised himself he would fight everything Cal Jones had passed onto him.

Not just for himself, but for Ariana too. Their future. They wanted a family together. More than *wanted* — they were *trying* for a baby. After Rita and Grayson's gender reveal party, they'd decided it was time.

Exciting as the thought of starting a family with her was, nothing scared him more. What if he couldn't fight his genetics? Or worse yet, what if he passed them along to their children? It was almost enough to make him put on the brakes, but he couldn't do that to Ariana. Besides, he'd proven he could live a normal life despite his upbringing and genetics.

Any child they had would have a diluted gene pool, mostly full of good, caring people. Ariana's entire family was full of kindhearted, normal people. People like his mom. Cal Jones was only a small part of that, and he and Ari would raise their kids in a home full of love with no strife. Lots of positive nurture, very little negative nature.

That would make all the difference.

He hoped.

Chapter Eight

Ariana pulled into the parking lot at the bar and grill. The Mexican restaurant was Rita's pride and joy. When her ex-husband Boone was cheating on her and murdering people — not that she knew about the killings until later — her focus was on creating a thriving business. Once he started cheating on her, Boone didn't care what Rita did as long as she stayed out of his hair. It had worked in her favor, as the restaurant was now one of the most popular places to eat in town.

Inside, she found Maya and Olivia in a booth tucked away in the back hidden by numerous potted trees. That was where Rita wanted everyone to meet to work on the party planning. Bella had been itching to get out of the house, but Rita didn't want her out of her sight.

Not with their dad and Neil thinking of her as their property.

It was the perfect way to hide in plain sight. The restaurant was packed, which was typical for a Saturday. Rita didn't usually come in this early on a weekend, but several people were out sick.

That was one thing Ari didn't like about her favorite holiday. It was the time of year people tended to get sick because of stark weather changes. Living near Washington's beautiful western coast meant warm sunny summers quickly turned to chilly rain, bringing in a wave of colds with it. But clearly plenty of people were healthy given how many customers filled the tables and booths.

Ari slid into a seat next to Maya. Her twin Olivia sat on the other side of Bella.

“Where’s Rita?” Ariana grabbed a chip and dipped it in the bowl of salsa in the middle of the table.

“Filling in for a manager.” Bella nudged a pitcher of soda toward her. “She said to start planning without her.”

“How are you holding up?”

Bella rubbed her bloodshot eyes, which had dark circles underneath them. “I’ve been better. It’s hard to relax, you know? I keep expecting my father to jump out and drag me home.”

“You’re safe at Rita’s. Between their security system and Grayson, I don’t think anyone could get to you no matter how hard they tried.”

“I hope you’re right. But I’d rather talk about the party. It sounds like so much fun.”

Olivia’s eyes lit up. “I can’t wait! People are still talking about the one Ari threw last year. The kids I nanny for have told me all about how they turned their garage into a haunted house for kids to go through before getting their candy. They told me kids who live in other neighborhoods try to get in here just for the Jones’s house.”

Maya lifted a brow. “You’re a legend? I didn’t think you two had lived here very long.”

“We’ve had a few Halloweens in Rosy Hills. This will be our first in our newly built house. It was fun to be able to give input on the floor plans. I had this in mind the whole time.”

“I want to hear all about it,” Bella said. “This will be my first Halloween party.”

Ari dropped the chip in her hand. “You’ve never been to one?”

Bella shook her head. “My parents have always said it’s an evil day, but I always thought it just looked like fun. I mean, who wouldn’t want to dress up and get free candy?”

Ariana couldn't wrap her mind around never having celebrated Halloween before. Her yearly parties had always been a big hit with her friends from the time she was little. As soon as November first rolled around, she began thinking about the next year's bash.

Rita squeezed into the booth next to Ariana. "What are we talking about?"

"Ari's legendary parties," Bella said. "I can't wait to see this one with my own eyes."

"Wait, what?" Rita gave her sister a double-take.

"The Halloween party."

"That's not a good idea. At all."

Bella's expression fell. "What do you mean?"

"You need to lay low with Dad and Neil looking for you. Our parents have been blowing up my phone all day with texts and calls. They already suspect you came to stay with me since I'm the black sheep who left their way of life."

"You're not letting me go to the party?" Bella stared at her sister in disbelief. "I'm finally getting free from living under our parents' strict rules, and now *you're* keeping me from having fun?"

"It isn't like that."

"What's it like, then?"

Ariana exchanged uncomfortable glances with Maya and Olivia.

"We need to keep you safe," Rita said. "Your life is in every bit as much danger as mine was when Boone—"

"I'm not even engaged to Neil. This is completely different." Bella folded her arms.

"You think so?" Rita cocked an eyebrow. "If our father gave his permission for Neil to marry you, you're as good as married in their eyes. Doesn't matter that there hasn't been a ceremony yet."

“Maybe I should find somewhere else to stay. I didn’t think I was exchanging one set of impossible rules for another.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Rita asked.

“No. I’m not the little girl I was when you got married and moved out, so you can’t order me around anymore. I’ve never been to a Halloween party, and I want to go to this one.”

Rita threw Ariana a pleading glance.

“Maybe we should play it by ear,” Ari said. “Make sure your dad won’t be able to get there.”

“It’s a gated community, and he’s not on the list of allowed guests.” Bella glared at her sister. “And I can wear a costume with a mask. Nobody even has to know I’m there. I can just enjoy the only Halloween party I’ll have ever been to.”

Rita started to say something, but then pulled out her phone. Her face paled as she looked at the screen.

“What’s wrong?” Maya demanded.

“Our parents are on their way here.” Rita’s face lost even more color, and she turned to her sister. “We need to get you out of here *now*.”

Chapter Nine

Rita lifted a blind and looked outside for what had to be the five hundredth time. When she had returned home with Bella, she'd stopped at the gate and double-checked with the guard that her parents were on the list of people not to let in.

They were, but that still didn't put her mind at ease. Not when her father believed he was above the law. He thought he was an agent of God and laughed at the laws of the land.

If he wanted inside the gated community, he would find a way. She wouldn't put it past him to scale a fence or trick his way into the car with someone who *was* allowed past the gate.

There was only so much they could do against someone like him. And if he and Neil were working with each other, they had two devious minds to put together. They would come up with something. The men in that cult were quick to take what they believed belonged to them.

Including her sister.

Right now, Bella was in the family room with Grayson and the kids. Laughter rang out, almost making it sound like nothing was wrong.

It had been a few hours since they fled the restaurant. She'd instructed her employees not to tell anyone where she was. Not that it mattered. Her parents knew where she lived. They'd been there numerous times when she'd been married to Boone.

A chill ran down her spine at the thought.

Maybe she should've sold the house and moved when she and Grayson married. Too late now. She was harboring her sister like a fugitive, and their father was determined to take her back.

She glanced across the street. Maybe it was time to send Bella to stay with Ariana and Damon. They'd offered and even had a room already set up for her.

Rita moved to a different window and glanced outside. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. Then again, if her father had managed to sneak in, he wouldn't brazenly march up to the front door.

Or would he?

Her phone buzzed again. She didn't have to look at the screen to know who it was. Her parents hadn't let up, and they were getting more insistent the longer Rita held out from responding.

It buzzed again, then yet again.

She was ready to bury it in the backyard, but she glanced at the screen.

A flood of new texts from both of them and unknown number. Must be Neil. If not him, then someone else from their cult.

The phone rang.

Now she wanted to stomp on it until it was completely destroyed. But then she'd just be without a phone.

Maybe if she answered and sounded chill, they might leave her alone.

That was laughable. But it might be her only option, short of blocking all the numbers. That wasn't a bad idea, except she wanted to know what they were saying.

Rita accepted the call and plastered on a smile. Something she'd learned as a business owner was that a smile could be heard through the tone of voice over the phone. "Hello?"

“Why have you been avoiding my calls?” Her father’s voice boomed over the speaker.

“I’m busy, as you should know. I run a thriving business, and I’m almost in my third trimester. You’re too impatient.”

“Where is Bella?” He was so loud, she had to hold the phone away from her ear.

“Did you lose her?”

“She’s with you. I know it!”

“Take a chill pill. She’s an adult. If she went somewhere, I’m sure she had a good reason.”

“Adult? She is under *my* authority until the day she marries! And even then, I still have a say in her decisions.”

Rita rolled her eyes so hard they practically landed across the street. “If she doesn’t want to be at home, maybe there’s a reason. Has something changed recently?”

“Where. Is. She?”

“Maybe if you weren’t so controlling, your kids wouldn’t be so eager to get away. Did you ever think of that?”

“You can’t speak to me like that!”

“I just did.” Rita smiled — genuinely, this time. It felt so good to speak her mind to him after years of fearful silence.

“Bring her to me.”

“Have you tried calling her cell phone?”

“It goes straight to voicemail.”

“Maybe you should take that as a sign that she needs some space.”

“I *know* you know where she is.”

“Bye, Father. I need to get back to my family.”

“We are your family,” he sneered, “and Boone is your legitimate husband.”

“Interesting. I don’t think the law agrees with you. I’ll talk with you later, Pops.”

“What did you call me?” His tone was so on edge, it sounded like he could burst into flames.

“See you around, *Pops*.” She ended the call.

A new text came in immediately.

The Devil: Add me to the list at your stupid gate!

Her heart sank. Was he at the gate?

Rita shoved her phone into a pocket and raced to the family room. “Bella, lock yourself in your room! Hurry!”

All the kids looked up with terror in their eyes.

Bella ran up the stairs.

“What’s going on?” Brayden asked.

Grayson turned to him. “Remember how we said someone bad is trying to get to Bella?”

All three kids nodded.

“That’s what’s going on.”

Someone pounded on the front door.

He couldn’t be at the house already.

Rita rubbed her belly and struggled to breathe normally.

Grayson pointed to the staircase. “Kids, go to your rooms and lock the doors!”

They ran up the stairs.

The banging continued.

Rita turned to her husband. “What should we do?”

He glanced toward the door. “Let me handle this.”

“No! He could have a weapon.”

They exchanged conflicted glances as the beating continued on the door. Then the noise changed to powerful thuds.

Grayson balled his fists. “Is that lunatic trying to break down our door?”

Rita looked at the doorbell app. Her father was throwing himself against the door, using a shotgun as a battering ram. “He’s gone completely crazy!”

Grayson hurried to the door. “Stop now, or we’re calling the police!”

“You’re the ones guilty of kidnapping!”

“Kidnapping? An adult?”

“Let me in!”

Crack!

Rita screamed. “He’s going to break through!”

“You’re going to pay for that if you break it,” Grayson shouted.

“Never!” her father yelled from the other side. “You’ve forced my hand. I’m not going to stop until my daughter is back in my possession!”

Grayson turned to Rita. “Call 911!”

She made the call and explained the situation to the operator while the banging and cracking continued. She put it on speaker so Grayson could hear everything.

As soon as the operator said police were on the way, Grayson flung open the door, but stood so her father couldn’t get inside. “The cops are on their way. You need to leave before we press charges.” He glanced at the door. “And you’re going to have to pay for that.”

“Move aside. I’m not afraid of any earthly laws or the request of an illegitimate husband.”

Grayson stood his ground. “Doesn’t matter how you feel. If you break the law, you’ll pay the charges. And I’m Rita’s *only* legitimate husband. The cheating, murderous ex you forced her to marry is in prison for life, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Outta my way!” He cocked the gun and aimed it his son-in-law.

Rita screamed.

The 911 operator said something, but Rita couldn't focus on anything other than Grayson and the deadly weapon aimed at him.

"I said move!"

Grayson stepped aside, eyes wide and hands shaking.

Rita had never seen him so scared.

The kids were upstairs. She had to do something.

Before she could race to the staircase, her father bolted up the steps.

She and Grayson followed him.

"If you hurt anyone in this house, I will kill you!" Grayson reached for him, but missed.

"You can't do anything to me!"

Rita rubbed her belly. "If you ever want to meet your granddaughter, you'd better stop this now!"

He ignored her, obviously not caring about her baby. When he reached the top stair, he paused and looked around. He hadn't been in the house since Boone had lived here, and Rita had changed everything.

"Where are you, Isabella?" he called.

"Everyone stay in your rooms!" Grayson yelled, then he leaped up and tackled the other man.

The shotgun flew from her dad's grasp and down the hall.

Toward the children's rooms.

Rita's blood ran cold.

Her husband and father rolled around on the floor, grunting and knocking into things.

She couldn't get around them to grab the gun. Her hands remained on her stomach, protectively guarding the baby.

The two men rolled into a side table. It wobbled, then its contents toppled. A vase crashed to the floor. A lamp landed on Grayson's head.

Her father leaped up, dashed down the hall. Stopped in front of Bella's door.

Snarling, he flung it open.

Chapter Ten

Ariana lifted a blind and glanced across the street, the police lights flashing brightly on the dark street. They were in front of Rita's house. Ari's stomach dropped. Had Bella's dad or Neil come and hurt her?

She dropped the blind and was about to race outside when Damon put an arm around her. "Can you tell what's going on?"

"Police across the street."

He tensed. "At Rita and Grayson's?"

"Yeah. I need to see if they're okay."

"Is it just police cruisers, or are there ambulances too?"

It took her a moment to think about the scene. "Just cops."

He squeezed her shoulders. "That's good news. If anyone was hurt, there would be aid vehicles."

"Unless they haven't gotten here yet."

Slam!

Ariana froze. She and Damon were the only ones home. There was no reason for a door to slam.

"Did you leave a window open?" he asked.

She relaxed. Whenever they left multiple windows cracked for fresh air, a draft inevitably made doors close on their own. That's all it was. Her nerves were just on edge from seeing the police across the street.

Thump, thump, thump!

Heavy footsteps sounded from the lower level.

Ariana looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon. She had nothing on her. No time to run to the kitchen for a knife.

Thump, thump, thump!

“Who’s there?” Damon demanded, straightening his back and holding up a fist. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a palm-sized pocketknife. At least one of them was prepared.

She needed to fix that for next time.

If there was a next time.

Thump, thump, thump!

“It’s just me!” Bella appeared at the top of the stairs.

Ari’s knees turned to rubber.

They’d given her a key for a situation just like this. And she’d used it. She was safe.

But was Rita? The kids? Grayson?

“Did Neil show up?” Damon asked.

Bella shook her head. “It was my father.”

“What happened?” Ariana hurried to her, wrapped an arm around her, then guided her to the living room. They sat on the couch, Bella shaking.

Damon wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. “Do you need anything?”

She stared at her nails and shook her head again.

Ari turned to him. “I think she’s in shock.”

He knelt and looked into Bella’s eyes. “Do you want us to take you outside and get help from the police?”

“No! I don’t want my father knowing where I am. I’ll be fine. This is just what happens when he freaks out. I’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

Damon exchanged a worried look with Ariana before turning back to Bella. “You feel like *this* on a regular basis?”

“When he freaks out.”

“What do you mean by ‘freaks out?’”

Bella pulled some hair from her face. “When he yells, calls me names, makes threats. That sort of thing.”

“That’s normal?” Ariana asked, unable to keep the disgust from her voice.

“Yeah.” She pulled the blanket tighter around herself. “Can you see if everyone is okay across the street? I need to know they’re safe.”

“I’ll check.” Damon stood. “We didn’t see any ambulance, so I don’t think anyone is hurt.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you need anything before I go?”

“No.”

Damon squeezed Bella’s shoulder then gave Ari a quick kiss before heading outside.

Ariana turned on the TV and found a lighthearted movie for a distraction. “I know you don’t need anything, but I’m going to get you something to drink. Water, coffee?”

Bella shrugged and pulled her knees against her chest, shivering.

“How about hot chocolate? That’s always comforting.”

“Okay.”

Ariana put some milk on the stove to warm. She went to the front of the house and peeked out the blinds again. Now there was only one cruiser out there, and a small crowd had gathered. Damon stood on the sidewalk talking with Grayson. Rita and the kids were on the lawn with an officer.

They were all accounted for. Relief washed through her. Whatever had happened was over.

For now.

Ari stirred the milk, took it off the heat, then added chocolate and marshmallows. She brought it to Bella, who was picking at a hangnail.

“Rita, Grayson, and the kids are all outside. Everyone looks fine.”

Unfortunately, *fine* was relative. Physically they appeared unharmed, but emotionally was another matter altogether. Just like Bella. Though out of harm’s way, she was clearly suffering.

That was assuming her father had been arrested.

If he was on the loose, they were all in danger.

Chapter Eleven

Damon tried to take in everything Grayson told him. The whole story was wild, but at the same time unsurprising. It was easy to fall into routines and pretend like things were normal. To get lulled into a false sense of security. But between his and Ari's true crime podcast, writing their books, and giving personal safety presentations in person and on television, it was usually enough to keep the grim reality of life close to the surface.

The fact was, life was not safe. Monsters hid behind normal looking faces and false veneers. Some of the most dangerous people were the most outwardly charismatic. They might pretend to be funny or charming or intelligent. It was only those closest to them who saw their true natures.

People like that build a strong network of loyal monkeys ready to do their bidding. If someone spoke out against them, they had an army ready to defend them. People like that isolate the ones they abuse, so it ends up being their word against the lies of the well-loved, popular deceiver.

From the sounds of it, Rita and Bella's dad was just like his own father. Except hopefully he wasn't a killer. He hadn't hurt anyone tonight, aside from giving Grayson a black eye.

But he *had* brought a shotgun to his daughter's house.

A chill ran down his spine. He would need to make sure that psycho didn't find Bella.

Part of him wanted to put Diego Fuentes in his place.

That was the part of him he needed to stifle. The part of him he fought and ignored.

Killing people wasn't a genetic trait, but it may as well be. Damon was all too aware of what anger could lead to, and even if his emotions were normal, there was no way he could entertain them.

He couldn't risk turning into his father.

So, for his sake and that of those he cared about — mostly Ariana and any future children they would have — he wouldn't allow himself the luxury of certain emotions. They weren't safe. He needed to stay on the path he'd chosen all those years ago.

Rita came over and asked Grayson to look at the front door.

Damon pulled her aside. "Is there anything specific you want Ariana and me to do for Bella?"

Her expression clouded over. "Just keep her hidden. I don't want anyone seeing her in a window or doorway. Our father could still be in the neighborhood somewhere." She shuddered and looked around. "He could be anywhere, or he could send someone in here to spy. I know it sounds conspiratorial but—"

"It doesn't. He's unhinged, and anything is possible. Do you really think he could be wandering around here, unseen? Everyone has doorbell cameras."

"He's gotten away with more in the past. Honestly, nothing would surprise me. Do you guys need anything from us to take care of her? I can pay you."

"No. We're more than happy to help, Rita. Just take care of your house and the kids. I'll let Bella know you're all okay."

"Thanks. How's she holding up?"

"She's in shock, which isn't surprising. We've already got a room set up for her, and hopefully a good night's sleep will help her feel better. Ari might have a sleep aid if she needs it."

Rita hugged herself. "If not, let me know. I'm sure I have something."

He nodded. “How are you doing? The kids?”

“I’m okay. The kids are frightened, but thankfully I don’t think they fully understand the gravity of what happened. They’re already back inside playing video games. I guess kids really are more resilient than adults.”

“Keep an eye on them for the next few days. They could start showing delayed signs of stress or shock too. If you need suggestions for counseling, Ari and I can find you some.”

She gave him a hug, which was awkward with her large belly. “I don’t know how to thank you for everything you two have done for us. Not just now, but all year.”

“We’re glad to help. And don’t hesitate to ask for anything else. I mean it. We’re just across the street and *want* to do what we can.”

“I really appreciate it. Taking my sister in is more than I could’ve asked for.”

He nodded. “Take care of yourself.”

“I’ll do my best.” She headed back to the house.

Damon looked around, searching for someone hiding in the shadows. If anyone was there, they hid well.

Grayson’s voice drifted from the porch. “The door is structurally fine, but I’d still like to get a new one after the beating it took.”

Damon flashed back to his childhood home. His mom looked down at him with tears in her eyes while banging sounded on the front door. “Go up to your room, baby.”

He stared at her, shaking.

“Now!” She pointed to the stairs.

The pounding grew louder, and his dad’s voice bellowed from the other side. He sounded really angry.

Mom nudged him, and Damon finally hurried up the steps. But he didn’t go into his room. He hid at the top of the staircase, trying to hear what he could. He might need to

protect his mom. It hadn't worked last time, but maybe it would this time.

She yelled at Dad to go away until he was calm.

His father continued banging on the door. He also yelled something, but it was impossible to hear what he said.

But the message came across clearly. He wasn't going anywhere.

A hand on Damon's shoulder brought him back from the memory.

Grayson stood next to him. "Are you okay?"

Damon tried to shake away the vision. "Yeah. All of this just reminds me of something I went through."

He and Ariana hadn't yet told Grayson about Damon's dad, and he wasn't about to mention it now.

"Sorry to hear that. Tell Bella we're all fine. If she needs anything, just say the word. We'll get you anything."

"I'll let her know, but like I told Rita, we'll take care of Bella. Don't worry about it."

"You sure?"

"Yes. What are friends for?"

"If you two ever need anything, let us know. It's yours."

"We're always happy to help."

Grayson slapped his back. "We really couldn't ask for better neighbors, thank you. I better get inside and check on the kiddos."

Damon nodded. "I'm glad everyone is safe."

"You and me both."

They headed their separate ways, and as Damon was in the middle of crossing the street the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. His skin crawled.

Someone was watching him.

He didn't pause or look around.

Let them think they had the upper hand. Damon would keep an eye out, and he would keep everyone in his house safe.

Chapter Twelve

Bella watched Ariana go into Rita's house from between the blinds. Both of them had insisted Bella stay here in the Jones's house.

Tears stung her eyes. Everything about this situation sucked. Her father was determined enough to get her that he nearly broke down Rita's door. Neil would no doubt go to the same extreme measures.

All Bella wanted was to go back to school, but that would be the first place they'd look for her. Plus, she didn't have her phone anymore. By now, her parents had probably tracked it down. Father had configured the settings himself and forbade her from changing them, so he knew her every move.

That was why ditching the device was the first thing she did. With it remaining at the school, they probably hadn't been concerned at first, figuring she'd been at the library studying.

The thought of never going back, never working toward a future of her own making, brought more tears. Without their funds, she had no way of paying for her classes.

But if she stayed at their house, she would have to marry Neil and her entire future would be destroyed. Hopefully she could break free from their hold like Rita had. Not that it'd been easy on her — it had nearly killed her.

Bella's escape would be no less dangerous. There was no doubt about that.

There was no movement outside. Ariana was probably settled in with Rita, making plans for the upcoming Halloween

party.

That would be the perfect distraction from all her troubles. The closest Bella had come to attending something like that was when she was little and the school let kids come dressed up. Even though she wasn't allowed to wear a costume, she loved seeing what the other kids wore. But she was still pretty young when the district put a stop to that.

Sometimes she watched Halloween movies, but it was always a risk. If her parents caught her, she'd have gotten a whooping for it. They saw everything about the day as pure evil, and they were sure if she so much as thought about it she would be inviting evil into the home.

Except it already lived there.

And Dad was now on the hunt for her. Next time, he was sure to bring Neil with him.

She waited a few more minutes at the window before stepping away. The only action on the street was a few colorful leaves floating down into puddles. Not that she was complaining after having to flee from her father the night before. She should be relieved to have peace after so much strife, tension, and fear.

Instead, her body almost felt like it was vibrating. Like she needed to move around or do something to release all of her negative emotions.

Bella went up and down the stairs a few times until Damon came out from behind a closed door. "Everything okay?"

Her face flamed. He must've heard her. Mother always said she was as quiet as a cattle stampede. "I can't sit still."

"Feel like a caged animal?" He gave her a sympathetic look.

"Something like that."

"I know that feeling all too well. Let me show you our workout room. Use whatever you want, and I'll get some breakfast going. Sound good?"

She stared at him in disbelief. Why couldn't Father be more like him or Grayson? Her life would've been so different if she'd have been born into a family like that.

He looked like he was waiting for a response. Right. He'd asked about the workout room.

"If you don't mind." Bella played nervously with her hair.

"Our house is yours. Use anything you need. Just tell us if we run out of something, so we can get more."

She nodded, not used to so much kindness.

Damon motioned for her to go downstairs, then he led her down a hall and opened one of the doors. The room looked like the gym at her school.

"Whoa."

He chuckled. "Ari says I might've gone a little overboard, but I have everything we need. Knock yourself out. I'll let you know when the food's ready."

"Thanks." Her voice was so quiet, she wasn't even sure he could hear her.

She walked slowly through the room, taking in all the options. There were dumbbells all the way to giant weights that slid onto a bar. They also had an exercise bike, a treadmill, a stair stepper, a punching bag, and a few things she didn't recognize.

Bella climbed on the bike, glancing around to make sure nobody was watching. She'd never been allowed to get on a bike before. Her parents said it wasn't ladylike.

She didn't care anymore.

When she pressed the power button, lights flashed until the screen gave her options. They were all foreign, except for speed. Even she wasn't *that* sheltered. After she'd picked all the options, the screen asked her if she wanted to watch something.

Definitely.

In a few minutes, her muscles burned, and sweat dripped into her face and clung to all of her clothes. She was completely mesmerized by the show. The actors were about her age, maybe a little older, and everything that came out of their mouths was hilarious.

Between the exercise and the laughter, she felt better than she had in... forever? She couldn't remember ever feeling so relaxed and at ease.

If this was how the other side lived, her parents had definitely been lying to her about the evils of the world. She wanted more of the show and more exercise. But first, water. Her mouth and throat were parched.

Then she wanted to figure out a way to get to the Halloween party. She had so much life to experience, and she wasn't about to let fear of her father or Neil get in the way of that.

Chapter Thirteen

A riana waved to Rita before heading across the street. They had everything needed for the party, now it was a matter of decorating. That was a task that both overwhelmed her and sent a rush of excitement through her.

Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. A chill ran down her spine.

She looked around, trying to see if anyone was watching her. Nobody appeared in any of the neighboring windows. She couldn't see anybody outside.

It must just be the weather and all the thoughts of Halloween getting to her. Not to mention Rita's dad showing up last night. It was all too close to her own abduction. Some years, the memories hit her harder than other times. After everything that had happened all year, it was no surprise she was a little on edge.

But that didn't stop her from picking up her speed and hurrying inside. She breathed a little easier once in the safety of her own home.

Her mouth watered. The air smelled like freshly baked brownies.

In the kitchen, Bella had the oven open and was checking something inside. On the counter sat a platter of brownies, and next to it a cupcake tin held steaming treats.

"You've been busy."

Bella jumped and turned toward Ariana. “It’s hard to sit still. I tried doing some homework but couldn’t focus. And I don’t know if I can finish my classes anyway. My parents are paying for it, and if I turn in assignments, they might find out. I hope you don’t mind that I’ve been baking. Damon said to make myself at home.”

“If you’ll let me eat one of those brownies, you can make whatever you want.”

Bella smiled. “Have as much as you can eat.”

Ari took a bite of a sweet, and it melted in her mouth. “Did you make these from scratch?”

“I did.” She opened the oven again and this time took out a tray of cookies. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Better than okay.” She grabbed another brownie. “We should take some of these across the street to Rita.”

Bella’s eyes widened. “Am I allowed to go over there?”

The question made Ariana jolt. “You’re an adult, you can make your own decisions.”

“But I thought I couldn’t go over there.”

“After last night, it’s better if we’re careful. Going after dark would be best, and you should wear a hood while walking. Rita’s worried your dad has someone watching.”

And after what Ari felt when crossing the street, she didn’t doubt her friend. Or maybe it was her friend’s concerns that were getting the better of her.

Bella looked deep in thought. “Maybe I should stay here.”

“You think your dad has eyes here in the neighborhood?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.” She frowned. “When he wants something, he won’t let anything stop him.” She sighed. “Is Rita okay after last night? No problems with the baby?”

“No problems. Grayson took her to the doctor this morning, and she and the baby are both great.”

“That’s such good news.” Bella visibly relaxed. “I was worried I’d caused early labor or something.”

“None of that was your fault. Your dad’s actions aren’t on you.”

Bella frowned. “If I’d have just stayed home, he never would’ve gone to Rita’s. He took a gun!”

“None of that is on you. He has no right to try and force you to get married, and you shouldn’t have to flee your parents to stay safe.”

“I should’ve known he’d come after me.”

“It isn’t on you. Your sister *wanted* to help you, and it sounds like she knew what the risks were.”

Damon appeared around the corner. “Risks?” He eyed the treats. “Do I spy brownies?”

Ari handed him one. “Our houseguest is spoiling us.”

“I’ll say.”

Bella grabbed a bowl and smeared orange frosting on a cupcake.

“I’m all for skipping lunch and going straight for dessert.” He grabbed a spatula and frosted one of the cupcakes. “You’re welcome to stay indefinitely.”

“It’s just a little baking.”

Ariana scooped the cookies onto a plate. “The stuff I make usually comes from a box.”

They carried the sweets over to the table, and Bella poured them each a tall glass of milk before sitting.

“Do you like baking?” Damon asked.

She shrugged. “I never thought of it that way. Father wants this stuff available at all times, and Mother has always insisted everything be made fresh. She doesn’t like the prepackaged stuff. No offense.”

“None taken.” Ariana reached for one of the cookies, and that too melted in her mouth.

Damon emptied his glass. “Do they dictate everything you do?”

Bella’s face fell. “Yeah. I try to make some of my own decisions, but that doesn’t ever work out for me. As you can see by last night’s fiasco.”

“Does he always get that angry?” Damon studied her.

“Only when he doesn’t get his way.”

Damon tensed.

Ari squeezed his hand, but he didn’t relax.

“If he doesn’t get his way, then everyone else pays. Sounds familiar.” Damon’s expression tightened.

“At least you’re out of there now,” Ariana said, speaking to both of them. Her husband was clearly thinking back to the days with his own dad.

Bella squeezed the table. “But he isn’t going to give up. Not until he has me back at home.”

“Do you want me to look into getting you a restraining order?”

“What’s that?”

The girl really was sheltered.

“It’s basically a court order to keep him away from you.”

“But he’s my father. I’m under his authority until I marry.”

“Not according to the law,” Damon said, his voice gruff.

Bella didn’t look convinced. “I’m disobeying him by being here. He’s probably destroyed everything in my room by now.”

Damon’s nostrils flared.

“The law is on your side,” Ari said. “You’re twenty, so that means you get to make all the decisions in your life. Want to go to school? Great, it’s your choice. Don’t want to get married? You don’t have to.”

Bella squirmed in her seat.

Ariana glanced at Damon, but his eyes were glazed over.

She needed to figure out a way to distract both of them from thinking about their dads.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out to look at the screen. Neither Bella nor Damon paid her any attention.

It was an unknown number.

Ariana rejected the call.

A few moments later, her phone vibrated again.

Voicemail.

She pressed play.

An angry male voice burst through the speaker. “Send Bella back to where she belongs. The consequences will be deadly if you don’t.”

It sent a cold chill down her spine. She stopped the message before it reached the end.

She wasn’t going to let anyone scare her.

And she would do anything to help protect the young woman in front of her.

Chapter Fourteen

“Can you help me?” Someone called from the other room. It could’ve been anyone, as close to a dozen people were over to help get the party ready in time.

Ariana set down her hammer then raced to the entryway. Maya stood balancing precariously on a step stool with a string of skulls tangled in her arms. Ari grabbed the stool and steadied it.

“Phew, thanks!” Maya climbed down. She strung the decorations over the steps. “I think I need a new strategy with these babies.”

“What were you trying to do?”

“Hang them, obviously. But I was trying to get fancy. You’d think I’d learn by now. I should never try to make anything fancy. It always goes wrong.”

“I could help you.”

“Everything okay in there?” Olivia rounded the corner. She had a streak of orange paint across her forehead with confetti stuck to it.

Apparently Maya’s twin was also trying to get fancy with her project.

“Fine,” Maya said. “Nothing to see here, but it looks like you have an interesting story to tell.”

Olivia patted her forehead, getting paint on her fingers. “Yeah, about that.” She turned to Ariana. “Your welcome poster isn’t going to be quite how you envisioned it.”

Ari tried to hold back a smile but failed. “No problem, and it isn’t *mine*. The party is for everyone. Have fun with it.”

“I already am.” Olivia left the room.

Ariana turned to Maya. “Do you want some help with those skulls?”

“Maybe.” She held up the decoration again. “Do you mind holding the stool? Or I can hold it and you can hang these. You might have better luck.”

“Luck is for St. Paddy’s Day. Let’s make your Halloween vision come to life.”

They laughed as Maya hung the skulls around the entryway in a jagged, crooked way. Ariana wasn’t sure what her friend was going for until it all came together.

Ariana clapped once Maya was safely on the ground. “It’s perfect!”

She beamed. “It did come out pretty good, didn’t it?”

“I’ll say! Everybody’s going to love it.”

Maya snapped a few pictures. “Now I want to see what everyone else is up to.”

They wandered through the main level of the house. Ari, Damon, and their friends were hard at work getting everything ready for tomorrow’s party.

Halloween was almost here. The day she counted down to all year long.

Each room was in various stages of disarray with decorations up, down, and in boxes. Ariana had accumulated more holiday boxes than most people kept for Christmas — she’d been fortunate they hadn’t been in the house when it burned to the ground. Plus her friends had brought some of their own things, like Maya’s skulls in the entryway. Even Bella was smiling as she pressed gel decorations to the windows.

It was all starting to come together, but they still had so much left. Halloween was only one day away — the big party

was the next night. Sometimes she ended up pulling all-nighters the night before. It was hard to tell if this would be one of those years. At least they had an army of people helping. She might actually get some rest tonight.

She checked on Rita, who was reviewing the menu. “How are you holding up?”

“Great. You know me — I’m on my feet all day.”

“If you need to rest, don’t feel bad about it.”

Rita grabbed one of Bella’s cookies. “I won’t, but I might have to get shopping soon. These ingredients aren’t going to buy themselves. And you still want the appetizers from the bar and grill?”

“Definitely.”

She jotted another note. “Okay, I’ll get that order put in soon. We have a lot to cater tomorrow, plus the restaurant is bound to be busier than normal.”

Bella came over. “Did someone say shopping?”

Rita frowned. “I can’t take you with me, sweetie.”

“Why not?”

“You’re in hiding.”

“Father can’t be everywhere, and he doesn’t know where I’m staying. He couldn’t find me the other day. He has no idea I’m staying here, or that the Joneses live across from you. I’ll be safe.”

Ariana bit her lip. “About that...”

Rita’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I didn’t want to say anything, but the other day I got a threatening voicemail from an unknown number.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“I know I should have, but I didn’t want to worry anyone. I was waiting to see if he would try calling again, and he hasn’t.”

“Let me listen to it.” Rita held out her hand.

Ariana found the voicemail and gave her phone to Rita.

Bella pressed against her sister, listening too.

“That’s Father,” they said in unison.

Ariana’s stomach knotted. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner. I meant to bring it up when the time was right, but then I got distracted with all of the party planning. I know that isn’t an excuse.”

Rita grabbed her sister. “He knows where you’re staying! We have to figure something else out.”

Maya came over. “Wait, are you talking about threatening phone calls?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I got one the other day.” Maya toyed with one of her earrings. “Came from an unknown number. I answered because I love messing with telemarketers. But it was some lunatic ranting about his daughter. I didn’t put two and two together until just now, but he had to have been talking about Bella.”

Rita pulled on her hair. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“This is good news.” Bella smiled.

“You’ve lost your mind.” Rita gave her sister a bewildered expression.

“No. This means Father doesn’t know where I am. He’s calling your friends at random, hoping to scare whoever knows where I am.”

Rita shook her head.

“That’s exactly what’s going on! Why else would he have called Maya?”

“You don’t have a recording?” Rita asked.

“No. Like I said, I talked to him. If people are going to call me uninvited, I’m going to give them a hard time. That’s what they get.”

Bella sighed. "I wish I could be more like you. I don't know how to not be way too polite."

Maya wrapped an arm around her. "You're welcome to spend as much time around me as you want. I'll teach you to be uncouth and speak your mind to anyone at any time."

"Can we focus?" Rita snapped. "I need to know if it was my father you spoke to."

"I can ask him if he calls again."

Rita threw her hands in the air.

"Listen to this." Ariana replayed her voicemail.

"Yeah!" Maya snapped her fingers. "That's totally the guy. His voice got higher the more I kept talking. He didn't know what to do with me."

Bella giggled. "I wish I could've heard that."

"It was fun."

Rita got up and paced circles around the dining room table. "We have to be even more careful. He's a dangerous man, and it worries me that he's calling my friends. How would he get your numbers?"

"It wouldn't be *that* hard," Maya said. "He met us all at your wedding. Ari's number is associated with her and Damon's business, so that wouldn't be so hard. And I've never gone to any effort to keep mine private, unlike Olivia who's practically a ghost online."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Olivia said, not looking up from the black, orange, and neon green poster she was painting not too far away.

"Did you get any calls?" Rita asked.

"Nope, nothing."

"See?" Bella said. "He's grasping at straws. I bet he doesn't even know about the party. And even if he does, he won't get me."

"Obviously, since you won't be there."

Bella squared her shoulders. “Yes, I will.”

“Not a chance!”

The sisters stared each other down.

“I’m staying here,” Bella said. “Do you expect me to lock myself in my room upstairs while everyone parties down here?”

“You can stay at my house, safe and sound. Grayson and I have upgraded the security system and—”

“Hold up. You want me to stay at the one place Father has come looking for me? The one place he would come back to?”

“Did you hear what I said about the security system?”

“You can’t stop me. I’m an *adult*. I can make my own decisions.”

“But you came to *me* for help. I’ve dealt with our father and come out on the other side.”

“I can do the same.”

“Yes, if you do what I say.”

“You said I don’t have to obey anyone. I’m an adult, I make my own decisions, and I decided I’m going to the party.”

Rita clenched her jaw. “It’s a bad idea. You’d be inviting him and Neil to show up and drag you back home. Do you think you’d be able to escape a second time? Do you?”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Bella ran from the room.

Rita turned to Ari and Maya. “Can one of you try to talk some sense into her? I don’t know why she won’t listen to me. I’ve been through all of this before.”

Maya arched a brow. “She’s right.”

“Excuse me?”

“Bella’s twenty. She needs to make her own decisions. If she wants to be at the party, she should go. We won’t let your old man in. Simple.”

Rita glanced at Ariana. “You’re on my side, right?”

“It isn’t about sides,” Maya said. “She’s an adult who just broke free from overbearing parents. Let her live her life and make her own choices.”

“Bella isn’t a normal college student! My father won’t hesitate to drag her back home and hurt her! He sees her as his property, and he thinks she’s defying him. This is serious.”

“Why didn’t he ever drag *you* back home?”

“Because he sees me as Boone’s property. It wasn’t his place. He wouldn’t step on another man’s toes like that. The men only have respect for one another.”

“Then I guess this is between you and your sister.”

Rita threw Ariana a pleading glance.

“If you don’t want her at the party, I’ll talk with her. But I can’t guarantee anything. Like Maya said, Bella’s an adult. She hasn’t even had the opportunity to live like she’s one.”

“Once she’s safe, she can make all the decisions she wants. This isn’t that time. She’s my family, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.”

“So will I,” Ariana said. “But we do need to let her have a say in this.”

Rita shook her head. “Unbelievable.”

Ari put a hand on Rita’s arm. “She’s going to rebel if she feels like you’re trying to control her too. To keep her from running from us and into more danger, we have to consider what she wants.”

“She has *zero* experience making her own decisions. This isn’t the time for her to start! I’m going shopping for the party. You may as well have Bella pack her things. She’s coming to my place when I get back.”

Maya’s mouth fell open. “Are you listening to yourself?”

“Yes. My sister is moving back in with me so I can protect her.”

“You sound like your parents.”

Rita's face flushed red. "Take that back!"

Maya folded her arms. "I say it as I see it."

"Then you're wrong!" Rita fled the room. "Bella, pack your things!"

Ariana turned to Maya. "Do you think we're being unreasonable?"

"Not even close. I think her pregnancy hormones are on overdrive, and she's lashing out because of fear. She isn't thinking clearly."

"I hope shopping calms her."

"Me too."

The front door slammed.

Chapter Fifteen

Damon added another song to the party playlist. At this rate, it would take two full days to get through the entire list, but the important thing was none of the songs would repeat. All night long, the festive music would be different.

Knock, knock!

He pulled his attention away from the screen, his vision blurry for a moment as his eyes adjusted. “Come in!”

The door opened slowly, then Bella stepped inside. “Sorry to bother you.”

“It’s no bother. I could use a break anyway.” He rubbed his eyes.

“I hate to ask, but...”

“Ask away. We keep telling you, we’re here to help.”

She leaned against the door frame and played with a button on her shirt. “I know you and Ariana have a bunch of Halloween stuff, so I was wondering if you have any extra costumes.”

He couldn’t help laughing. “I think we have an entire closet dedicated to those. What are you looking for?”

Bella chewed on her lower lip. “Something with a mask. That’s important.”

“We have plenty of those. Follow me.” He led her to one of the guest rooms. “You’re lucky we still have these after our

house fire earlier this year.”

“You didn’t lose your Halloween stuff?”

“We kept them in the storage shed in the backyard since we didn’t have as much room in the old house. But since we were able to design everything this time around, Ariana made sure we had plenty of room for her favorite holiday.”

“That was lucky. I imagine she’d have been devastated to lose those. Do most people get that excited about Halloween?”

Damon chuckled. “She’s on her own level, but I can’t complain. Nothing compares to her Halloween parties.” He opened the closet door. “Use anything you want. Most of these are ones we’ve used in the past, but there are also a few that have never seen the light of day. Some years we buy several costumes and don’t decide on what to wear until the day of the party.”

“Why’s that?”

“We can’t be tempted to tell anyone what we’re going to be if we don’t know. Everyone always wants to know since ours tend to be pretty original.”

“That makes sense.” She reached for a long, elegant gown. It could easily be a princess dress, but she couldn’t wear a mask with it so that was out.

Damon would’ve suggested a masquerade mask, but if her father did show up to the party, he’d be able to recognize his own daughter. Hopefully next year she’d be in a place where she could pick anything she wanted, mask or not. For now, she had to work only with costumes offering complete identity camouflage.

“There are a few boxes on the floor full of masks,” he said. “You can pick out anything you want. Mix and match, be creative. You could wear a gorilla mask with that dress.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“It would keep anyone from recognizing you, and it would be unique.”

“That’s one way to put it.” The corners of her mouth wobbled. “You’re sure I can use anything? What about your costumes for tomorrow’s party?”

“Those are in our room, so no worries. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Thanks.” She rifled through the costumes, her eyes wide with wonder.

Damon returned to the recording studio where he’d been working on the playlist, having a hard time imagining never having celebrated the holiday. Halloween was something his father had never put much thought into. He didn’t care whether Damon dressed up or not, went out with friends or stayed home.

Ever since Damon met Ariana, the day went from a fun time to dress up and get free candy to the biggest, most exciting day of the year. She’d always spent twelve full months planning everything from her costume to decorations to making her party bigger than the one before. Now all of that was normal, and he found himself jotting down ideas in July or at Thanksgiving.

He double-checked that he’d saved his playlist — the last thing he needed was to have wasted those hours collecting all the songs. As he searched for any that he might’ve missed, his mind wandered back to his childhood Halloweens. He’d been unsure of himself much in the same way Bella was now. Having a threatening, overbearing father could do that to a person. But Damon at least had some freedoms, and he’d spread his wings whenever given the chance. His father had traveled a lot for “work,” so Damon had been free to do pretty much anything he wanted — but only when he had the house to himself.

As a teen, it had been confusing to bounce back and forth between so much freedom and getting smacked around for the tiniest offenses. Sometimes, all these years later, he still braced himself for a punch after saying something thoughtlessly. It was a reaction that didn’t go away easily.

Hands rested on his shoulders, and he jumped.

“Are you okay?” Ariana asked, wrapping an arm around him.

“I was lost in thought.”

“Anything I can help with?”

Damon shook his head. “I should get downstairs and help with the decorations.”

“Take all the time you need on the playlist. I’m going over to Rita’s to see how she’s doing.”

“Is everything okay?”

“She and Bella had a difference of opinion.”

“I hope it didn’t have anything to do with costumes.”

Ariana lifted a brow. “How’d you know?”

“Bella’s looking through our old costumes as we speak. Hopefully I didn’t just make things worse.”

“I don’t think so. Rita needs to let her make her own decisions, and I have to find a way to delicately say that to her. I know she only wants to protect her, and while that’s why Bella came to her, Rita needs to let her adult sister make her own decisions.”

“If I can do anything to help, let me know.”

“Going downstairs to work on the decorations would help. We haven’t even started on the escape room yet.”

“You haven’t? That’s going to take hours.” He glanced at the time. It was already later than he thought. “We’d better order in for dinner tonight.”

“For sure.” Ariana gave him a quick kiss before hurrying out of the room.

Damon found Bella still in the room with the costumes.

She had at least a dozen of them on the bed, and she held up a corn on the cob outfit, looking deep in thought. “There are too many to choose from.”

“Rita doesn’t want you coming to the party?”

Bella scowled and dropped the costume onto the bed. “You aren’t taking her side, are you?”

“I’m not your parent.”

She visibly relaxed. “Rita thinks she is.”

“I don’t want to get in the middle of a family dispute, but I’m not going to stop an adult from making her own decision. If you want help finding something that will hide your identity, I’d be happy to give you ideas. Something like the one you just had would work because it’s so wide, it’ll hide your shape. But a princess like we talked about earlier could give you away to someone looking for you.”

Bella eyed him with suspicion. “You’d actually help me hide from my sister?”

“I’m thinking more along the lines of your parents.”

She picked up the corn on the cob outfit again. “You think this one would do the trick?”

“If we can find the part that goes over your head. All anyone would see of you would be your arms and legs, and we can find some baggy clothes to wear underneath.”

“Nobody’d even be able to tell if I was a guy or a girl.”

“Exactly.”

Her eyes lit up. “I love it! And it’s such a fun idea.”

Damon chuckled. “Nobody has ever accused Ari of having a boring costume. In fact, I’m pretty sure she was born wearing one.”

Bella giggled and held the corn on the cob outfit in front of her again. “You know where the top part is?”

He pulled out the boxes from the closet. “I saw it in one of these last year.”

She opened one. “Let’s get to work! Now Rita will never have to know I’m even there tomorrow night.”

Damon nodded, but he hoped Ariana would be able to convince Rita that giving her sister a choice was the best

option.

The last thing they needed was a full-on family feud the next night.

Chapter Sixteen

Rita threw the last of the clothes into the dryer, slammed the door, then set the timer. She'd spent the last hour cleaning and fuming. How dare her friends make those accusations? She was *nothing* like her parents. In fact, she was trying to protect her sister *from* them.

The doorbell camera chimed.

Knock, knock!

Rita wiped sweat from her forehead. That better be her sister, having come to her senses. Surely Bella had to see that Rita was only trying to keep her safe.

If she didn't, then her baby sister would end up with a life like hers had been. She would do whatever she could to spare her that kind of heartache. Neil sounded exactly like Boone.

Look where that had gotten her.

Rita answered the door, and it took her a second to realize Ariana stood in front of her rather than Bella. "Where's my sister?"

"At my house."

"Is she packing her things?"

"Not that I'm aware."

Rita narrowed her eyes. "Then what are you doing here?"

Ariana gave her a sad smile. "Can we talk?"

“About packing Bella’s belongings so she can return here?”

“No.”

“What then?” Rita crossed her arms, not making room for her best friend to enter.

“Can I come inside?”

“We can talk here.”

Ari sighed. “It’s chilly out here.”

Rita glanced at her friend’s bare arms. “You should’ve worn a jacket.”

“Please?”

“Fine.” Rita stepped aside. “But you won’t change my mind.”

Ariana came into the entry and showed herself to the living room.

Rita followed then chose a seat on the opposite end of the couch as her friend. “If you think I’m going to let my baby sister stay with you any longer *or* go to your party, you’re sorely misinformed.”

“But she isn’t a baby. She’s an adult.”

“The girl has no experience making decisions for herself. She doesn’t know what’s good for her. I’ve gone through everything she’s dealing with now, down to a nearly identical forced fiancé.”

“She’s safe with us, and what she really needs is the freedom to make her own choices.”

“Safe?” Rita spit the word out like it was poison. “The entire neighborhood is coming to your house tomorrow night! There’s nothing safe about that. Nothing! Our father has already proven he can get inside the gates of this community.”

Ari scooted closer. “I know you’re worried about her. We are too.”

“If you were, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Yes!”

Ariana rested a hand on Rita’s arm.

She scooted back, like her friend’s touch was a snake about to strike. Her heart pounded loudly enough for them both to hear. “Bella needs someone to guide her.”

“Does she?”

“You don’t know what it’s like having every move you make dictated for you. Your parents gave you small choices to make for yourself, incrementally giving you more say over your life as you grew older. Bella hasn’t had any of that. She’s gotten slapped on the wrist for stepping out of line every day of her life. If she gets free rein over her decisions, she’s going to go crazy. Guaranteed.”

“Maybe it’s time for her to make some mistakes and learn from them.”

Rita drew a deep breath. Her daughter in her belly started moving around erratically. She needed to calm down before she found herself giving birth a trimester early. She closed her eyes and counted to ten slowly before opening her eyes again. “This isn’t up for debate.”

“I understand your hormones are running strong and your maternal instincts are probably higher than ever, but your twenty-year-old sister needs to make her own decisions. She came to you because she thought you’d be a support, Rita. She wasn’t looking for someone else to dictate to her what she can and can’t do.”

The words were like a slap to the face. Even worse, her friend was right. The difference was she wanted control to keep Bella safe, where her father wanted control to exert his dominance. But a lack of freedom was a lack of freedom, and she had to acknowledge how stifled her sister must feel.

Rita did sound like her parents. Fear had her making demands on an adult. It was all too easy to see Bella as the little girl who was still playing with dolls when Rita moved out and not the grown woman she’d become.

Bella had no experience making decisions for herself. Her going to the party would be a mistake. Their father had wormed his way inside *her* house already. It would be even easier to get inside a party that was open for the entire neighborhood.

“I know you want to support her,” Ari said. “Instead of banning her from the party, let’s figure out a way to keep her safe while she’s there. It’s a good way to meet in the middle. Let her come and have a good time, and we’ll watch out for any dangers.”

Rita’s defenses shot back up. “You don’t get to call the shots! She’s not your sister.”

“She may be your sister, but she’s her own person.”

“Not for long if my father or Neil get to her. Then she’ll return to being a slave to the men in her life. Is that what you want for her?”

“I want her to be able to decide what she wants. She’s away from her parents now, and this is one small thing she can do. Something she can enjoy.”

“It isn’t small! Your party is open to everyone. It’s basically a blinking neon sign, welcoming the people who want nothing more than to destroy her life. If you think they’ll ever let her go again, you’re wrong. Dead wrong.”

Ariana jolted.

At least Rita was finally getting through to her. “To you, this is just your party. But for my sister, it’s life and death.”

“We’ll protect her.”

“We *can’t*. You don’t understand the people we’re dealing with. How would you feel if Damon’s father was alive and could show up if he wanted to?”

Ariana started to say something but stopped.

“Do you get it now?”

“What I know is Damon didn’t stop living because of his dad. Yes, the man was a monster. I know that firsthand.

Another thing I know is your sister is fully aware of what she's dealing with — even more than you, because since you got free, she's been living the nightmare alone, dealing with him and her wretched situation by herself. Everything is fresh on her mind.”

“I can never forget what it was like living with that monster!” Rita clenched her fists. “I know *exactly* who we're dealing with. He hasn't changed a bit!”

“Maybe instead of making demands on your sister, you two could work together to form a plan to keep her safe *while* she's living her life. The same way you're living yours.”

Rita's face flushed with heat. “I'm done with this conversation. Sure, it's unfair that Bella can't do what she wants right now. But you know what? She came to *me* because she knew I'd keep those men away from her. And that's what I intend to do — no matter who hates me for it. When she's still alive and out of their clutches, everyone will realize I'm right.”

“Nobody hates you for caring. I'm just trying to find middle ground. It's possible.”

“No.” Rita leaped to her feet then raced across the street.

Ariana's front door was unlocked. That proved her friend wasn't capable of keeping Bella secure. Anyone could get inside just like Rita had.

Her sister was coming back home with her. She marched up the stairs. “Bella! You're coming home with me where you'll be safe!”

Only one door was closed.

She raced to it and flung it open.

Her sister's things were on the bed, but Bella wasn't there.

Chapter Seventeen

Bella pressed her ear against the door.
Silence.

Nobody would find her here. There was no way she was going back to Rita's house. She only wanted to control Bella too. Sure, she was trying to protect her from their father and Neil, but she couldn't see she was doing the same thing to her they were.

Forcing her to do what she didn't want to do.

She'd run away to escape that kind of treatment, not to face it again at the hands of her sister. If she had to run farther and with fewer things, she would. Now that she'd had a taste of freedom, she wasn't going to go back to being controlled.

No one would tell her what to do again. Ever. Those days were done. Somehow she'd find a way to start over and make something of her life. Rita had managed. Bella would do the same, but *before* being forced into slave labor. If Neil married her, she would have even less freedom than she did with her parents. At least they let her go to college.

He would put a stop to that. Men like him didn't want a woman who could think for herself. And they knew how to domineer. It was their specialty.

She shuddered at the thought. Her friends at church who'd already been married off — some had already 'celebrated' their fifth wedding anniversaries — whispered their horror stories to her. They were all terrified of their husbands. Most

had chronic health issues that couldn't be explained by doctors.

It was the stress. Living in fear tore the body apart.

Bella knew that all too well. Even in the short time she'd been away from her father's house, her stomach was already starting to feel better and her headaches were improving. All her ailments would get worse if she had to live under Neil's thumb. No one would care. Their church encouraged men to be cruel to their wives. They taught that women were nothing more than property, even though they would never use that language. They didn't need to. Not when everyone lived that way.

Acid churned in her stomach just thinking about it. She was starting to feel better, but then Rita had to go and start making demands of her. Why was her sister reverting to their old ways? Did she think she owned Bella now?

It sure seemed like it, the way she was demanding Bella pack her things and leave the Jones's house.

Over her dead body.

She would rather suffer death than become a slave to Neil. Every time she thought of the night he came over for dinner, an icy chill ran down her back.

That would not be her future. One way or another. She would either avoid him by freedom or death. There was no other option. Not that her parents would give her.

Bella pressed her ear to the door again.

Everything was still quiet outside.

The shed wasn't the ideal place to stay, but at least nobody could tell her what to do while she was out there. Damon had described it as being full of Halloween supplies before, but now it was packed with gardening tools. Barely left any room for her, but at least she had the corn on the cob costume. She could lie down when she got tired.

Luckily it was clean, unlike her father's many sheds. Those were dirty and gross, filled with mud and grass

clippings. Everything had appeared new when she opened the door and the daylight had lit everything.

Maybe what she needed was somewhere else to stay. If somebody opened the door, she had nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape. The person would block her only way out.

Bella cracked open the door, the bright daylight nearly blinding her after so long in the dark. She blinked a few times until her vision adjusted, then she peeked outside. The pool house blocked most of the home, but someone had obviously opened either a window or door, as festive music blasted from inside.

Leaving now would be too risky. With so many people inside, someone could easily look out at just the wrong moment and see her taking off.

No. She'd wait until darkness covered everything.

Then she would make a run for it.

Hopefully nobody would discover her hiding spot before then.

Chapter Eighteen

Ariana caught up with Rita outside Bella's room.
Rita spun around. "Where is she?"

"How would I know? I've been with you."

"You're supposed to be keeping her safe. That's what you promised!"

Ariana drew a deep breath. Now wasn't the time to lose her cool. Not when her friend was worried and pregnant. "I'm sure she's in the house somewhere. She's really excited about helping with the party. Why don't we go downstairs and have a look?"

"She's supposed to be packing."

"My guess is she'd rather be helping with the decorations. Maybe she's working on the escape room with Damon."

"Which room?" She shot Ariana a venomous look.

"The garage."

Rita raced down the stairs.

Ari hated being at odds with her, but she had also promised to be on Bella's side. She would do whatever she could to keep her young friend safe, but also protect her right to make her own decisions. It wasn't like she was a teenager. She was a full-fledged adult, and it had to be frustrating to be twenty and have her family treating her like she was only a child.

In the meantime, Ariana needed to find Bella. She checked all the rooms upstairs, finding them all as empty as Bella's

bedroom. Hopefully she was downstairs helping with the party. That was the last place she'd seen her, and it should've been the first place she looked.

Ariana made her way downstairs. Everyone else was busy with the preparations, and neither Rita nor Bella were anywhere to be seen.

Her throat was parched, so she grabbed a water bottle before checking the garage. Damon, Maya, and Olivia were busy transforming the space into an elaborate escape room based off a popular TV series. None of them looked up when Ariana opened the heavy door.

Did Rita go back to her house? Go outside?

Ari finished the water, tossed the bottle into the recycle bin, then headed to the backyard. Maybe they were around the pool house. She hurried there but didn't find anyone, so she walked toward the tool shed.

She texted Rita, asking where she'd gone. Waited for a response.

Rain started sprinkling down, so Ari went back inside. She and Damon should've gotten Bella a phone since she'd had to ditch hers. Now they had no way of reaching her. No way of knowing whether she left because she was mad or because she had some other reason that would make perfect sense once they heard it.

Ari's phone finally rang.

It was Rita.

She accepted the call. "Where are you?"

"Back at my house. I thought maybe she'd come back here."

"Did she?"

"No. You didn't happen to find her, did you?"

"Not yet."

Rita made a frustrated sound. "What are we supposed to do now?"

“We could ask around the neighborhood.”

“It’s not like she’d go to stay with someone she doesn’t know.”

“Someone might’ve seen her.”

“No,” Rita insisted. “She’s *hiding*. It’s something she’s been good at since she was little. Whenever our father would lose his temper, we’d lose her. Then we’d find her in some random place, like hiding behind boxes in a closet.”

“That’s it!”

“What?”

“I checked all the rooms in my house, but I didn’t look in closets. Check your closets. I bet we’ll find her in one of those.” Ariana darted back up the stairs. There were now plenty more places to look. Every room had a closet, plus there were several in the hallway. She hadn’t even thought to look in any of those.

“Okay.” Rita sounded defeated. “Let me know if you find her.”

“You’ll be the first person I tell.” Ariana ended the call and checked every closet, under all the beds, and anywhere else someone might be able to hide.

Bella was still nowhere upstairs. Maybe she’d hidden somewhere downstairs. It seemed unlikely, given how many people were bustling around getting ready for the party, but she had to check.

After still not finding her, Ariana returned to the garage to see if there were any hiding spots in there. She checked her phone, not finding any missed texts or calls from Rita.

Damon smiled at her when he glanced her way. “Hey babe, do you mind grabbing me some extra nails from the shed? We’re running out quickly in here.”

“Sure.” She may as well do something useful since she couldn’t find Bella anywhere, though it was hard to imagine going on with the party if she didn’t show up before it started. How could they enjoy the festivities?

This time, Ariana grabbed a jacket before heading outside. She pulled up the hood and hurried to the shed, as the rain was picking up. At this rate, it would be a downpour before long.

She flung open the door.

Two eyes stared at her.

A Halloween prop?

It took a moment to realize it was Bella. By the time she did, she was already screaming. Or at least someone was screaming. She covered her mouth. It was her. She managed to get control of her vocal cords and stop.

Bella scrambled to her feet.

Ariana gasped for air. “What are you doing in here?”

“I *was* hiding.”

“Your sister’s worried out of her mind.” Ariana had been too, but she didn’t want to heap guilt on the poor girl. She couldn’t really blame her for wanting to get away from all the demands and expectations on her.

Bella frowned. “I don’t need her telling me what to do. All I need is help making a fresh start for myself. That’s it. I’m an adult, and I should be able to make my own decisions.”

“I agree.”

“And another thing... Wait. You agree?”

Ariana nodded. “Yes. Most of us feel that way. Rita and I were arguing about that very thing before we realized you were missing.”

“So I can stay at your place?”

“Didn’t Damon and I promise you that room is available as long as you need it? We are more than happy to help you however we can. If you want a job, we can help you find one. We can be your references if you want. Whatever you need. But you can’t hide from us. Your safety is still a concern.”

Bella threw her arms around Ariana. “Thank you!”

The side gate slammed shut.

“You found her and didn’t tell me?” Rita marched over.

Blood drained from Ari’s body. “I *just* found her.”

“Unbelievable.” Rita’s eyes shot daggers at her.

“We need to talk,” Ariana said.

Rita turned her attention to her sister. “You and I certainly do.”

“You aren’t Mother — you can’t tell me what to do. And actually, *she* can’t either. I make my own decisions now. All of you have to get used to that.”

Ariana readjusted her hood. “Let’s get out of the rain and discuss this. I’m sure we can work this out.”

Neither of her friends looked like they believed her.

She wasn’t entirely sure herself.

Chapter Nineteen

Ariana held the gate open for her friends. Rita marched through, but Bella didn't budge.

"Come on." Rita waved her over.

Bella shook her head. "I'm not going to your house."

"We need to talk."

"Then we do that here. At Ariana's house."

Rita threw Ariana a pleading look.

"I'm not changing my mind." Bella crossed her arms.

"Why are you doing this?" Rita exclaimed.

"Me? You're the one trying to control me! I refuse to trade one prison for another. If I wanted to keep living under someone's thumb, I'd have stayed at home. But I'm done living that life! I've wasted too much time being a good little girl who obeyed every ridiculous rule foisted upon her. But I don't have to be, and I'm not going to be! You escaped that life. Why would you want any less for me? You're trying to take my freedom, too, just in a different way than Father and Neil."

A flash of lightning lit the sky. A few moments later, thunder rumbled so loudly Ariana felt it.

The downpour began.

Neither Rita nor Bella had on coats.

"Let's go inside!" Ariana gestured toward her house.

“Okay.” Bella marched toward the house.

Rita glared at Ari before following her sister.

Ariana closed and latched the gate, then hurried inside just as the sky lit up again. A crack of thunder shook the house just as she closed the door.

Hammering from the garage sounded over the peppy Halloween music.

“Where to?” Rita asked.

“Upstairs.” Ariana hung her jacket on a hook. Water dripped onto the floor. “You two need dry clothes. Take whatever you can find from Bella’s room. I’ll be up as soon as I clean up this puddle.”

This sisters bickered as they climbed the steps.

Ariana grabbed some hand towels from the kitchen and sopped up the mess.

One of her neighbors came from the living room and asked about some decorations. Ari pointed her in the right direction then made her way upstairs.

Rita and Bella had changed into dry clothes and pulled back their drenched hair.

“I have nothing more to say.” Bella plopped onto her bed.

“We need to talk.” Rita sat next to her.

“Not if you won’t treat me like an adult.”

Ariana started to say something, but Rita spoke first.

“You don’t understand what it’s like on the outside. Living with our parents—”

“I’d be able to find out if you’d stop acting like them!” Bella’s nostrils flared.

Rita’s mouth fell open. “Take that back.”

“No.”

Ariana got between them. “Time out!”

“Would you stop?” Rita shook her head. “This is between my sister and me.”

“I can see both sides,” Ari said. “Rita, you’re scared about what could happen to Bella because your dad and Neil are the hunt. You don’t want her to get hurt. Right?”

“Obviously.”

Ariana turned to Bella. “And you only want to be treated with the respect you deserve and have always lacked. Right?”

“Yes.”

“I do respect her!” Rita put her hands on her hips. “But I also need to protect her. Not that she’ll let me.”

“Do you want to be protected?” Ari asked Bella.

“Not like she’s trying to do. I will not be controlled again! Like I said, I’m done. I’m not going to put up with it, no matter who’s trying to force my hand.”

Rita’s expression deflated. “You really think that’s what I’m trying to do?”

“That’s exactly what you *are* doing!”

Ariana rubbed her temples, where a headache was starting to form. “I have a proposition.”

“What?” The sisters spoke in unison.

“Since emotions are running so high at the moment, how about we call a time out? Let’s just focus on getting things ready for the party. We’ll agree to disagree for the time being, then come back together after the festivities. That’ll give everyone plenty of time to think.”

Bella frowned. “Only if I can stay here.”

“Not a chance.” Rita crossed her arms.

“You don’t get to make that decision for me.”

“I thought you wanted my help.”

“Starting over, not giving up.”

“Time out!” Ariana waved her hands. “We clearly need a break.”

Rita threw her an exasperated look. “You think space is going to resolve this?” She turned to her sister. “Father, possibly along with Neil, is going to come after you at some point. Don’t let your guard down. I shouldn’t have to tell you how determined those men are to keep what they think belongs to them.”

Bella narrowed her eyes. “They’ll be less likely to find me here.”

“Yeah, they’d never think to look for you at a party the entire neighborhood is attending!”

“They’ll be too afraid to come inside. They think everyone who participates in Halloween is a devil worshiper.”

“And what do you think they’ll do to you if that’s where they find you, and they manage to take you away?”

Color drained from Bella’s face, but she quickly recovered. “I won’t let them take me.”

“You think it’ll be that easy?”

Ariana waved her hands again. “Time to get downstairs and get to work. The decorations aren’t going to display themselves. Who wants to help with the escape room?”

“Me!” Bella’s expression lit up.

“Do you even know what one is?” Rita asked.

“Yes.” Bella glared at her. “You think I’ve never watched TV?”

“Have at it.” Rita gave her a dismissive eye roll. “I need to get to the restaurant and make sure everything is in order for the catering. The next two days are brutal between Halloween and the Day of the Dead.”

“If I need to do anything with my order, let me know,” Ariana said.

“Will do.” Rita marched toward the door, but she stopped suddenly. Pulled out her phone and looked at the screen, her

eyes widening.

“What’s wrong?” Ariana asked.

Rita’s mouth gaped, but she didn’t say anything.

Ari put a hand on her arm. “Talk to us.”

Rita looked at her. “He just threatened the lives of Grayson and the kids if I don’t hand you over.”

Bella gasped. “Are you going to?”

“Of course not.”

“Maybe I should just turn myself in. I can’t let others get hurt because of me.”

“No,” Ariana and Rita said.

“What then? I can’t go to your house. You don’t want me staying here.”

Rita frowned. “I don’t know what the answer is. For now, stay and help with the party. I’ll make sure the door is locked on my way out.”

Bella turned to Ariana. “Do you still want me here? I understand if you don’t, considering my father is making death threats.”

“You need to be here all the more now. Damon and I will never revoke our offer for you to stay. But I would highly reconsider coming to the party if I were you.”

Bella nodded but looked more determined than ever.

She might show up at the party despite any potential danger — including her unhinged father and the man he so desperately wants her to marry.

Ariana would have to take every measure possible to keep her safe.

Chapter Twenty

Tantalizing scents of bacon, eggs, and coffee tickled Bella's nose. She rubbed her eyes, pulled the covers up to her face, and stretched. The last thing she wanted was to get out of bed. They'd stayed up past two in the morning getting everything ready for the big party.

She bolted upright at the thought of it. Tonight was her first time celebrating Halloween, and she wasn't going to show up as food like she'd told everyone. It wasn't like she was trying to lie, but the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to wear something more traditional.

More risqué. Something her parents would hate.

The thought made her heart race.

She'd gone through the costume closet again just before bed, and put together the perfect outfit. It was award-worthy.

Bella leaped out of bed, flung open the closet door, and gushed over her picks. The ruffled gray and white dress with torn lace throughout was to die for. She wasn't used to clingy, sleeveless tops but she couldn't wait to don it that night. Paired with the Day of the Dead skull mask, the long gray wig that almost matched the dress, and a gray veil, she would be a hauntingly beautiful living dead bride.

It was the perfect costume to send exactly the message she wanted to her father and Neil. Not only was the top part revealing — her arms and shoulders wouldn't be covered, except by the veil — but it shouted the message that she would

only get married over her dead body. When she'd tried it on, it had fit her like a glove.

Footsteps sounded out in the hall.

Bella shoved everything back into the closet and shut the door. Nobody was going to see her costume until she arrived at the party. All eyes would be on her, and nobody could make her change once all the guests had already seen her as the bride who would choose death over domination.

She couldn't help smiling at the thought.

Knock, knock!

Bella leaped from the closet then pulled on the soft bathrobe she'd been wearing lately. "Come in!"

Ariana poked her head in and smiled. "Oh, good. You're up. Breakfast is ready, though we should probably call it lunch at this hour."

"What time *is* it?" Bella yawned and looked out the window.

The clouds were as dark as they'd been the previous day, so it was impossible to guess the hour. It could be ten in the morning or two in the afternoon. Rain fell in torrents, pelting the windows and puddling on the ground.

"Almost noon, and we still have more work to do before guests start arriving."

"I can't wait!" Bella bounded toward her, imagining the delighted responses to her outfit. "Do you have a costume contest?"

"Of course." Ariana beamed. "It's always done by a secret vote. And it's always so hard to pick. I swear, people's ideas get better each year. Last time someone came as an octopus, and it looked so real. Somehow the tentacles even felt slimy to the touch."

"So cool! I can't wait to see what people come up with this year."

"Me too. There are always a lot of fun original ones."

“What are you dressing as?”

“Damon and I never tell.”

“Not even to your houseguest?” Bella batted her lashes.

“Nope. Come eat.” Ari turned for the door and motioned for her to follow.

By the time they reached the bottom of the staircase, Bella’s stomach rumbled like the thunder outside.

“Help yourself.” Damon motioned toward the food on the counter as he dug into his meal. “I’d have waited for you two, but I have a ton of errands to run before we can get the party started.”

Bella’s stomach roared, and if her hosts heard it they didn’t act like they had. While she stuffed her face, Ariana and Damon discussed the remaining things to do.

It sounded impossible to get everything done in time. But luckily it wouldn’t take her long to get into her costume. She didn’t have to deal with makeup or fixing her hair. The mask and wig took care of that. It would probably take her all of five minutes to get everything on, and then a few more minutes to adjust everything to her liking.

“Do you need anything else for your corn on the cob costume?” Damon asked her.

She shook her head, guilt stinging for the lie. But she didn’t want anyone knowing about her switch in plans. Plus, they weren’t telling her what they were dressing as. It was all fair. A girl was allowed to change her mind.

“Okay.” He took his plate to the sink and rinsed it off. “I’m off.” He kissed Ariana. “Text me if you need anything else.”

“Will do.”

After finishing their breakfast, Bella helped Ariana clean the kitchen then set up the table for the party. They put out more than twenty different kinds of candy. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen.

They went around the rest of the first floor, checking everything that had been set up the day before and touching up anything requiring a last minute adjustment. The only thing that remained was the long dining room table. Rita would arrive just before the start of the festivities to set up the food.

After scarfing down so much bacon and eggs, Bella wasn't sure she'd be hungry by then. Or ever. Hopefully she'd still fit into the gorgeous gray dress after gorging herself.

Ariana put on the music, and everything started to feel real.

Bella was actually going to her first ever Halloween party.

Ding-dong!

Was that the first guest?

Her stomach knotted at the thought. This was really happening.

Ari hurried for the door. Her and Rita's voices carried from the entry way along with the mouthwatering aromas of Mexican food from the bar and grill.

Bella took the long way around to the staircase in order to avoid her sister.

It was time to get dressed in her secret costume.

Chapter Twenty-One

Damon adjusted the collar of his safari outfit and rechecked his reflection in the mirror. He would get tired of holding the binoculars all night if he didn't find a strap. Unfortunately, they wouldn't fit in the fanny pack Ariana had insisted made the ensemble.

He was pretty sure she just thought it was funny that she convinced him to wear the atrocious thing.

Luckily he had a plain black lanyard that would hold the binoculars so he wouldn't have to carry them around all night. Otherwise, he'd lose them within fifteen minutes by setting them down and forgetting about them. And they actually completed the costume, unlike the goofy pack around his waist.

Ariana stepped out of the bathroom in her clingy yet elegant leopard print dress and matching ears. She'd drawn leopard spots on her face, arms, and legs that matched her dress.

He whistled then pulled her close. "We could always skip the party and have the night to ourselves."

She kissed him but pulled away. "As nice as that sounds, there's no way I'd skip my Halloween party."

Damon chuckled. "Can't blame me for trying."

"Nope." She grabbed her phone, leaned close, and took a selfie.

He grinned widely, proud as always to be the other half of her costume.

They made their way downstairs and looked around one last time to make sure everything was perfect. He turned up the volume of the music.

Ding-dong!

Ariana clapped her hands. “Our first guest is here!”

She flung open the door to welcome Maya and Olivia. They were dressed as the twins from the Shining.

“I love it!” Ariana wrapped her arms around them.

“Look at you two!” Olivia gushed. “Perfect!”

They took turns taking pictures of each other.

Rita, Grayson, and the kids were next. Rita and Grayson wore matching pirate outfits and the kids all raced inside before Damon had a chance to take in their costumes.

More guests arrived, each in their own fun and unique designs. This year might be the hardest to pick a winner. They were all so good, and everyone seemed to love his and Ari’s combination. Charles and Lia always used to go all out, having some kind of weird and wild idea that people would talk about for weeks after. But now they were in LA and their house had a *for sale* sign out front.

Their old friend group was almost completely broken up. Damon and Ariana remained, as did Rita. But Boone was in prison, and Damon hadn’t had time to really connect with Grayson yet. They were friendly, but it wasn’t like they were at the point of calling each other at all hours.

Maybe that was on Damon. While he was friendly and well-liked, he found it difficult to make close friends. As the son of an infamous serial killer, he didn’t just open himself up to others. That invited fear and rejection, two emotions he ardently avoided. It was impossible to know how someone would react to finding out his parentage.

The doorbell kept ringing, and more people flooded in. Soon the house was packed, and he was leading the first group

of people into the escape room. He went over the directions and returned inside.

Music now boomed louder than before, laughter and conversation came from all rooms, and even more people had arrived. He wouldn't be surprised if everyone from Rosy Hills was here now, and as far as he could tell everyone was having a great time.

He greeted some of the newcomers, complimenting the creativity of the costumes. Something on the staircase caught his attention.

No, someone.

She took each step slowly, her long gray-and-white dress dragging on the stairs behind her. At first Damon thought Ariana had changed her costume — it was impossible to see the face behind the elaborate skull mask — but then he realized it was Bella. She must've decided against the corn on the cob for this ensemble. It was a mixture of several of Ariana's from previous years, and Bella had made it into something entirely new.

If Rita was upset before, she was sure to be furious after seeing this. While Damon didn't disagree with how she felt about her sister's plight, she was being overbearing. Rita wasn't Bella's mom, and the last thing Bella needed was another parent. Especially considering the actual parents she'd been dealing with her whole life.

Damon couldn't imagine having to put up with his father's demands into adulthood. He had already been on his own since high school. After his dad's arrest, he found a foster family who let him stay at his family home as long as he checked in with them regularly. With as much as his dad had traveled before, it wasn't much different after his arrest, except that he had other people checking on him.

Ariana tugged on his arm. "Rita's going to flip out."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

"If her dad shows up, I think he'll know it's her. Even with her face covered, he could recognize her figure. Have you seen

anyone suspicious?”

“No, but I’ll take a closer look at everyone. Somebody could’ve slipped in while I was in the garage.”

“Thank you. I’m going to stay near Bella and make sure she doesn’t leave with anyone.”

“Good thinking.” Damon looked around at the guests, making mental notes of who was there.

He could account for everybody he came across.

Grayson came over to him and adjusted his eye patch. “This party is amazing. Rita told me I’d be impressed, but I had no idea it would be anything like this. It’s pro level.”

Coming from the local celebrity newscaster, that was quite the compliment. “You’ll have to tell Ariana. This is her baby and always has been. Her family jokes that she was born wearing a costume.”

He chuckled.

Damon glanced around as they continued the discussion.

Grayson must have picked up on his thoughts. “You haven’t seen Rita’s dad, have you?”

“No, but I’m keeping my eye out.”

“I appreciate it. Rita’s really worried about Bella.”

“So are we. I had an unstable father too, so I know the danger.”

Grayson cocked a brow.

“That’s a topic for another day.”

“Rita mentioned something about you having a sordid family history too.”

“You could say that. It’s more complicated—”

The doorbell rang, and someone nearby opened the door.

In stepped a lone man in a hockey uniform and mask.

Damon straightened his back, trying to tell who that might be. It was nearly impossible to tell with all the padding. He

could be muscular or skinny, or anywhere in between.

“That’s not Diego,” Grayson said. “He’s shorter.”

“Could it be Neil?”

Grayson scratched his beard. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never met the guy. You don’t recognize him?”

“No.”

They exchanged a worried glance.

“Find Bella,” Damon said. “I’m going to talk with this guy.”

And possibly kick him out and call the cops.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Diego pulled the ski mask from his mouth and sucked in the cold, fresh air. He hated the thing, but it was all he had to wear that wasn't part of an evil, devil-worshipping costume. He had on his typical baggy hunting attire along with the mask to hide his identity. It was as close to Halloween attire as he would ever get, and he'd only donned it to get his daughter back. Like Neil's sports uniform, they were wearing ordinary clothes that had nothing to do with the evil holiday being celebrated inside that house.

The music was so loud, he could hear it at the edge of the property. Isabella had to be inside. It was across the street from Boone and Margarita's house, and his daughters had to be together. He hadn't found his youngest the other night, but today would be different. This time he had Neil on his side.

And Neil wanted his bride. He was eager to get her back and make her learn her proper place, which was under the thumb of the men in charge. Currently that transfer of power was moving from Diego to Neil. He could see the gleam in Camila's eyes — nothing made his wife's expression light up like a big dowry, and this one was the largest sum received for any of their daughters.

Diego would've actually preferred another suitor than Neil, but he'd offered the most money. Once Camila heard that number, there was no going back. He couldn't say no to his own bride.

It was a good thing this was Diego's last child, because it was growing increasingly clear that he was losing hold. None

of his other children had run away like Isabella, and only two remained faithful to their cause.

That would change soon enough. Isabella would be where she belonged by sunup, and the church was working hard to get Boone free from prison. Then all three of his daughters would live under their proper protection and authority. Obviously breaking Boone free would take some time, but it would happen. Then all would be right in the world again, and Diego would be in good standing with both Heaven and Earth.

A family rushed by, all dressed like the devil worshipers they were. The kids ran ahead, rang the doorbell, and called out, “Trick or treat!”

The woman who answered gushed over the costumes and gave the kids handfuls of candy each before the family passed him again.

Diego waited until the homeowner went back inside, then he darted across the lawn to the fence. He already knew there was a tricky latch on the other side. It would be enough to deter a thief, but Diego was no criminal. He was on a divine mission.

He would save his family no matter the cost, no matter who he had to hurt along the way. His good standing in the next life was too valuable to risk, and he sure wasn't going to let his children get in the way of that. Anyone else was collateral damage if things got out of control.

Everlasting life was what mattered. Everything here was only a test.

One he intended to ace.

Diego fumbled with the latch. He should've sent Neil to this job. Taller than most, he could get the gate unlocked with more ease. Diego was several inches shorter than him, and the latch was made to be difficult for someone of average height to undo.

However, sending Neil in the front door was overall the better part of the plan. Nobody would recognize him inside.

Only Isabella had met him, and just the one time. She wouldn't realize it was him in the hockey gear.

Both Diego's daughters would easily spot him in his hunting attire. How many times had they seen him in it over the years? He was a champion at catching their meals, and he often went out and got their food from the woods regardless of worldly laws that set limits on the time of year he could provide for his family.

This world was out to get them, always attacking their beliefs. Not only with their ridiculous laws but especially with the entertainment industry. Even the school system was in on it, getting kids excited about tonight's stupid holiday that turned everyone's attention to devil worship.

He couldn't wait to get to the next life where everything would finally be right. In fact, if he had to use his guns and bring half the people inside to the everlasting world tonight, he'd do it. At least he would save himself and his daughters from the evils of this world. Then they could enter the utopia together one day.

Everyone in attendance had made the decision to attend this Godforsaken event. If they forced his hand, it didn't matter. He wouldn't have to see them again.

The day of reckoning was coming.

One way or another.

He was sure of that, and he would love nothing more than to be part of it all. Not that he'd kill anyone unnecessarily. That would clearly be wrong. But if somebody put him or his family in danger, they were sealing their own fate.

Things were going to get real tonight.

He just wasn't sure *how*.

Lives would change. Drastically.

Diego was eager to set everything right. No matter the cost.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ariana balanced two trays of appetizers as she moved them from the kitchen to the living room. Nearly bumped into five different people on the way, but she managed to keep everything upright. She set them on the small tables spread around the room, speaking with people along the way.

Everything was going great, and the turnout was even better than she'd hoped. Most of the neighbors were eager to see the inside of the newly built home. Only their closest friends had been over to visit since she and Damon rebuilt.

A lot of the houses inside the gated community were similar in style, having been built around the same time by the same contractor. Only theirs and the oldest homes that had been here before the gates had wildly different layouts. And from the compliments she'd heard, people loved their choices.

Sheila, currently dressed as a cartoon mouse, was a dentist who lived a few blocks over. She stopped Ariana. "I can't believe I've never been to one of your parties before. Are they always this elaborate?"

"Mostly. The escape room is new. Every year we try to come up with something different."

"And your costume! You're absolutely adorable. Do you mind if I get a group picture to put on the HOA website? That needs to be front and center. What a selling point!"

Ariana beamed. "I'd love that, and I guarantee my parents would share the link far and wide."

“Oh, are they here? I’d love to meet them!” Sheila looked around.

“No, they’re with my younger siblings at a party. After I left, my dad’s best friend took over hosting a huge party each year. It’s too far to drive for one night.”

“Pity. I’m sure your parents wish they could see you more.”

Ari ignored the stab of guilt, but she and Damon had good reasons for moving so far from their hometown. “Yes, but we’ll be there for about a week at Thanksgiving.”

“They’ll love that! Well, next time they come this way, let me know. I’d love to meet them.”

“Will do.”

Someone in the back of the room dressed as a hunter caught Ariana’s eye. She hadn’t seen him before, and she’d made a point to welcome everyone.

He was also staring at Bella.

Ariana turned her attention back to Sheila. “I see someone I need to talk to. We’ll catch up some more in a bit?”

“Certainly! I’m going to round up everyone for that group picture.” Sheila joined the nearest group of costume-clad guests.

Ari inched toward the man in camouflage. He didn’t seem to notice her, as he was intensely focused on Bella. Her living dead bride costume was striking, but his attention to her was over the top. And considering Ariana hadn’t seen him come in, he was high on her suspicion list.

He had to be either Diego or Neil.

The man visibly tensed as Bella laughed with the group of women gathered around her.

When Ariana turned her attention back to the man, someone in a hockey uniform had joined him. Now there were two men she hadn’t seen arrive. Both focused on Bella.

It had to be the two of them. They were here, in her home. Somehow they'd managed to get inside unnoticed.

Ariana's stomach churned acid, and a chill ran through her. This was really happening. The murderous Halloween haters had come to her party, a place of refuge. Except for the year she was eleven.

That hadn't gone well. She'd been abducted.

But she'd survived. Beat the odds. Lived to teach others personal safety, to have a hand in helping others through similar life-threatening circumstances.

She could protect Bella as well. This would just be one more story for the books.

Sheila grabbed her arm. "We're going to do the picture in front of the fireplace."

"Picture... right." Ariana followed her, keeping her attention on the two mystery men.

Sheila pointed everyone in place while Damon set up his camera on the tripod.

Ariana needed to get to him. Ask if he'd let those guys in. Maybe he knew them from somewhere. But where? They lived and worked together. Hardly spent any time apart. Their worlds were one and the same. His friends were her friends and vice-versa.

Maybe they were new neighbors or friends of someone in the community.

After the picture, she would have to ask Bella if she recognized them — not that it would be easy to tell who they were. Both the hockey uniform and the hunting gear did a good job of disguising the men's shapes.

At least with Sheila's picture, there would be photo evidence of them. Ariana could point them out to the police, if it came down to that.

She drew a deep breath. Just because she didn't know who they were didn't mean they were going to try to abduct Bella and force her to marry someone terrible.

It also didn't mean they *weren't* going to do that.

Sheila put both mystery men at the other end of the group. Bella was in the middle.

They could reach her just as easily as Ariana could.

"Everyone look at the camera!" Damon waved his arms to get everyone's attention. "I'm about to set the timer. Keep your eyes on the blinking light once it starts. It'll take three pictures. Smile and try to keep your eyes open for all of them. One, two, three. Now!"

He pressed the button then ran over to Ariana and wrapped an arm around her.

She tried to focus on the blinking light, but also strained to see the two men from the corner of her eye.

"Smile!" Damon called out.

Ari forced a smile just as the flash blinded her.

"Hold the pose!" Damon kissed her cheek before turning back to the device.

"Do you know the hockey player or the hunter?" Ariana asked, trying to keep her smile.

"What?" he asked.

Another flash.

"I didn't see them come in and they keep looking at—"

One final flash then the group dispersed.

"Not so fast!" Sheila said. "We need to see how those came out."

As everyone else waited, Ariana glanced around for the two men. It was impossible to see them since the group was crowded in such a small place.

Damon and Sheila looked at the tiny screen on his camera.

Ariana's breath hitched. Would they need to pose again? She needed to find those men.

Now.

Sheila gave a thumbs-up. “They’re perfect. Go back to partying!”

Everyone went their separate ways.

“Come look at these!” Sheila waved Ariana over.

“I need to check something.”

“Which is your favorite? Damon’s going to send me the best one.”

“Let him pick.” She darted toward the kitchen, not seeing either of the two mystery men.

Or Bella.

Ariana’s heart leaped into her throat.

If they had her alone, they could drag her back to the depths of hell where they came from.

Guilt tore through her. She should’ve done a better job of protecting her houseguest.

Rita would never forgive her if anything happened to her.

This was exactly why her friend had been so adamant that Bella stay away from the party.

Ariana should’ve gone along with her friend’s wishes.

Now it was too late.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ariana turned to Damon, but he'd disappeared with his camera. There wasn't time to find him.

She had to get to Bella.

Groups were gathered all throughout the first floor of the house, but Bella wasn't among them. No gray flowing dress, no Day of the Dead mask in sight.

The house seemed to shrink around her as she raced from room to room, not finding her young friend anywhere.

Maybe they'd taken her outside.

Cold air blasted her as she opened the door. Wind whipped raindrops and leaves through the air, and the nearest streetlight flickered like it was about to go out.

The only people in sight were groups of trick or treaters, running and laughing, all unaware of the potential danger not far away. Most homes were empty because of the party, but there were buckets of candy on the porches of the homes where nobody waited to hand out treats.

Ariana raced into the yard and checked the fencing on either side of the house. Both gates were closed.

Were the men still inside? Was Bella?

She marched to the sidewalk. Looked up and down the street for anything unusual. Listened for any signs of distress or struggle.

Shrieks and giggles sounded, but nothing out of the ordinary for a Halloween night.

“I love your costume!” a girl dressed as a firefighter called to Ariana as she raced by, chasing a boy dressed as a Dalmatian.

Ariana tried to say thanks but couldn't get her voice to cooperate. The girl was already out of sight anyway.

Bella must not have gone outside. That was just as well. Ariana needed to let her friends know what was going on with the two men watching Bella.

Slam!

She whipped around to look at her front door. It was still open.

The noise had come from somewhere else.

Ariana oriented herself and crept down the street to where some overhead branches blocked her view of the road.

A white van sat running at the corner of the street. Its back doors were open.

Her heart sank. That vehicle may as well have ‘kidnap mobile’ painted on the side.

It was even more suspicious than the two men she was looking for.

There was no other choice.

She bolted toward it.

A dark curtain hung behind the open doors.

It could be hiding anything. Including Bella.

Ariana's heart threatened to leap into her throat as she approached the van.

The hunter stepped out from around the vehicle. This time he had no mask.

It was Diego.

She recognized him from Rita's wedding.

His eyes widened with recognition too.

“What are you doing?” Ari demanded.

“It’s none of your concern!”

The hockey player came around. “Who are you talking to?” He stopped, stared at Ari, then turned back to Diego. “What’s she doing here?”

Ariana glanced back and forth between the van and the house. She could either try to rescue Bella — if she was even behind the curtain — or go back to the house and try to get help. But that would just give them time to get away.

And she couldn’t see the license plate. No other identifying features. Just a white van. Could be one of thousands, if not more.

She had to do something.

“Why are you here at my street?” she demanded. “Why were you at my party?” Ari kept her gaze focused on the van, looking for the slightest movement.

“None of your business.”

“When you come into my house, it is. Are you trying to kidnap Bella again?”

They both laughed.

“You think that’s funny?” Ariana quickly glanced toward the house. Hadn’t Damon noticed she was gone yet?

“Yeah, actually.” Diego narrowed his eyes at her. “When she’s my property.”

“A person isn’t property.”

“Not to a heathen like you who doesn’t understand the proper order of things.”

Neil stepped next to Diego. “Leave now, and forget you ever saw us.”

Ariana could hardly believe they were going to let her walk away. But then again, they clearly didn’t think they were doing anything wrong.

She stared both of them in the eyes. “Let Bella make her own choices. She’s an adult.”

“Her decisions are in *our* hands. Our women don’t get such privileges. No woman should.”

Red hot fire burned in Ariana’s chest. How could people like this still exist?

She knew all too well that evil never stopped roaming the streets.

“Is Bella in there?” Ari gestured toward the van.

“No.” Neil smirked and crossed his arms, clearly lying.

“Okay.” She took a step away from them, but then darted toward the van. Pushed past the wool curtains. Landed with a thud on the hard, uncarpeted floor. Into pitch blackness.

Muffled sounds came from the left.

Ari struggled to see anything. Could barely make out any shapes. “Bella?”

More of the same noises. Something bumped on her left.

It had to be her.

“Bella!”

The doors slammed shut behind her. Weight shifted as Neil and Diego got into the front and closed those doors.

Someone gunned the gas.

Ariana flew backward. Crashed into the doors.

Tires squealed as the vehicle turned a sharp corner.

She flew to the left. Landed on someone.

Ari recognized the lacy dress that had once been her costume.

“Bella!” she whisper-yelled.

Her friend squirmed and muttered, but didn’t say anything.

Ariana felt around.

Duct tape covered Bella’s mouth.

She reached for it.

A bright light blinded her. “Don’t touch that!”

Her lungs deflated.

With the light still blazing in her eyes, footsteps sounded on the hard floor coming her way.

Hands grabbed her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bella struggled against the restraints, still unable to believe her father and Neil had managed to get her after everything she'd done to protect herself. She still couldn't figure out how they'd gotten into the party. Ariana and Damon were supposed to make sure nobody got in who hadn't been invited.

Yet they managed to circumvent every security measure put in place. How?

Not that it mattered now. She was taped up in the van, hardly able to move, and Ariana was with her.

A bright light lit up the back of the van. It felt like an assault on her eyes after having adjusted to the darkness. It was impossible to tell who was behind the flashlight. But he was fighting Ariana, and she was giving him a run for his money.

They would both be covered in bruises after this.

Maybe if Bella had fought that hard in the house, she would still be in there. Her father and Neil might've given up and walked away, admitting defeat. But old terror had seized her, and her muscles had turned into mush upon seeing their faces again.

It was like she was a little girl, unable to defend herself against the giant bullies in her life. If she survived this, she needed Ariana to teach her how to fight back like that. She was the kind of woman Bella wanted to be, if she could ever uncover that kind of confidence within herself.

Maybe it wasn't too late. She could still fight for her friend who'd just risked everything for her.

Nobody had ever done anything like that for Bella.

She *had* to find the piece of her that could return the favor, duct tape or not. Unable to free herself, she rolled over to where Ariana was struggling.

Bella kicked her feet as best she could considering the tight tape around her ankles. She didn't want to hurt Ariana with the heels, but at the same time wanted to inflict permanent damage on her father or Neil. Or better yet, both of them. But she only had one within reach.

It was hard to see where to kick. The beam of light kept moving around, and flashed in her eyes every so often, making it even harder to focus. She had to twist herself almost completely around but she was certain her heels were aimed at whichever man was back there with them.

She held her breath for a moment before pulling her legs as close to her as she could then thrusting them out.

"Ow!" That was Neil, and he released a string of profanities before promising Bella she would pay for that poor decision.

She kicked him again, harder this time. And her heel sunk into something.

The flashlight dropped and bounced along the floor. When it stopped, the light shone on a wall.

It was just enough to light up everything in the van. Not well, but enough to see.

Neil swore all the more.

"What's going on back there?" Father demanded.

"Your disobedient daughter just kicked me in the groin!"

"Aren't you wearing a cup?"

"Not for a stupid Halloween party! I — oh!"

Ariana tackled Neil, and they both flew backward, landing on the floor.

Neil gasped for air.

Ariana covered his mouth and nose with her hands.

He wrapped his fingers around her neck.

She cried out and let go of his mouth.

Bella squirmed over, finding every movement a challenge because of the tape around her ankles and wrists. They had tied her hands behind her back, which made it even harder.

Done on purpose, no doubt.

That wouldn't stop her. Slow her down, but not stop her.

She'd tasted enough freedom that she knew exactly what she was fighting for now. Life without the heavy-handed rule of oppressive men was better than she'd dreamed. She'd had the space and freedom to breathe, to dream.

No way she was going to let them take that away from her now. This was nothing more than a setback.

Bella twisted her body again and aimed her feet at Neil. She'd hit him harder in the crotch and hopefully take away his ability to reproduce. The last thing the world needed was more of him.

Just as she was about to make contact, Neil shoved Ariana away and grabbed Bella's legs.

She tried to scream, but the duct tape prevented her from making more than a muffled whisper.

He pulled off her right shoe then the left.

Those were the only weapons she had.

Neil threw them at her.

Bella closed her eyes just as the heel of one scraped across her face, over her closed lids. They both hit the wall behind her.

“Who gave you permission to wear those things? Never put on such provocative and immodest footwear again!

Nothing like that should ever sit on your feet unless I put them there. Do you understand?"

She narrowed her eyes. It wasn't like he could expect her to answer.

He struck her across the face. "Do you understand?"

Clearly he did expect a reply.

Neil held up his fist, his face reddening even in the dim light.

Bella nodded. Not that she intended to comply.

She would either get away or they would kill her. Those were the only two options.

The last things she would ever do would be to marry him or return to her father's household.

And she would fight for her life. Or die trying.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The van skidded to a stop, sending both Ariana and Bella flying forward, crashing into each other. It was almost a welcome change from the constant bumping up and down. They'd been on a gravel road for what felt like miles.

But now they weren't moving.

It would be an ideal time to try and get away. Not that they could while tied with duct tape. They'd both been trying unsuccessfully to free themselves, but all attempts had been futile. Or at least Ari assumed her friend was having as little success as she was having.

Neil and Diego had removed the flashlight after tying Ariana, and the ride had been dark and silent since then. The two men had hardly said two words to each other, and neither had put on music.

Ari's mind raced. Not only did she and Bella need to get free of their restraints, but they had to escape and find a way back home. There was no way to know where they were after all that driving. She only hoped Bella would recognize the location. Hopefully it was somewhere her dad had taken her before.

If so, they stood a chance at getting away. But even if she didn't know, Ariana would fight and run. This was hardly the first time she'd been taken to a remote location. Granted, when she was a kid her efforts hadn't gotten her very far, but now she was an expert who taught personal protection techniques to others.

She had what it took to get her and Bella to safety.

Next to her, Bella squirmed.

Ariana waited.

Neither man had gotten out of the vehicle or spoken a word since stopping. What were they planning? Had Ariana's presence altered their plans?

She would take any advantage she could get. But first she needed to remove the tape. Then she could fight. Until then, she was at their mercy.

And neither Neil nor Diego had any mercy to give. They didn't care about Bella, so they definitely wouldn't concern themselves with an outsider. Ariana might be the first one they decided to go after, intending to eliminate the unintended witness to their crimes. She needed to be prepared.

For anything.

It was anyone's guess what awaited them outside the vehicle. Could be the entire cult standing in position with weapons. Or it could be nothing. Maybe they were going to dump Ariana in the middle of the woods to get rid of her so Neil could marry Bella without a struggle.

Nothing would surprise her.

Both men exited the van, slamming their respective doors. Muffled conversation sounded outside. They were moving, making it even harder to make out any words.

One thing was certain — their tones were serious. Deadly serious.

Ari's heart raced, compounding her difficulty in eavesdropping, but also making her ready to fight back.

They would regret ever taking Bella from Ariana's house.

A key slid into the keyhole near them. The doors flung open, allowing a little light inside. Wherever they were, it wasn't raining, and the stars and moon provided faint illumination.

“Out!” Neil waved around a rifle. He’d removed his hockey uniform and now appeared to be in a tux, but it was hard to tell while he was backlit.

Ariana and Bella both scooted toward the doors, not making much progress due to the restraints.

“Faster!” Diego snapped.

Before she had a chance to try to speed up, someone grabbed her ankles and yanked her toward the door. She bumped her head on something hard. Something else scratched her arm, tore her dress. Her leopard ears were still pinned to her hair.

She flew through the air. Hands grabbed her. Forced her onto the ground. Shoved her against the van. One ankle buckled, but it didn’t twist. She’d still be able to walk once the tape was removed, not that it’d be easy in heels on a gravelly road.

Neil yanked Bella from the vehicle then forced her next to Ariana. “This is what’s going to happen.”

Bella whimpered.

He slapped her.

Her father looked on with approval.

A fire burned in Ariana’s gut as she stared at the sad excuse of a man who should be protecting his daughter.

“Not another complaint,” Neil spat, glaring at the woman he thought he was engaged to. “We’re here at the original church building. The women are getting it ready for our wedding. Your smutty, devil-worshipping costume has to go. No woman of mine is ever going to celebrate that pagan day. Got it?”

Bella just stared at him.

“Got it?” Spittle flew from his mouth onto her face.

The only thing keeping Ariana from attacking him was the duct tape.

Bella nodded, tears shining in her eyes.

“Good. Your mother is inside with your wedding dress. She’s going to put it on you, and you’re going to be the obedient, submissive woman you’re supposed to be. No more of this running away or celebrating Halloween nonsense. You had your fun. Now it’s over. Understood?”

Bella nodded again, this time tears falling from her eyes.

Ariana looked around. Woods surrounded them on every side. She didn’t see the church Neil had mentioned.

Muffled words came from behind Bella’s duct tape.

“Her?” Neil scowled as he glanced at Ariana. “I don’t know what we’re going to do with her yet. She wasn’t part of the plan, and she certainly can’t be part of the wedding. She isn’t pure.”

Bella said more that couldn’t be understood, squirming.

Neil smacked her again. “Enough!” He turned to Diego. “Cut their ankle ties. We’ll need them to walk. I don’t feel like carrying anyone.”

Diego pulled out a pocketknife, opened it, then cut his daughter’s. He glowered at Ariana. “We should leave her here. The wild animals will take care of her, and we’ll be innocent of her blood.”

Bella shook her head, and more muffled words came from behind the tape over her mouth.

Neil raised a hand, and she stopped. He lowered it. “Cut the pagan’s tie.”

Diego sliced the tape around Ariana’s ankles.

She stumbled before regaining her balance.

“Follow us,” Neil demanded. He and Diego walked ahead.

Ariana and Bella exchanged a look. With the men not looking their way, they could make a run for it.

Neil turned around and aimed his rifle at them. “Now!”

So much for that.

They’d have to find another means of escape.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The fabric ripped so loudly, the sound echoed in Bella's ears as her mother grabbed the dress and tore it. She gave it another hard yank, and the once gorgeous gray dress pulled away from her in tatters.

Bella flinched and threw an apologetic glance at Ariana in the corner.

"Better." Mother's face scrunched as she looked Bella up and down. "Now that we have that wicked thing off you, it's time to remove that makeup. You think you're going to be like Margarita?"

Bella didn't answer. She was too disappointed to speak. Her plan had been to make a run for it as soon as all eyes were off her. But now as she stood in the large abandoned church building in only her undergarments, she had no chance at escape.

"Too good to answer me?" Mother pinched Bella's side.

"Ow! Quit doing that."

"I'm your mother, I'll do what I like. Are you planning to be a rebellious harlot like Margarita?"

"She's not a harlot, Mother."

Another pinch.

"Stop!"

"You don't tell me what to do! You've been spending entirely too much time with your sinful sister." She grabbed a

rag, dipped it in a bucket, and wiped the cold liquid all over Bella's face. "Stop squirming. Don't ask me what I did to deserve two disobedient daughters."

Bella couldn't help rolling her eyes.

Her mother pinched her twice as hard as the other times.

The pain was too much to ignore, and she yelped.

"Shut up." Mother pressed harder as she scrubbed off Bella's makeup.

Luciana, Bella's other sister, entered the room with her young daughters.

"You're finally here," Mother said. "Help me get this paint off your wicked little sister's face."

"Who's that?" Luciana glanced toward Ariana.

"Nobody. Get over here." Mother handed the rag to the only daughter she was proud of before unzipping a garment bag hanging in the corner.

Bella tried looking around her sister to see what her mother was doing. She could only get a partial glimpse of the dress. Wedding dresses tended to get passed around among families, so it was probably the same one both of her sisters had worn, and several cousins too.

It wasn't like anyone cared about making wedding days special or unique for any of the brides. They could easily be swapped out for another. Unlike the few outside weddings she'd been to, the ones in their church made the men the stars of the weddings.

They were always the stars of everything. Men led Sunday services, they stood at the front to lead singing, they made all the decisions. Women and children were expected to obey and do nothing else. They were barely decorations. Nothing more than servants.

"Hold still." Luciana cupped Bella's chin firmly, but not harshly like their mother's touch.

Bella looked around for a way out. There was only one door in the building, but it had plenty of windows. Whether any of them opened was a big question. It wouldn't surprise her if they didn't. She wasn't the first bride to want out.

She'd heard the horror stories.

Those women were either never seen again, or they were the ones who never looked anyone in the eye. When at church or other gatherings, they stared at the ground the entire time and never left their husband's sides. How could a husband trust a wife who tried to flee the wedding ceremony? Everyone knew he had to keep a tight rein on her.

That would be her fate if she didn't successfully get away from Neil tonight. It was now or never.

"Why'd you put on so much makeup?" Luciana rubbed her face all the harder.

"It's just the normal amount." Because of her skull mask, she hadn't put on anything extra for her costume. She only wore what she'd applied for the day.

"No matter what the world considers normal, it's too much."

"It would also be easier to get off with the right kind of wipe."

"Don't talk back to me."

"I'm not one of your kids," Bella quipped.

Luciana made a *tsk* sound. "Look at what such a short time away from our community has done to you."

"It's shown me freedom."

"Don't let Mother hear you talking like that." Luciana glanced over at their mother.

If Bella had on more than her undergarments, she'd run through the church and take her chances with the woods.

Maybe that was her best bet even without clothes.

She glanced around. Upon seeing Ariana slumped in a corner, her heart sank. Her new friend had risked everything for her. She couldn't leave without her.

But she also couldn't marry Neil. Marriages in the church were permanent, unlike those outside of it. Rita had gotten away and had been able to get married to someone nice. Grayson treated her well, and her sister was happier than she'd ever seen her. Even if she did try to act like her mom.

If Bella had listened to Rita, she wouldn't be in this mess.

Now she had to figure out what to do on her own. Nobody would let her talk to Ari, and Rita probably hadn't even noticed Bella was missing from the party. She, her husband, and the kids were probably having the time of their lives with no clue Bella was about to marry Neil.

She pulled away from Luciana's grip. "Enough! I'm done."

"There's still makeup on your face."

"Then using that gross water isn't working." She rubbed her skin, which felt raw.

"You're the one who decided to put the tools of the devil on yourself."

Bella ignored the dig. "Isn't there any soap around here? That would make it easier."

"Don't make anything easier on her." Their mother turned and glared at Bella. "You made your choices, and now you must pay the consequences."

"It's *waterproof* makeup!"

"Should've thought about that before you put it on." Mother turned to Luciana. "Rub as hard as you need to. Just get that trash off her."

Luciana reached for her.

Bella recoiled and stayed out of her reach.

"Mother!"

“Get the belt if you need to. I’m busy.”

Bella’s entire body froze.

Her sister lifted an eyebrow. “Do I need to get a belt?”

Before she could respond, Luciana spun around and marched across the room.

Everyone’s back was turned to her.

Except Ariana’s. She nodded.

Bella gulped in air.

This was her chance.

She had to run.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bella's heart hammered so loudly she was sure everyone else would hear it and know her plan. But nobody turned. Nobody stopped what they were doing.

She dashed toward the sanctuary. The floor was icy cold on her bare feet. Small pieces of debris dug into her soles. None of it was important. Only escape mattered now.

The one thing standing between her and the sanctuary where she was supposed to become Neil's wife was a curtain. She pushed past it.

It looked like any other wedding. Candles everywhere. Flowers. Lights.

At least a dozen people milled around, getting things ready.

A boy about her age turned and saw her. His eyes widened before he covered his eyes and turned away. He would probably spend the evening washing out his eyes after seeing her in a bra and panties.

Bella darted down the aisle meant to turn her into an unwilling wife.

The exit was at the far end of the building, behind the altar, hidden by another curtain.

A lady shrieked.

Someone else demanded all the men cover their eyes.

Bella willed her feet to move faster.

Everything around her turned into chaos. Some people turned from her, but more ran toward her.

All of these people would do whatever it took to make sure she married Neil.

She made it to the altar then around it. Prayed it would be the last time she ever saw it again. Sprinted to the other side.

The door flung open.

Her father, Neil, and the priest stared at her wide-eyed.

A slow grin spread across Neil's face. "What's this? An early present?"

Bella skidded to a stop, nearly crashing into the three men. She regained control over her feet. Spun. Sped the other way.

"Get her!"

Two women headed her way.

Bella dashed down between two pews. One wobbled as she bumped against it.

"Stop the harlot!"

"Runaway bride!"

She raced across another row of pews. Her leg slammed into the seat of one. It tipped slowly back.

Crack!

Then it crashed onto the pew behind it. That one wobbled. Not that any of this was a surprise. The church had started using it after the building was condemned by the state. And that was years before Bella was even born.

A nail that had kept the seat in place dug into her leg as she raced by. Warm blood dripped down her leg.

Bella skidded to a stop at the wall. Reached for the window. Pulled. Strained.

It didn't budge.

She moved to the next one. Yanked upward.

Nothing.

Her only hope was the door. She dashed toward the other side of the altar. If she timed it right, she could evade her father, Neil, and the pastor.

If she was lucky.

More people called for her to stop. Most of the men and boys hid because seeing her without clothes would be sin. They couldn't risk their souls.

Who'd have thought running away in her undergarments would've worked to her advantage?

Not that she was anywhere near safety yet.

Father, Neil, and the pastor had split up. Neil was closest to her.

The look in his eyes was pure evil. He cracked his knuckles. "You're going to pay for all of this."

Bella's stomach plummeted. She grabbed a vase of flowers. Chucked it at his head.

Missed. Barely.

He released an animalistic noise.

She ran past the altar. Knocked over the pulpit then a candle. Hot wax dripped on her foot. She shook it, but the molten liquid fused painfully to her skin. Ignoring the pain, she pushed past the curtain.

The door was within reach.

Fingers grasped her arm.

She screamed so loud it hurt her throat. Yanked her arm. Kicked her feet. Tore free.

Lunged for the door. Twisted the knob. Pulled.

A gust of cold air blew inside. Rain droplets chilled her skin.

Bella dashed outside. Gasp in the icy night air. Raced in the opposite direction of the van.

The woods weren't far away. That was her only chance at cover. She was a sitting duck until she got there.

Bang!

A gunshot rang out. The sound echoed in her ears.

Bang! Bang!

Her feet slid in a muddy patch. She flung her arms out for balance. Her right foot flew out. The ground came closer.

Somehow she managed to stay upright. Regained her footing.

Sprinted toward the woods. Sucked wind. Stepped on a sharp pebble.

Voices called out. More gunshots.

Raindrops pelted down. Faster, harder. Snaked down her bare skin, got into her eyes. Made her face slimy after having that gross rag rubbed forehead to chin and back countless times.

Bang! Bang!

It would be a miracle if she still had her hearing after tonight. She rubbed her ears as she made her way toward the cover of the trees.

Almost there!

Her feet skidded in another soupy puddle. Everything became a blur as she pitched forward. Pain shot through her knees as she landed on them. Stars danced in front of her eyes, between her and the trees. Air burst from her mouth as she crashed onto the ground, rocks digging into her chest.

Voices called out. Sounded closer, nearer.

Bella struggled to pull air into her lungs. To push herself up.

Needed to get to the woods.

Her chest burned as she struggled for a single satisfying inhale. Knees burned as she crawled, ankles protested as she tried to stand. Mud clung to her. Rain pelted down. Her vision, her consciousness, clouded.

Hands pressed around her waist.

“Gotcha!”

She stiffened as she was hauled upright.

Bella found herself standing, pressed against a warm body.

“You think you’re getting away from our wedding?” Neil’s fetid breath heated her ear. “Never! And you’ll spend the rest of your life paying for all of this. Running away, worshiping the devil, fleeing again. You’ll be lucky if I can beat the sin out of you. Maybe one day I’ll offer you forgiveness. But don’t count on it.”

He squeezed her harder.

She cried out.

Neil dragged her toward the building.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ariana yanked off the last of her duct tape. She'd been secretly cutting at the one over her wrists since she managed to reach a piece of broken glass. Hardly anyone had given her a second glance, so it hadn't been too difficult to slide the shard over with her feet then nudge it into her fingers.

It had gotten even easier after Bella made her escape. With all the hollering — and eventually gunshots — everyone had forgotten about her completely.

Despite her dire predicament, she couldn't stop worrying about Bella. Had she escaped? Or had one of the bullets stopped her for good?

No gunfire had rung out in the last several minutes. That almost confirmed her worst fears.

She couldn't give up hope. Wouldn't unless she saw Bella's corpse with her own eyes.

Hopefully, it didn't come to that. She prayed her friend was still alive.

Ariana scrambled to her feet. Looked around. Her eyes had more than adjusted to the dim lighting. Both dresses remained here since Bella had fled in nothing other than her underwear.

The costume was beyond repair, and she wouldn't likely want to wear the wedding dress, but what other options were there? It was better than being in her underwear.

She grabbed it and hurried to the door. Peeked out into the main room. It looked like a typical church with rows of pews and a raised pulpit. The only difference was the lectern and some of the seating had been knocked over, and the only light came from the many candles around the exterior. People bustled around, some tending to flowers on the stage and others righting the fallen furniture.

Bella was nowhere in sight.

Ariana's heart sank. Where had they taken her? She didn't want to think about the gunshots, but Diego and Neil were both unhinged enough to shoot the girl rather than let her escape.

It was a matter of getting by all these people so she could get outside and look around.

An unseen door slammed shut, making the curtain behind the pulpit move.

The exit had to be behind that. Of course it was clear across the large room. Maybe if Ariana walked with purpose, nobody would notice her. They might think she was just another cult member.

Except she was dressed as a leopard in a slinky dress with ears attached to her hair. She fiddled with one, but it didn't budge. It would take two hands and a mirror to get them out. She'd done that on purpose.

She flung the dress over her shoulder, and its many layers managed to cover her dress on that side. If she walked along the wall, she could possibly make it to the door unnoticed.

That was her only choice. There wasn't another way to the door unless one of the windows opened easily. They didn't look like they did.

She stepped into the sanctuary. Just as she did, Neil and Diego appeared.

Bella was with them. Neil had her in one hand and a rifle in the other.

Ariana froze. If she wasn't careful, they could be a statistic.

Neil and Diego spoke to each other while Bella squirmed.

Nobody else seemed to notice them. Ari was the only one looking their way.

She had to do something. Looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon.

Nothing. Unless she wanted to grab a candle and set the place ablaze.

That actually wasn't a bad idea. Assuming everyone could get out safely. Then it would be a matter of getting Bella away from the two psychopaths.

Suddenly the rows of pews between them felt like miles.

But it was all she had. And there wasn't much time.

Neil wasn't far from the place where he planned on marrying Bella, who was covered in so much mud it wasn't readily apparent that she was only in her underwear.

Ari pressed herself against the wall and scooted along, not taking her eyes off Bella.

Neil and Diego whispered to each other, and even with Neil distracted, Bella couldn't get away from him. His one-handed grip on her arm was more than enough to keep her at his side.

Determination rose in Ari's chest. She would do anything in her power to get them away from here, away from these people.

So far, so good. Everyone else was still busy, not paying her any attention even though she carried the wedding gown while dressed like a wild animal.

A teenage girl turned and met Ariana's gaze. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open.

Ari brought her finger to her mouth and shook her head.

The girl pointed to her. "Outsider! Outsider!"

Ariana's heart raced. She looked around.

Most everyone had turned her direction, and the teen was still hollering about her being an outsider.

Clearly this was not an outreach-focused organization.

Ariana burst into a run, nearly knocking over a preteen boy in the process.

He leaped out of the way, crashing onto a pew that wobbled back and forth under his weight. "Outsider!"

More people called out. Voices sounded from all over the room, turning into a chant. One by one, people raised their fingers to point at her. The candles gave them all eerie shadows.

It was the creepiest thing she'd ever seen or heard, and she'd seen every Halloween movie ever made.

Her breath hitched. Sneaking over to Bella was out of the question now.

That left only one option. She had to race over and attempt to free her from Neil's grasp. That would be no easy task. But it was all she had.

Hopefully nobody else had any weapons.

She raced toward them, stumbling over the uneven carpeting.

Bella looked her way. Called out her name.

Something struck Ariana on the side of the head. Her ears rang, and dots danced in front of her. She turned to see what had hit her. A rusty candle stand rolled away from her. Someone must've thrown it.

No time to stop. Must keep running.

Had to get to Bella.

People continued chanting. More objects flew through the air. Flickering candlelight cast elongated shadows everywhere.

Far scarier than anything she'd ever watched on the screen.

She ducked, avoiding objects flying toward her. Nearly missed a lit candle. It crashed against the wall then rolled to the floor, the flame licking the carpet until it stopped at a pew.

Ariana picked it up and held the candle so the flame brushed each seat she passed.

Bang!

The chanting stopped.

Ari froze mid-step.

Neil aimed the gun at her. “Not another step, devil worshiper!”

She did as instructed.

The lunatic continued his rant.

She didn't pay attention. Needed to find a way of escape.

Then she saw it. The perfect answer.

Chapter Thirty

Bella stared in disbelief as Ariana disappeared. No, she didn't disappear. She fell to the ground near the pews.

“Stop struggling.” Neil tightened his grip around her arm, digging his nails into her flesh.

People cried out. Some pointed in Ari's direction. A few darted her way while others scrambled in the opposite direction, probably scared she was actually devil worshiper like Neil had said.

Everyone here seemed to believe every word from his mouth.

She probably would have too, if she hadn't managed to get away and gain some clarity. Now that she'd spent time away from the cult, it was glaringly obvious how messed up everything was. She'd always had an inkling that things weren't right, but it had been all she knew her entire life. There hadn't been anything else to compare it to before.

Now she knew better. And she needed to get away. Get a chance to live her life without the influence of all this insanity.

She glanced around, searching for Ariana. Others still ran about, amplifying the chaos.

Ariana climbed out from underneath the first pew. Somehow she'd managed to crawl under them all with the dress and the candle.

Bella opened her mouth to call out to her.

Ari shook her head and signaled for her to stay quiet.

She did.

Neil shoved Bella against the pulpit. The corner dug into her side. “I told you to stop squirming!”

Her breath hitched. She hadn’t even realized she’d started squirming again.

Ariana leaped to her feet and pushed Neil with both hands.

He stumbled back, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Run!” Ari shoved the dress into Bella’s hands.

She clung to it and bolted away from her captor.

Bang!

A bullet whizzed by, missing her only by inches.

Bella’s knees turned to rubber. She almost dropped the dress. Only managed to cling to it because it was as close to clothes as she could get.

“You think I’ll miss next time?” Neil snarled.

Ariana grabbed Bella’s hand and pulled her around the altar.

A woman blocked the door. No, not just any woman.

Mother.

She leaned against it, arms crossed, staring at Bella like she was the devil incarnate.

“You really think you can get away with this carnage, Isabella?”

“Carnage?”

“Just because Margarita managed to destroy our family name doesn’t mean you get to do the same. You will follow our orders.” She turned her attention to Ariana. “Nothing, and no one, will get in our way.”

Bella glanced back. Neil and his gun were surely not far behind. “Mother, move! Neil is crazy.”

“Because of *you*.” Mother gave her such a cutting look, it felt like a slap across the face.

“It isn’t right that you’re trying to force me to marry someone I don’t love.”

“Love is a joke.”

“No it isn’t!”

Ariana stepped forward, holding the candle flame to Bella’s mother. “You need to move!”

Mother laughed, not taking her gaze from Bella. “Nobody’s going anywhere until you and Neil are married.”

A lump formed in Bella’s throat. “That’s never going to happen.”

“You don’t call the shots.”

“Neither do you!” Bella shoved her forefinger against Mother’s shoulder. “You have to listen to Father. He’s head of the household. But I’m an adult who’s moved out of the house, so I don’t have to do anything any of you say.”

“You’re our child. You have to obey us no matter how old you get. Learn your place!”

“I have. It’s away from all of you!” Bella struggled to find the doorknob behind her mother.

“Child, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“About what?” Bella’s fingers reached the cold knob. She tried to make Mother move over so she could turn it.

The older woman didn’t budge. “About everything. You think your pathetic father has any actual authority? I hold the real power in our family.”

Bella stopped. “What do you mean?”

Smoke tickled her nose.

Ariana held the candle up to the wall. Flames licked toward the ceiling.

Mother would be forced to move from the door as soon as the fire neared her. Yet for the moment, she didn’t seem to notice the danger. “I’m the driving force behind your father. He does my bidding, and only because the church won’t allow

women any leadership. That's fine. I'm happy to be the puppet master. Your father moves when I pull his strings."

Bella tried to make sense of her mother's ramblings. "What are you talking about?"

"Diego may be the face of decisions made in our household, but I'm the one who actually makes them."

"How?" Bella watched Ariana move the candle's flame to more parts of the wall from the corner of her eye. They wouldn't be able to ignore the fire much longer. The smoke made her eyes and throat burn.

Mother cackled. "Your father doesn't even want to be part of the church! He hates it — everything about it. But there isn't a thing he can do!"

"What... what do you mean?"

"I'm the one who grew up in the group. We met outside the church, and he joined to be close to me. But then he decided he didn't like it. He wanted out, wanted away from me. I couldn't allow that."

"Why not?"

"Because we were meant to be together. I had to trick him to get him to stay. Now he has to spend the rest of his life doing my bidding."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Of course it does." Mother shoved her away. "I convinced him that I was being abused by my parents. He got so worked up, he'd have done anything to protect me. And he did. Your father killed my parents in cold blood."

Bella gasped. "You said they died in a hunting accident."

"That's what I *said*. What most people believe. But your father and I know the truth. It was premeditated murder, for which I have irrefutable proof. All I have to do is turn it over to the worldly authorities, and your father goes to prison for the rest of his natural life. Or he stays with us, free as a bird. As long as he does what I tell him."

The floor felt like it dropped out from underneath her. “You’re behind everything?”

A wicked gleam shone in her eyes. “That’s right. Now turn around and marry Neil. He’s paying us a lot of money for you, and you’ve already given him a world of trouble. You’ll pay for it eventually, but for now I don’t want it to get in the way of my payment.”

Bella stared at her in disbelief. All along she’d thought Mother was almost as much of a victim as all the kids.

But she’d been behind everything.

The harsh punishments, the forced marriages, everything. And she’d forced Father to kill Bella’s grandparents. They hadn’t died in an accident. Bella might’ve been able to meet them if Mother hadn’t manipulated him into it. Now he was her servant forever, because he was trying to protect her. Because he’d cared.

“Am I speaking in a foreign language?” Mother snapped. “Turn around and go to the altar.”

Lightheaded, Bella turned to Ariana.

Ari nudged her into a slow walk. “Let’s get your dress on you.”

Bella glanced down. She’d forgotten it was in her hands. “But I…” The rest of the words wouldn’t come.

“We can’t have the bride without a dress.” Ariana guided her away from the growing flames.

“How can my mother be the one behind this forced marriage? Behind everything? All this time I thought she was on my side. I thought she obeyed Father because she was scared, but he’s actually the one frightened of her.”

“We need to get out of here.” Ariana looked in her eyes. “The fire is right next to the door, and as far as I can tell, this the only way out.”

“Mother’s standing there.” Bella felt like someone else was using her voice. “She’s behind it all.”

“Let’s get you into the dress so you at least have something on. Believe me, it’s going to be cold in the woods, and I don’t know how long we’re going to have to run through them until we reach the other side.”

Mindlessly, Bella let Ari slip the dress over her muddy body. Her entire world was upside down. Mother had been manipulating Father all these years. He may have been the domineering one on the surface, but she’d been pulling his strings and acting like a helpless victim.

Maybe on some level she had felt like that. The church gave no agency to women. None. And Mother had grown up in the culture, just like Bella and her siblings had. It was all she knew. She did what she could to have some power in her life. She’d probably honestly shed tears when she’d begged Father to kill her parents.

Bella knew that feeling, but there was one major difference between her and her mother. Bella would never ask someone to kill her parents. Or anyone. She didn’t wish anyone dead, and she wouldn’t wish the stain of murder to burden the soul of anyone she cared about.

Ariana zipped the dress. “Are you ready? The flames are almost at the door, and your mom still hasn’t budged.”

Bella swallowed. It didn’t matter if she was ready.

They needed to leave now.

Chapter Thirty-One

Damon glanced in the rearview mirror then punched the gas harder. He'd insisted on driving his Charger because it was the fastest of their cars. They didn't have a moment to spare.

"What are you going to say if you get pulled over?" Rita asked from the backseat. Her presence was the only thing keeping him from driving recklessly. She was the only one who knew where the church was, so she had to be there.

"My father-in-law is a cop," Damon said. He'd gotten out of more than one ticket because of his relation to Alex Mercer.

Grayson leaned over and glanced at the dashboard. "You're going over eighty. I don't think that'll work."

"Then I'll tell them my wife and your sister are being held hostage." Damon pressed harder on the gas and watched the speed rise even more. "There isn't anyone else on the road. We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Are we close?" Grayson looked back at his wife.

"Shouldn't be long at this speed."

"I still don't think you should've come." Regret sounded in Grayson's tone. "You're in your third trimester."

"You think I don't know that? I wouldn't do anything to hurt the baby, but I would also do anything for my sister. Besides, you'll never find that church without me. Not with all the turns on that driveway. It goes for miles."

Grayson sighed as he turned forward.

Damon hadn't wanted to bring Rita either, but she was the only one who could lead them to Ariana and Bella. His stomach had been a mess of acidic knots since he realized the two of them were missing.

If anything happened to either of them, he'd never forgive himself.

He wasn't sure he could live with more guilt piled on top of everything he carried. No matter what anyone said, he blamed himself for his mother's murder. Obviously he didn't commit the act — culpability fell solely on Cal Jones. That didn't stop Damon from feeling like he could have done more. Sure, he'd been young, but he should've protected her. He knew what his dad was like.

Not that he'd ever expected him to do *that*.

Ever since, Damon had always had major trust issues. It was why Ariana had a circle of friends around her and he didn't. His friends were by default, the husbands of her friends. Even then, they weren't close. Grayson didn't know his dad was a serial killer. He knew Damon's mom had been murdered, but that was as far as it went.

Damon always walked a fine line with people. If he didn't tell them about his notorious father, then he always felt like he was lying. But once they knew, he always wondered if they were silently judging him. Or worse, if they feared him.

He couldn't blame them if they did. Who could trust a serial killer's offspring?

It was one thing he appreciated about Ariana. She knew everything about him and his family, and she loved him unconditionally. Her parents had even accepted him as family, even after Cal targeted them.

That was why he needed to get to Ariana, to save her. Because she was the one person who loved him as much as his mom had.

He would do for her what he couldn't do for his mom.

Damon glanced up at the night sky. *This is for you, Mom, as much as it is for her. I'm sorry I couldn't have done more*

for you.

A warmth swept through him. It was as if his mom was telling him she loved him and wished she too could've protected him from the monster who'd fathered him. She'd been the kindest of souls, so that was probably how she felt in her last moments. Knowing she wouldn't be there for her son had likely broken her heart as her life slipped from her. She'd always done everything she could to shield him and would have taken that instinct to her grave.

He wiped a tear from his eye before it escaped.

"Turn here," Rita said.

Damon cleared his throat and turned sharply, nearly missing the gravel road. They continued on in silence for miles as he drove as fast as he could on the narrow lane as the tires shot pebbles out behind. Some bounced off the Charger, but he didn't care. Scratches could be buffed out, dents could be fixed.

Ariana could not be replaced. He wouldn't let anyone hurt her like his father had done to his mom.

"Go left at the Y," Rita said.

They continued on, taking several more forks.

"You're sure there's a church all the way out here?" Grayson asked.

"It's abandoned and dilapidated, but it's there."

"And your church meets there?"

"My *former* church. And to be clear, it's a cult."

"Right."

"Take the next left."

Damon's anxiety was increasing. "Are we getting close?"

"Not much longer now."

"Didn't you say that earlier?" Grayson asked.

"It isn't my fault it's so far out here. They have a lot to hide, as evidenced by them kidnapping Bella and Ariana just

so they can force my sister into marrying a guy twice her age.”

“If they won’t listen to reason, they should listen to fear.”
He patted his pocket, where he had put a pistol.

Damon too was carrying. He also had an array of pocketknives, the largest one with a blade longer than his hand. It was anyone’s guess what they were walking into, and they had to be prepared.

“Last turn,” Rita said. “Take the right side of the fork.”

Damon’s heart rate spiked. They were almost there.

He’d do whatever it would take to protect Ariana.

They rounded a corner.

Gunshots sounded.

“Tell me that’s fireworks,” Rita said.

“Nope,” Damon and Grayson said in unison.

Rita mumbled something.

They rounded another corner. A church building came into sight.

It was engulfed in flames. People ran around, crying out.

Neither Ariana nor Bella were among them.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Beads of perspiration dripped into Ariana's eyes despite constantly wiping them. The heat was too intense, and was getting harder to breathe by the moment. She pulled at her dress, which stuck to her skin.

Diego and two other men had guns pointed at her and Bella. They were all drenched in sweat too.

Clumps of mud dripped from Bella's arms and face onto the floor. More melted through the fabric, turning the white dress brown.

The flames had engulfed most of the building and were licking toward the small wedding party.

Not that it seemed to bother any of the others. Only Bella and Ari exchanged worried glances. The officiant droned on about the importance of female servitude and a woman's enthusiastic obedience to her master, seemingly not noticing the fire or smoke that would soon kill them all if they didn't get outside.

Ariana wanted to grab Bella and run. All she needed was for one of the gunmen to look away for even a moment. But all three of them were fixated on them.

Bella coughed. Practically doubled over.

Her mom pinched her. "Focus!"

Ari glared at her. "We need to get out of here! The smoke is going to kill us all if the flames don't get to us first."

One of the gunmen struck her across the face with the butt of a rifle.

She pressed her palm against the sore spot.

He glowered at her. "Next time it'll be a bullet. Shut up."

Gunfire sounded outside — more than five consecutive shots followed by screams and arguing.

More loud bangs.

Tires squealed. A car engine gunned before cutting.

She'd know that distinctive sound anywhere. It was a Dodge Charger engine.

Damon.

How did he know how to get here?

Rita. She had to be with him.

And she was pregnant.

One of the gunmen hurried to the window.

Ariana grabbed Bella's arm and yanked her. They weren't far from the door. Could make it outside. Had to. There was no other choice.

Both coughing, they pressed passed the curtain.

Bang!

Ari jolted but kept running. Bella stumbled along behind her.

Flames licked the door, but it wasn't engulfed.

They could get out. It was possible.

She grabbed the doorknob.

It seared her skin. She yanked her hand away, shook it. Checked her palm. Didn't look nearly as bad as it felt.

Bella's eyes widened as if to ask what to do now.

More gunfire, from both inside and out.

Yelling cut through the roar of the blaze. One voice sounded like Damon's.

She stared at the doorknob. There had to be another way.

A ceiling beam engulfed in flames fell onto the altar. The fire devoured the curtain as if it were covered in gasoline.

Diego, Neil, and the others raced around.

Neil shot in their direction.

Ariana pulled Bella to the ground.

The bullet hit the door. A crack snaked down.

It was weak. They could break through it. Escape.

Get to Damon. Go home to safety.

She leaped to her feet. Stared down the door. Braced herself. Threw all her weight against it. Closed her eyes and protected her face.

Broke through.

Ari gasped in the cool night air. It was still smoky, but so much clearer.

Bella ran out the door, grabbed her, clung to her.

Together they ran to the woods then hid among the trees, breathing heavily. Leaning on one another. Scanning the crowd for their loved ones.

Neil, the other gunmen, and Bella's parents stumbled out. Looked around. Hurried toward the small crowd.

Bang! Bang!

The Charger's engine roared again. Plumes of dust gathered behind the wheels.

It lunged toward the building.

Ariana's heart leaped into her throat.

Damon thought she was inside and he was going straight into the engulfed building.

She had to stop him.

Ari raced from the cover of the trees, waving her hands and screaming. Her high heels caught on rocks. She kicked them off. Ran faster, still yelling. Bumped into people. Nearly knocked someone over. Went around the building, ready to leap in front of the car.

Whatever it would take to keep Damon safe.

Hands grasped her waist. Pulled her away.

She hollered all the louder, kicking and punching.

An arm covered her hands. A familiar arm.

Ariana whipped her head around. “Damon! Who’s in your car?”

The Charger skidded to a stop just before crashing into the building. Rita stepped out, tears streaming down her face. “You’re safe! Where’s Bella?”

“In the woods.” Ariana embraced her friend, careful of her belly. “You were about to drive into the building? Are you crazy?”

“It was the only way to save you two!” Rita looked around.

“But what about *you* two?” Ari pressed her palm on her friend’s rounded belly.

“We’d have been fine.” She craned her neck. “There she is!”

Rita hurried around her then threw her arms around her sister.

Grayson ran over to them, calling his wife reckless even as he embraced her.

Sirens sounded. Several police vehicles pulled up then skidded to a stop. Officers flooded into the clearing, calling out orders and bearing guns.

Ariana clung to Damon. “I can’t believe you all made it out here in time. How’d you know?”

He held her tightly. “As soon as we figured out you and Bella were missing, Rita knew where they’d taken you. We didn’t even tell anyone at the party that we were leaving. Grayson called the cops while I was driving.”

She glanced over at his car, glowing from the flames. “The Charger is riddled with bullets.”

“I don’t care.” He managed to squeeze her even harder. “The only thing that matters is that you’re safe.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Bella laughed as five-year-old Alonzo danced around, celebrating his win at Candy Land.

His sister Sofia rolled her eyes. “He always does this when he wins.”

“At least he’s happy.” Bella loved watching her niece and nephews enjoying such simple things. Her childhood had been so full of fear and strife. She never experienced carefree moments like that.

But now her parents were both in jail, where they belonged. Given the long list of offenses against them, they would both likely be going to prison for the rest of their natural lives. Not only were they behind everything that happened the previous night, but they were also responsible for the deaths of her mother’s parents.

Neil and the rest of the cult leaders also faced serious charges. Without anyone to follow, the members had disbanded. Her and Rita’s family was split in half, their brother and other sister furious at them for breaking up their church.

Rita and Bella were just glad everyone was free from the cult’s clutches. Now in addition to Rita’s ex-husband being in prison, many others from the church would soon be joining him. As it should be.

Finally. Now Bella could breathe easy. She didn’t have to worry about being forced to marry Neil or her father taking her back home. The house and property would likely be sold and

split between the siblings, and they would take whatever belongings they wanted — if any. Rita was going to speak with a lawyer soon.

Bella had a few things in her room that she wanted to bring to her new room in Rita's house, but mostly she wanted to forget about everything there.

“Another round?” Alonzo asked, pleading with his eyes.

“How can I say no to that?” Bella laughed.

“I can.” Sofia spun in a circle.

“You don't want to play?” Bella asked.

“Oh, I do. But I can say no to him. Easy!”

After three more rounds of the board game, Grayson came in and took Alonzo for his nap.

Bella yawned, thinking her bed sounded good.

Sofia gave her a quizzical look. “You aren't going to take a nap, are you? You're too old.”

“My grandma always said you're never too old for a nap.”

The girl made a disgusted expression. “I am! You wanna watch cartoons with me?”

“I'd love to. Let me talk with Rita first.”

“Okay.” She skipped out of the room.

Bella put away the game pieces then wandered into the kitchen where she heard Rita talking on the phone.

Rita motioned for her to eat some of the leftovers from the party.

Bella warmed up some tacos. She sat at the table just as her sister set down her phone. “A lot is still in the air, but the attorney said I can take you to the house to pack anything belonging to you. As far as anything belonging to our parents, we have to leave it for now.”

“I don't want anything of theirs anyway.”

Rita rested a hand on Bella's arm. "I'm really sorry for trying to control you before. The thought of you getting hurt scared me half to death, and I didn't want to see you end up in a marriage like I was forced into. I'm still in therapy because of Boone and his abuse. But you're an adult, and I should've let you make your own choices. I shouldn't have acted out of fear."

Bella squeezed her sister's hand. "I get it. You wanted to protect me, and I love you for it. But at the same time, I really do need the space to spread my wings and make my own choices."

"I promise you have that from here on out. I'm not going to stop you from doing anything you want."

"Do you think I'll be able to return to my classes? Father paid my tuition through the school year."

"Then it sounds like you're good to go. You'll have to catch up on missed work, but I'm sure you'll be fine. You have a good head on your shoulders."

Bella beamed. "That means a lot coming from you."

"I mean it."

A lump formed in Bella's throat. "Thanks for everything. I can't tell you how good it feels to be able to count on you."

"Always."

As silence settled, a weight lifted from Bella's shoulders. She was actually free, and not just from the cult. Her real freedom was in the fact that she could do anything with her life that she wanted. Now she had not only her sister's support, but that of Grayson and her new friends across the street.

Everything was going to be better than she ever imagined.

Chapter Thirty-Four

A riana sipped her coffee as she stared through the window in the front of her house. It was an unusually sunny afternoon, making the decorations from the Halloween party seem out of place. Especially since one of her neighbors across the street was already putting up Thanksgiving decor on her porch.

Damon came over and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “What’s on your mind?”

She glanced at his car. It looked like part of the Halloween props. “I feel bad about your car. It’s your baby.”

He kissed her forehead. “You mean more to me than a thousand Chargers. The only thing I care about is that you’re here safe.”

“We need to replace it.”

Damon shrugged. “Or we can fix it. I’m not worried about it.”

“I think we should get you a Challenger Hellcat. I know you’ve been itching to get one.”

“You were just abducted last night. We can think about cars later. All I want to do is spend the day holding you and appreciating you. Forget the car.”

“We’ll start looking tomorrow.”

“It’s a deal.” He pulled aside the curtain. “Should we check on Bella and Rita?”

“Rita texted me a little bit ago. She just got back from an ultrasound, and both she and the baby are doing great. Bella’s still sleeping.”

Ariana’s stomach lurched. Hard. She covered her mouth.

“Are you okay?” Damon asked.

She nodded, afraid if she opened her mouth more than words would come out.

He lifted a brow. “Are you sure?”

Ari nodded again, this time with conviction.

Her stomach lurched more aggressively. She raced to the nearest bathroom, flung open the toilet lid, then lost her breakfast.

Her stomach settled.

“Maybe you should rest.” Damon appeared in the doorway.

“It’s just nerves. Last night brought up a lot of old memories, and I had a bunch of nightmares. I just need to schedule an emergency appointment with my therapist. I haven’t seen her in a while anyway. It’ll be good to—”

Her stomach roiled, and she stuck her face in the porcelain throne just in time.

Damon rubbed her back and spoke softly to her as she emptied her stomach.

After going upstairs to the master bathroom, she brushed her teeth.

He leaned against the doorway and tilted his head. “Are you sure it’s just nerves?”

“What else would it be?”

Damon reached past her and dug through his drawer. He pulled out a pregnancy test. “Maybe we should take this.”

Everything around her disappeared. “You... you bought that?”

He grinned. “I’ve been hoping we might need it.”

A warmth spread through her, and she wrapped her arms around him.

“What do you say?” he asked. “Do you want to do the honors?”

She stared at him in disbelief. Damon had actually gone and bought that himself, before they’d even officially started trying for a baby. Only recently had they stopped using protection, for the time being letting nature take its course. He’d had his hesitations because of everything he’d gone through with his own father, worried about not knowing how to be a dad.

But he clearly wanted to have a family with her.

Damon held the box toward her. “Well?”

Her breath hitched, but she took it. “Let’s do this. But don’t get your hopes up. My upset stomach could easily only be nerves.”

His only response was to kiss her cheek and look at her with the deepest adoration.

* * *

The next book in the series will be available early in 2024! While you wait, check out my newest standalone novel [Don’t Trust Her](#): Is Angelina losing her mind... or is someone trying to make her think she is? The answer is twistier than you might think!

Other Books by Stacy Claflin

For a printable checklist of the books:

<https://stacyclaflin.com/reading-list/>

PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

Ariana Jones

Watch Your Back

Don't Look Now

Without a Trace

Never Letting Go

Lie in Wait

Brannon House

The Perfect Death

Family Secrets

The Darkest Garden

Shattered Pieces

Grave Memories

Alex Mercer Thrillers

Girl in Trouble

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Danger Zone

Lady in Red

White Wedding

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The Gone Saga

The Gone Trilogy: Gone, Held, Over

Dean's List

No Return

Recluse Island

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The Father's Secret

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Cursed Wolf

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Renegade Valkyrie

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(Writing under the pen name Eden Bloom)

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At any given time, I have multiple free books for readers to try. Since I write in multiple genres, it's a risk-free way to see if some of my other works may be for you.

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I'd love to connect with you!

Find me on any or all of the following sites. I'm not equally active everywhere, but I'd love to meet you where you love to hang out.

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I send my newsletter once a week or every other week, and include book updates, new release alerts, freebie notifications, and more. Sometimes I send cat pictures and share interesting facts about my books.

Website: <https://stacyclaflin.com/>

Find out more about my books on my website. I've written over 80 novels, so chances are, you'll find some books you didn't know about before.

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Bookbub is where I share, rate, and review books that I've read. You can also get new release and pre-order alerts if you follow me there.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/stacy.claflin.author/>

Facebook is a huge time suck for me, so I try not to spend too much time there. (I get a lot more writing done that way!) But you can follow me for book updates. I also have a street team you can join: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/StacyClaflinStreetTeam/>

TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@stacyclaflin>

TikTok is where I embarrass myself on camera and make videos about my books. I have a lot of fun and share some humorous tips and interesting book/authoring facts.

Pinterest: https://www.pinterest.com/growwithstacy/_saved/

I used to be really active on Pinterest, so there are a lot of fun boards, but I don't update them often. If you like Pinterest, you might enjoy browsing my profile. Just don't expect many updates!

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/growwithstacy>

Twitter is where I post about book stuff, but I don't interact much.

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/stacy.clafin/>

I'm not super active on Instagram, but I do try to put book updates and pretty pictures when I think about it.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading *Lie in Wait*. It was fun to continue the series, which originally started in 2014 when I wrote and published the *Gone* Trilogy. In it, we met Ariana's dad, Alex, as a rebellious teenager. Later I wrote his series, and now we have the spinoff of Ariana's story. I never would have imagined so many books would have come from my one idea in the book *Gone!* If you've enjoyed this series, then you're sure to love its predecessors.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review wherever you purchased it. Not only will your review help me to better understand what you like—so I can give you more of it!—but it will also help other readers find my work. Reviews can be short—just share your honest thoughts. That's it. And they really help—it's like sending chocolate to an author. Seriously!

Want to know when I have a new release? Sign up for new release updates:

<http://stacyclaflin.com/newsletter/>

I've spent many hours writing, re-writing, and editing this work. I even put together a team who helped with the editing process. As it is impossible to find every single error, if you find any, please contact me through my website and let me know. Then I can fix them for future editions.

Thank you for your support!

~Stacy

About Stacy Claflin

Stacy Claflin is a *USA Today* bestselling thriller author who has published more than 95 novels, including *Girl in Trouble* and *The Perfect Death*. She has always been curious about the human mind, and in her quest to learn more, she earned a degree in Psychology. Her favorite course was Abnormal Behavior, which has been useful in writing fiction.

Her love for thrillers goes back to her early childhood when she fell in love with *Unsolved Mysteries* and *America's Most Wanted*. When Stacy was five, she got mad at a babysitter who wouldn't let her watch the evening news. These days, she spends her free time listening to true crime podcasts or watching documentaries on the subject.

She has been telling stories for as long as she can remember, and as child would often get into trouble for trying to convince friends her wild tales were true. Now she puts her creativity to better use by writing page-turning stories that leave readers begging for more.

Stacy occasionally dabbles in other genres, so as you peruse her library of works, you'll find some romance and paranormal tales, all with strong suspense elements.

For more information:

stacyclaflin.com/about

