

E.L.EMKEY

Stay  
With Me

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Stay With Me is a dark romance and, at times, an intense work of fiction. I do NOT condone any traumatic situations or actions that take place between the characters. Please be warned that there are scenes with content that may trigger you based on your personal experiences. It is never my intention as an author to cause any mental distress to any of my readers but know that there is darkness in this book.

Trigger/Content Warnings include but are not limited to graphic physical and sexual violence, torture, abuse, rape, branding, sodomy, kidnapping, gaslighting, stalking, cutting, murder, murder scenes, mutilation, death, fear, panic attacks, trauma, mental illness, self-harm, blood, nudity, sex, and expletives. If you feel like any of these topics may cause you distress, please do not continue forward. If they don't, and you have made it this far without turning back, enjoy the ride.

*This book is for all the girls who survived whatever was meant to kill them.*

*I see you.*

*I am you.*

# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Content/Trigger Warnings](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Playlist](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY-ONE](#)

[TWENTY-TWO](#)

[TWENTY-THREE](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[TWENTY-SIX](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[TWENTY-NINE](#)

[THIRTY](#)

[THIRTY-ONE](#)

[THIRTY-TWO](#)

[THIRTY-THREE](#)

[THIRTY-FOUR](#)

[THIRTY-FIVE](#)

[THIRTY-SIX](#)

[THIRTY-SEVEN](#)

[THIRTY-EIGHT](#)

[THIRTY-NINE](#)

[FORTY](#)

[FORTY-ONE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[About The Author](#)



# Playlist

“Oh Death” By Noah Gundersen

“Hypnosis” By Sleep Token

“Running Up That Hill” By Placebo

“Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” By Cary Brothers

“Something Can Grow” By Tony Anderson

“Just Pretend” By Bad Omens

“You Put A Spell On Me” By Austin Giorgio

“Arcade” By Duncan Laurence

“Stay” By The People’s Thieves

“Eschaton” By Tony Anderson

“Long Suffering” By Eliza Grace

“Save” By The People’s Thieves

“Via” By Voices From The Fuselage

“Savagery” By Lissom, Lowswimmer & Hahlweg

“Love Is The Death Of Peace Of Mind” By Bad Omens

“Can You Hold Me?” By NF & Britt Nicole

# ONE

AVA

It is early evening, and a heavy downpour engulfs my car as I make my way home from the grocery store. My stomach growls, its rumblings nearly drowning out the crashing thunder that echoes in the distance.

The rain is so intense that it obscures my view beyond the windshield, forcing the wipers to work tirelessly in their attempt to maintain clarity.

The scent of fresh rain permeates through my car vents, and it soothes my soul, heavy with guilt over the murders happening in town.

I have always found solace in storms, as if the rain has the power to cleanse away the worries of the day, allowing me to see the world through a different lens once it subsides.

While Noah Gundersen's melancholy tune, "Oh, Death," plays softly in the background, I attempt to divert my attention from the unsettling sensation festering in my stomach. I glance over at the morning newspaper, and the front-page article flashes vividly in my mind, tormenting me from the seat beside me.

## ***HAS THE SKINNER RETURNED? IS THIS A COPYCAT, OR DID THE FBI GET IT WRONG AGAIN?***

*The following content is not suitable for children.*

*The tragic discovery of a mutilated body was made in a remote area near the industrial district by a sugar factory in Harborview. Authorities were alerted after geocachers in the area spotted what appeared to be human remains. Upon further examination, it was determined that the body had suffered severe trauma and had been deliberately disfigured in a brutal and disturbing manner.*

*Investigative sources claim that the body of Cindy Downs, 32, was found in an eerily similar manner to dozens of victims of the infamous Skinner serial killer that terrorized a Massachusetts college town over a decade ago. Downs was a local news anchor of Harborville and was found stripped naked and left exposed to the elements. Her face was completely unrecognizable due to massive blunt force injuries that fractured and dislocated her facial bones. Deep cuts and lacerations covered her torso and limbs, the result of a sharp implement used with extreme and violent force. Portions of her flesh had been carved away, exposing muscle and bone. The violent nature of the wounds suggests that she was alive and conscious for at least part of the horrific torture that she endured. Downs makes the fifth body in six months and has local authorities scratching their heads.*

*Is this the work of a copycat continuing the horrific torturing path that the original Skinner killer left behind upon his arrest? Or did the FBI make a fatal error and arrest the wrong man? David Commons was convicted in 2013 and has been on death row since. If authorities are wrong, then their egregious error may have cost five innocent women their lives. Speculators believe there may be more victims across the country.*

*Over ten years ago, Commons hunted and murdered nine women, evading police officers and the FBI alike. It was not until he came across a local college girl, Ava Thompson, studying to be a doctor, that he was finally caught. Commons held Thompson for fifteen days raping and torturing her, preparing to kill her in the same manner he had all his other victims. Thompson escaped and became the killer's only survivor. Her testimony was crucial in identifying Commons, and her bravery and courage helped lead to the arrest. However, it now remains unclear if he was the real killer, as it seems that the investigation has been reopened.*

*Commons was a 35-year-old high school biology teacher. An investigation revealed pictures of the victims on his computer. However, to this day, Commons maintains his innocence and claims he was a scapegoat for the real killer. With the body count adding up, was Commons telling the truth? Is the real*

*Skinner still out there in the shadows, emerging to continue his murder spree, or does Commons have a super fan imitating his art to gain notoriety? One thing is for sure, something sinister is going on, and we doubt this will be the last body found.*

*Police psychological profilers believe that the killer is likely a white male in his 30s or 40s with a history of violence, cruelty to animals, and dysfunction in personal relationships. The killer is potentially unemployed or works a low-skilled job that allows time to stalk his victims. Authorities are investigating all leads and are asking for anyone with information to come forward. The Harborville community has been left shaken by these depraved acts of violence, and the victim's grieving loved ones are desperate for answers.*

*Authorities are taking this care seriously and are doing everything they can to find the perpetrator. Everyone is urged to remain vigilant and to stay safe. If you have any information, please contact the appropriate authorities or the FBI tip line. For now, the killer remains at large, continuing to evade law enforcement and strike fear across the community. As more victims are discovered, police and residents wonder—who will be next, and will authorities ever be able to stop this depraved and vicious serial killer before another life is lost?*

# TWO

## AVA

I frequently chose to take the longer, more scenic route home, and today was no different. While most of the roads near Harborview were considered picturesque, I prefer living my life away from the downtown hustle and bustle.

The grey clouds, the scent of damp earth, and the rumble of thunder all brought a profound sense of tranquility to my inner being. I take a couple of deep breaths, consciously focusing on inhaling and exhaling as I drive, trying to soothe my frayed nerves.

Having resided in this coastal town for nearly a decade, it has become a true sanctuary for me, a place I find solace in, away from the rest of the world and the reminders of the horrors I endured so many years ago. Harborview had become a place where the shadows of the past couldn't reach me, where darkness could not pursue.

*Or so I believed.*

Ten years ago, I started over on the other side of the country, far from the Massachusetts town I had grown up in.

Far from the torture chamber I was kept prisoner in.

I had put as much distance between myself and *him* as possible.

The peaceful illusion I cling to, the belief that I was safe from the darkness, now a part of me, was being chipped away piece by piece, gnawing at my very core.

I glance at the newspaper scattered haphazardly on the passenger seat alongside the brown paper bag of groceries and realize that I will never be safe.

The photograph printed next to the article about Cindy Downs stares up at me with accusing eyes. Her expression is gentle and innocent, her smile carefree. She had no idea that,

in that very image, she would be murdered in a brutal, unforgiving way. Her aspirations and dreams of becoming a prominent reporter in the big city were yet to be shattered.

I remember her from watching the local news. She was a beloved reporter in our town, and no one had a single negative word to say about her. She was studying journalism at the local community college, and her life was cut short.

Because of me, she is dead.

It's not fair.

*It should have been me.*

He is murdering women who bear a resemblance to me, with their dark hair and light-colored eyes.

Young.

*Carefree.*

*Happy.*

*Dead.*

*Did she beg for mercy when he tortured her?*

*Did she think about the things she would never get to do?*

*The life she would never live as she died.*

He is toying with me.

Letting me know he is close, and he is in control.

Despite the FBI's claim of catching him years ago, I always had a lingering feeling that he was still out there.

*Watching me.*

*Waiting for me.*

When he kidnapped me, I would retreat to the dark abyss of my mind when the pain was too much to bear, and I would let my mind wander to the future I thought I had lost.

*The love I would never experience.*

*The family I would never have.*

*The lives I would never save as a doctor.*

*All gone.*

With each murder, a sense of guilt overwhelmed me.

I couldn't help but blame myself. If I had only been stronger and had only fought harder for justice, maybe things would have been different.

Maybe *he* would be rotting in prison, and not the man I was convinced was innocent.

Memories of the violence I endured years ago resurfaced, paralyzing me just as I thought I was finally getting a grip on this survivor thing.

I felt his malevolent presence creeping back in, enveloping my strength and crushing it beneath his evil grip.

But that's the twisted nature of surviving.

The onlookers tell you that they admire your courage and strength, but then they get bored and move on to the next interesting tragedy in someone else's life.

They move on.

*But you don't.*

*How could I?*

*No*, I'm still stuck in the quicksand that threatens to pull me under.

I was left utterly broken.

Shattered.

Alone.

Nothing changed for them, yet everything changed for me.

I'm left to navigate through the soul-crippling trauma left to haunt me for the rest of my life alone.

My stomach growls loudly as I drive up the hill to my house. Exhausted from a long day at work, I am ready for a warm meal and the comfort of my bed.

The fear in town as a response to the murders was palpable.

People now locked their doors at night, a precaution they had never felt necessary before. Women walked in pairs, wary of their surroundings, and local businesses installed security systems and cameras.

Panic had set in.

I sensed the shift in the atmosphere, and they were right to be afraid.

No one in Harborview knew who I really was or how deeply personal these murders were to me. And for ten years, I managed to keep the truth of what I had run away from concealed.

But once the FBI arrived, and they would eventually, my secrets would be laid bare—raw and painful, and I can't help but worry about the consequences.

I know it is selfish that I worry about what happens to me when I could have prevented these deaths if I had just told the truth.

If I hadn't let them push me into a testimony that wasn't right.

Then no one else would have had to die.

I know it is my responsibility to do the right thing and demand justice for these women, but I also know that this only ends when he is dead...or I am.

*He* is hunting me, and I am afraid.



# THREE

## AVA

After moving to Harborview, I purchased a tiny storefront near the docks, next to a café called Bonjour, using the remainder of the stipend the FBI gave me as severance for my testimony provided in David Common's case. I turned the storefront into a flower shop and named it The Rosebud, creating beautiful bouquets and arrangements for the locals. Plants and flowers were my passion. I enjoyed creating beauty, and the world was full of it.

As a newcomer in town, the curiosity surrounding my presence grew, and I became subject to the inevitable small-town gossip about my identity and origins. I brushed off any rumors that came my way and pretended I was just a nobody looking for a change of scenery.

*No baggage.*

*No past.*

The name Ava Thompson died the day I left Massachusetts, and I locked my past up forever. Ava Monroe was born, and I was never going back.

In the early years of my newfound residency in Harborview, I deliberately distanced myself from the town's residents, preferring solitude. Yet, the isolation became challenging to bear. I craved human connection but feared opening myself up and trusting someone...*anyone*.

If only to reassure me that I wasn't losing touch with my new reality.

I wanted to be Ava again, albeit a different version.

*Ava 2.0.*

But Ava still.

I was tired of living in fear of my own shadow.

Something needed to change.

Then, one evening, two years after settling in Harborview, I closed my shop and decided to take a chance and look for the source of the loud music echoing down the street, leading me to discover Duke's, a dive bar situated near the waterfront.

After numerous internal debates and looking like a crazy person walking back and forth by the bar, I mustered up enough courage to step inside.

It was there that I crossed paths with Colin Spencer, a local police officer whose self-assured demeanor and irresistible, mischievous smile drew me in like a moth to a flame. We bonded over ample servings of alcohol and our shared affinity for the water. What began as a single date blossomed into two, then three, accompanied by stolen kisses behind the bar, and we became inseparable.

Our relationship began as a lust-filled, high-school teenager romp in the sheets, and Colin was the first person I trusted sexually since everything happened. I turned off my emotions and kept our relationship purely about sex.

I needed to feel something—to distract me from the bad shit that had happened to me.

It may not have been exactly healthy... but it felt good.

*Sometimes the best way to get over something is to get under someone else or something like that, right?*

It made sense at the time.

*Fucking him felt good.*

He was very adept at making me feel good, and he didn't push for more...*until he did.*

Until it wasn't just sex for him.

For eight months, Colin and I were content with our sexual courtship until he proposed that I move with him and take our relationship to the next level.

Panic consumed me, and I freaked.

*Of course, I did.*

I believed that I was too damaged on the inside to be in a committed relationship with someone. I hadn't disclosed the truth about my past to him, and the burden of my deception weighed heavily upon me. He didn't deserve to be lied to.

Tearfully, I struggled to explain that it wasn't about him but rather my own internal turmoil that I wrestled with.

Yes, I did use the line, "*It's not you. It's me.*"

Did I think he believed me?

*No.*

His face bore a solemn expression tainted with a hint of skepticism. Perhaps it stemmed from his profession as a police officer, or maybe it was just a facet of his personality.

Either way, he could see right through me.

*How could I tell him the truth about who I was and the dark past that still haunted me?*

He knew I wasn't telling him the whole truth, but he let me go like the honorable man he was. In his own way, I think he knew I had secrets that I didn't feel I was ready to share. He never pressed me about them, and that was another reason I was attracted to him in the first place. He let me be me.

But, it was my own guilt that plagued me.

I heard that he had no difficulty moving on with girl after girl, and from what I heard, he seemed happy after our breakup. I knew I made the right choice for him mostly, but it still crushed me.

I retreated to living my solitary life, free from prying eyes. I wanted to be able to open up and trust someone, but I didn't know if I would ever find someone who would be able to handle my past and not look at me like something that needed to be fixed, tiptoeing around me, afraid that I might crumble in their hands. I am not some delicate, fragile flower that needs to be treated like at any second; I might lose it.

When that someone found their way to me, I would be ready, and I would be the person they deserved, come hell or high water.

For now, I focused on building a home in Harborview and creating a healthy life for my new self, even if that meant I did so alone.

I'll admit the healing process is fucking brutal, and there were days I had more doubts than hope that I would ever move on. I owe it to the girls he murdered to fight like hell for the life I deserve. A life they would never have.

The murders pushed the local authorities to implement a 5 p.m. closing time for businesses to give people a chance to get home before dark with the hope that the killer would not abduct anyone during daylight hours. These small-town cops were overwhelmed with the murders. I don't think they could wrap their minds around the sheer violence perpetrated by the killer. It was inconceivable, especially in a town that rarely experienced crime in general.

I heard a rumor circulating in town that the police chief had called for help from the FBI, which meant my peaceful existence was likely in jeopardy. It wouldn't be long before agents would knock on my door demanding information and trampling all over the past I had kept a secret for all these years.

It would become an even bigger shit show, with me as the main attraction.

Shades of pink and yellow danced through the trees around my property as the sun set above the thick forest. The sky was glowing with an array of warm colors, and the shadows of the trees created a peaceful ambiance.

As I pull into the garage, I make sure the garage door is fully closed before I get out of the car. I keep my foot on the brake and put the car in reverse to activate the reverse camera.

This is part of my obsessive ritual to double-check that no one snuck in behind my car and was waiting for me to get out. A long-standing safety measure I've convinced myself will keep me safe.

After disconnecting my phone from the charging cable, I slip it into my purse. With my keys in hand, I turn the car off

and walk to the passenger side to grab my groceries.

I am considering whether or not to bring in the newspaper. I pause, choosing to fold the newspaper in half and tuck it under my arm.

I rush inside the garage door into my house and shut it, deactivating the alarm and then reactivating it immediately.

Once inside, my first task was to check the front door and all the windows to ensure they were still locked. I have to follow this obsessive-compulsive routine every time I return home to satisfy this compulsion driven by my paranoia.

As I scan the house for any signs of intrusion, I sigh, feeling foolish. I know it is irrational, but I can't shake the feeling that he is still watching me.

My heart is racing as I continue my search for any signs of intrusion. Every creak in the floorboards sends shivers down my spine, amplifying my fear. It's as if the walls whisper secrets, reminding me he is hunting me, lurking in the shadows.

For all these years, I constantly tell myself that *he* is gone and can't hurt me anymore. I repeat this mantra to myself over and over again. But deep down, I don't believe it myself.

I try to regain my composure by taking a deep breath meant to calm my nerves.

*I am safe.*

*I am in control.*

With each passing day, I become more determined to reclaim my peace of mind. I go to therapy, take medication, and take additional security precautions, no matter how tedious or outwardly laughable they may seem. I do it for my sanity and to preserve the peace I have fought tooth and nail for.

But despite these efforts, nothing I did ever completely erased him from my mind. He had infiltrated my very existence, leaving me in a constant state of paranoia. Every

unfamiliar face in the crowd sent my heart racing, my mind conjuring up terrifying scenarios.

As a child, I remember being scared of the boogeyman hiding in my closet or under my bed. My parents would check every night before I went to sleep, reassuring me that my fears were unwarranted. They promised me that nothing was there and I was safe.

As a child, I believed them.

But as an adult, I experienced the boogeyman firsthand. The boogeyman I experienced was not a figment of my imagination or a scary story parents told their children to get them to behave.

*No.*

The Boogeyman I met was a real person made of flesh and bone.

He was not anything like the stories we were told.

He was so much more.

He is evil incarnate.

Incomprehensible evil.

An evil I could never have imagined, not even in my nightmares.

After he took me, he stole my innocence and naivety physically and mentally, now frequently occupying my thoughts.

In the deepest recesses of my mind, I try to lock him in a box. But he spread into all the cracks in my mind and oozed out of all the other boxes I hid high on the shelves in a dark room I vowed never to return to. He was in the shadows in my room at night, watching me sleep. The creak on the stairs when I was alone. The movement in my peripherals when I was making dinner.

It took a long time for me to get over the darkness he left on my tattered soul. His manipulation and control caused

me to experience complex post-traumatic stress disorder and severe anxiety.

The thoughts of him were intrusive and inescapable, reinforcing my feelings of fear, powerlessness, and helplessness.

His presence was a persistent shadow in my life, never leaving my side and constantly reminding me of the trauma I experienced.

I spent many years in therapy with my Psychiatrist, Dr. Emily Larsen. She was patient with me and showed me how to construct the walls to protect my mind.

Some days, I felt incapable of functioning even if I hadn't been on medication.

I contemplated killing myself several times, so I didn't have to see him when I closed my eyes.

Or feel his fingers digging into my skin.

The pain in my core when he raped and tortured me.

The panic I felt when I heard him coming down the stairs to hurt me again.

There was a time when the memories became too painful, and I tried hanging myself from the stairwell railing.

I wasn't particularly proud of it, but at the moment, I felt like it was my only option.

Fortunately, the beam could not support my weight, and it broke in half, sending me crashing to the ground.

As I lay on the floor crying, my shame overwhelmed me.

I called Dr. Larsen, and she rushed over. She could have checked me into a psych ward where I was monitored 24/7, but she stayed in my home with me instead. She stayed for weeks until she was sure I was stable enough not to attempt suicide in her absence.

She saved my life, and I will never be able to repay her for her kindness. This was the second time someone saved my

life, and I vowed to get my head out of my ass, take the chances I was given, and make something of my life.

For years, I'd wake up screaming because the nightmares were too real.

I smelled his hot breath on my neck, whispering in my ears. His cold, bony fingers digging into my thighs as he roughly shoved them apart. His sharp teeth bite into my skin.

Sometimes he would be there watching me, his shadow illuminated by the light outside, but when I got up to confront him, he would disappear.

I slept with the lights on for years after him. In my mind, there was nowhere for him to hide if there was no darkness.

Dr. Larsen helped me create a safe space in my house, meticulously replacing windows, locks, and doors with studier materials. She told me it wouldn't necessarily save me, but it would buy me time, giving me a chance to escape. I probably never would have left my house if it weren't for her.

The sudden rush of emotions caught me off guard, leaving me feeling vulnerable and disoriented. The crippling panic attacks that happened multiple times a day had all but disappeared.

Except for the past six months.

The proximity of the murders brought much of my trauma to the surface.

The room began to spin and close in on me. The air was suffocatingly hot.

It felt like someone had punched me in the stomach.

*In and out. In and out.*

I lean my head against the wall and focus on my breathing, just like she taught me.

I count each one of my heartbeats until the pounding in my temples begins to dull.



The intense attack slowly subsides, and the room stops spinning, giving me control of my body back.

“Thanks, Emily.” I sigh out loud with gratitude for everything she has done for me.

# FOUR

AVA

Five women were found in my small town in six months, in a town where nothing ever happened like this. There was little crime, and drugs were the biggest problem. Sometimes a theft occurred but was usually tied to druggies or a transient looking for things to pawn for more drugs.

Never murder.

Never rape.

Never torture.

*Taken. Raped. Tortured. Mutilated. Killed. Discarded.*

My mind drifted back to Cindy Downs. Petite. Dark brown hair.

Just like me.

Just like the others.

She had not shown up for her 3 a.m. showtime one morning. Her obituary described her as someone who was always early and never missed work. She loved her job and her teacup yorkie Olive. She was involved in local charities and was a kind person.

I read the article over and over again, going through the similarities. Burning into my mind, the description of her wounds.

Everything was exact, except one thing.

There was no mention of the brand *he* left on all his victims.

The local police were convinced that the murders were committed by a copycat—a fanatical follower of The Skinner.

I knew better than that. I never truly believed David Commons was The Skinner. But at 19, when I escaped, I was broken.

*He had broken me.*

Inch-by-inch, he shattered me.

After him, I could be easily manipulated by others. He had taken my voice. He had taken the carefree girl I was before. The one that saw the light in every situation. The one that gave everyone the benefit of the doubt. The trusting girl.

*The girl I used to be was long gone.*

The day I escaped, Grace, my guardian angel, dropped me off at the hospital, and I passed out in the lobby.

The hospital room I woke up in seemed more like a sterile holding cell than a place of healing. The walls were painted a light gray-green color that reminded me of spoiled milk. The only decoration was a clock with aggressively loud ticking and a framed print of water lilies on the wall in front of me. There were two uncomfortable plastic chairs with thinly padded seats and metal legs that wobbled. The bed was an old metal frame with a thin mattress that had indentations from the previous patients. The sheets and blankets wrapped around me were stiffly starched and smelled faintly of bleach.

The fluorescent lights on the ceiling were harsh and unforgiving, making the room feel even more cold and unwelcoming. There was a small window, but the view was of a brick wall on the adjacent building. I saw a tray table next to the bed, and the IV pole behind me stood like a sentinel while the machines around me beeped as they monitored my vital signs.

*Hell*, I would have agreed to anything to escape from that small shithole hospital room that day.

All I could think was how I had to get out of that place. He would find me. I was sure of it. I had to escape him and get as far away as possible.

So, I did what I had to do to survive, and it still haunts me every day.

Not long after I woke up, I was *graced* with the presence of Dale Shriner, an agent with the FBI. Dale was the kind of FBI agent that didn't fit the stereotypical image. His

portly frame strained against his ill-fitting suit; the tie was perpetually askew. His jowls jiggled with every step, and he constantly wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

“Ms. Thompson, I am Agent Dale Shiner with the FBI. This is my colleague, Thomas Beck. I am sorry to question you so soon.”

*Liar.*

Agent Shiner was balding and carried himself with confidence that was uncomfortable. While his colleague was trim and physically fit, Dale made up for his lack of athleticism with a brusque attitude and an intimidating glare.

His obnoxiously patterned tie exuded egocentrism, and I had a hard time focusing on anything else.

He loomed over me with a scowl, and his interrogation style relied more on bluster and bluff than any real detective work. He saw himself as the epitome of a tough, no-nonsense FBI agent, even though his physical stature and lack of interpersonal skills said otherwise.

Agent Beck also wore a grey suit, but his tie was a muted grey and plain. He wore an expression of concern, whereas Agent Shiner pursed his lips and continued to push closer to me.

I cringed at his closeness, but if he noticed, he didn't bother with giving me space.

I watched him carefully and shifted my body to the left to put distance between us.

Agent Shiner's shrill tone forced my attention from his tie to his face. “We wanted to show you a series of photos while he is still fresh in your mind?”

*He was always fresh in my mind.*

“Can you point to the man that tortured you?” He placed a stack of photos of men with blue eyes in front of me.

The scent of stale coffee lingered on his breath, and as he talked, there was a hint of bitterness in his tone. His face was set in a perpetual scowl; lines etched deeply around his

mouth and brow. Sweat dotted his forehead, not from exertion but from an underlying annoyance, an impatience with the world and those in it.

I clumsily flipped through the photos, and the throbbing ache behind my eyes intensified. I could feel my heartbeat quicken and my blood pump in a loud cadence through my ears. I don't know if I expected to see his face staring up at me. Or if I was more afraid that his sycophantic face wasn't in the pictures.

I felt my hands begin to sweat, and a lurid sickness slithers its way into my stomach.

My doctor came into the room and protested against the agents questioning me. His voice was muted by the loud whoosh of my blood pounding in my head. He said something about being fragile, and then Baldy threatened obstruction of justice and charges for impeding an investigation back at him.

Agent Shriner and his goon fervently directed the medical staff out of the room, thrust their badges in their faces, and slammed the door.

The obnoxiously loud clap of the door slamming shut startled me, and I winced as the noise around me returned to normal.

I recognized very quickly that what I had experienced was neither here nor there to the agents before me. They were here with the one goal of using whatever information I had to catch the killer and call it a day.

I was their best shot. The only one that ever escaped and lived to talk about it.

Agent Shriner wanted to secure a conviction and close the case as soon as possible. The sooner he released formal charges, the sooner he could accomplish that goal. The Skinner had made the bureau look like idiots, highlighting their incompetence, where he had already killed nine girls before me, and they had not caught him. I was his tenth victim, and they were convinced I was the key to identifying the killer. They needed to prove to the public that they had done their job

and ensure that the public's outwardly misaligned distrust of the FBI was remedied.

I grimaced as I sat up to look at the photos, he handed me. My hands trembled as I slid them closer to me. I stared at each face, struggling to see the similarities. But none of them were him.

*Or maybe I could not remember.*

I close my eyes and see him smirking at me in his grotesque way as he cuts into the flesh on my thigh with meticulous, calm movements.

*No.*

I saw his face like he was in the room with me. My hands were soaked in sweat from my nerves and my fear. His thin lips curled as the unspoken words between us promised that I would not survive him. His blue eyes held a darkness that ran deeper than the surface. I was terrified and shook my head, doing everything I could to erase his face from my memory.

But he was still there.

As he raped me, I was forced to look at him. He grabbed my face, digging his fingers into my cheeks, screaming at me to open my eyes, his words laced with perverted promises of punishment if I didn't.

When I disobeyed him, he made good on those promises.

He tore into my flesh, lapping up my blood with his tongue, moaning as he swallowed.

He used his knife to make little cuts into my skin. His attempt at scaring me into submission.

When his rage consumed him, he shoved broom handles deep inside my core. Everything he forced inside me was brutal and unforgiving, and it ripped me apart.

Blood seeped out of my body from his abuse, the brutality like nothing I could ever have conjured in my imagination. There was nothing more cruel and wicked than

the things he did to me in the dark, dank room he imprisoned me in.

I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed I would make him angry enough to end my life right there just so the pain would stop.

It was excruciating and indescribable.

I became an empty shell. Devoid of feeling anything.

But this just angered him even more, and it soon became a game to him, procuring items to break me with.

On one of his visits, he brought a lid speculum, like the ones used by optometrists during Lasix surgery. I couldn't close my eyes even if I wanted to. I was forced to watch him penetrate me over and over again, and I wept as he smiled maniacally.

He had won. I had finally given him the response he craved.

None of these men in the photos Agent Shriner set in front of me held the same darkness in their eyes as him.

After a few days, I resigned to my fate, and I became numb to the pain he inflicted. I was nothing more than a toy for him, something to be used and discarded when he was done.

I was powerless to stop him.

I was dying, and I found comfort in it. The loss of blood from new wounds and the infection in old wounds was too much for my fragile body to take. When he realized he had gone too far, too soon, he carried me upstairs into his bathroom and out of the dungeon of torture he had created for me. His sick attempt to save me so he could keep torturing me.

The salmon-colored bathroom he brought me to was warm and inviting. I pretended to be unconscious when there was a knock on the door, and he left me alone in the bathroom. I do not know where the strength to climb out of the window came from, but the minute my feet touched the frozen ground, I ran.

# FIVE

AVA

I am naked and cold. But I won't stop until I find someone or die trying. The cold snow crunched beneath my bare feet, sending chills up my spine yet filling me with adrenaline. I ran, moving my feet quickly and lightly over the fresh powder. The bitter cold nipped at my toes, but I ignored the pain and dug deep into my soul for any remnants of strength to get away—strength I didn't even know I had.

I ran through the thick woods, focused on my freedom as sharp branches tore my face and body apart.

The cold air filled my lungs, and my feet went numb.

I reached a paved road and caught a glimpse of a silver Oldsmobile heading toward me.

I was terrified it might be him driving, and for a moment, I regretted my decision to stand there in plain view. But it was too late to hide, and I was frozen in place.

I waved my hands and cried for them to stop.

The car screeched to a halt, feet from running me over.

I held my breath as the driver got out of the car.

It was an old woman. Her weathered face creased with wrinkles and experience, a mix of shock and concern as she took in my appearance. Her hair was white as snow, thinning, and pulled back into a loose bun. She wore a blue wool shawl, faded and frayed at the edges, wrapped around her shoulders, shielding her from the chill.

I released a pained breath, more of a whimper, and begged her to drive me far away from here. After a few seconds, her face relaxed, and she wrapped her shawl around me and pulled it tight around my tiny frame.

“Come on, girl. You'll catch your death in this cold.”



Her name was *Grace*.

I thought her name was fitting for the woman who was my savior. If it weren't for Grace, I would be dead. He would have found me, or I would have frozen to death. I was already half frozen when I stumbled onto that road, bruised and bleeding. She took one look at me and ushered me into her car. She never asked who I was or what had happened. Her kind eyes and gentle smile conveyed only concern for my well-being.

My eyes fluttered open as the memory faded away, bringing me back to the present, causing my breath to hitch and my eyes to prick with fresh tears.

"I am sorry." I choked between sobs. "I just don't see him."

Agent Shiner's face turned bright red, and a deep crease formed between his eyebrows. His eyes narrowed, and his tone was strained when he spoke. "What about this one?"

He pointed at the picture of David Commons. I didn't know who he was at the time, but in the next few months, I became very familiar with that face. They had found images on Commons's computer. He was a high school biology teacher with a wife and three kids, who apparently had no idea about her husband's extracurricular activities. On his computer were hundreds of photos of dead women, and in those images were photos of me. Photos of me naked and bleeding, blindfolded and tied to the bed.

I put my face in my hands. "I wish I could help." I sobbed.

I felt exhausted. Every ounce of strength I had left seeped out of me and onto the floor. I sank back into the bed, defeated, and kept my head down. The weight of the world seemed too much to bear at that moment.

Everything felt impossible.

Thoughts raced through my mind, each one more helpless than the last. I wanted nothing more than to close my

eyes and wake up from this nightmare that had become my life.

“You can help.” He growled. “You’re just going to let him walk free because you’re too scared to point him out. You know he is on this lineup. I know he is in this lineup. Put aside your personal feelings and help us get justice for all the girls who didn’t survive like you!”

He stabbed his fat, stubby finger onto the picture of Common’s face, and his nostrils flared. “Is this the man that tortured you?” The veins in his neck engorged, his face reddened, and spittle fell on his chin.

I nodded wearily in response to his question, feeling too exhausted and defeated to argue with him. My body ached, and my mind felt numb from his relentless questions. I was growing less and less clear on the details he kept pressing me for. My eyes fell to my lap as I sat slumped in my bed, willing my mind to disengage from the situation and float away to whatever peaceful place I could conjure up.

They left, and the crippling silence enveloped me once more.

To this day, I don’t know why I nodded. Dr. Larsen explained it was because of the volatile nature of his questioning, and it was my mind’s way of protecting me by trying to find an exit from the uncomfortable barrage of questioning. She tried to convince me that I was not to blame for what I did or did not say because of the trauma I had experienced.

My lawyer sent a strongly worded complaint to the FBI and demanded that Agent Shiner be reprimanded for his conduct and that any of my testimony be wiped clean due to my fragile state of mind at the time.

They responded with excuses and offered the option that I would not have to testify in person if I signed a deposition statement stating I had picked Commons out of the photo line-up.

As time went on, Common's face began to morph into *his* face, and I had no choice but to believe that he was the one who broke me. When the FBI sweetened the pot and threw in the new start in Oregon, I jumped at the opportunity and left before the trial commenced.

Over the years, I struggled with what I did. I knew in my heart that David Commons was innocent, but the documents I signed made it impossible to go back on my word.

Ava Thompson no longer existed, dead by suicide; perks of being a part of the FBI's protective custody and the arrangement I made with them. Ava Monroe was just a girl who began a new life in a small coastal town with no belongings to her name and a wish for healing.

Years passed, and no other murders occurred, and I knew I had contributed to the condemnation of an innocent man. Regardless of what evidence the FBI and local authorities thought they had on him, he was just the unlucky schmuck it was pinned on. This ruse was the means to an end. The way they could end the harsh scrutiny and outrage of a very public murder case that made law enforcement look like clowns.

The killer had eluded law enforcement for years. When they thought they were close to catching him, he would disappear into thin air again. He taunted law enforcement and was always ten steps ahead of them. He somehow always knew where they would be.

It got so bad the FBI began an internal investigation to determine if someone in their department was the killer or was giving information to the killer. When nothing nefarious turned up, the subject was dropped.

David Commons denied knowledge of the folder and never admitted guilt to the murders, rightfully so. I always felt like the tip that pointed the FBI to Commons was conveniently timed. He was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death. He was still on death row and running out of appeal options. It didn't matter that he had solid alibis for the

timeframes when the bodies were found. It didn't matter that he had no other evidence in his home or anything that tied him to the crimes.

The prosecutors focused on the hundreds of pictures in a hidden folder and my signed statement. My deposition had destroyed a man's life, and I would always have to live with that guilt for the rest of my life.

I continue to breathe through those past memories and fight to overcome the pain. After a few minutes, the dizziness begins to subside, and I am back in the present. I stand up and amble slowly into my kitchen. Tossing the newspaper down on my kitchen counter, I grab the nearest bottle of whiskey and pour myself a drink. The dark brown liquid warms my throat but does nothing to stop the chills I feel deep in my bones.

His dark eyes burn into my mind.

His deep voice whispers, *"The pain you feel now will disappear when your body realizes you are dying. It is your body's defense mechanism that sends the last bit of adrenaline to your nerves to comfort you in your final moments. But until then, I am going to use you. I am going to tear inside your body. The last thing you will see before you die is me."*

His hot breath violates my ear; his words are laced with seduction as he speaks perverted details of my impending death.

*Fuck.* I exhale loudly. It was going to be a long night, so I poured myself another drink, this time a double.

# SIX

JAMES

My team and I had just entered Harborview when the sky lit up, thunder rumbled loud enough to shake the car, the windows rattled, and the side mirrors shook.

*Fitting.*

I was here to find the motherfucker that made the department look bad. Either this guy was flawless in his attention to detail to the murders committed, or the news reporters were right...they arrested the wrong man.

*How else could he have had photos of all those women on his computer if he was not the killer?*

I flip through page after page of The Skinner's file, reviewing the interview notes and pictures of the crime scenes. There was Ava Thompson, now Ava Monroe, on the day she was dropped off in the ER.

*The girl who got away.*

She was covered in blood, and her long dark hair was caked with dried blood on her skull. Her grey eyes were lifeless, and the brand on her thigh—an "S" was red and raw. He had branded her before she escaped. Judging by his timeline in the other murders, a brand meant he was almost done with her.

She was the lucky one.

*But was she really?*

I doubt that just because she survived with her life meant she was magically healed and moved on, with unbridled happiness ruling her life.

I had seen enough in Afghanistan to know that dark memories—especially the ones she carried, would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Death always leaves an imprint on your soul. Physical wounds may heal, but mental wounds taint the soul.

I have worked out of the New York office for four years. The FBI recruited me fresh out of the Navy, where I was part of a unit responsible for special operations counterterrorism work in Iraq and Afghanistan. During my time at the New York office, I have been involved in various high-profile cases collaborating closely with law enforcement agencies and intelligence organizations. The experience I had from my time in the Navy proved invaluable, giving me a strong foundation in strategic planning and critical thinking, which has greatly contributed to my success.

But it took a toll on my mental health. I chose to separate after twelve years of watching my friends die one by one—either in the field or by their own hands. The war was ugly and took so much from all of us. It felt like nothing was done to help the situation. We were devoured by corrupt government red tape and Geneva Convention laws that made retaliation options limited or nonexistent. I grew tired of being told there was nothing we could do each time someone I cared for was killed.

When the FBI approached me with an open position and promised less red tape, I eagerly leaped right in. There was slightly less red tape; however, I still had bosses to answer to, which was an annoyance, but I was given a lot of autonomy to handle investigations the way I wanted with little to no oversight.

In the cases I was assigned to, the victims were typically dead already. That made my job easy. I did more profiling and hunting for predators than dealing with the living, and I preferred it that way. I was adept at finding people who didn't intend to be found—finding trails that had gone cold. And my drive and commitment to the FBI sent me shooting through the ranks to lead agent.

This case would be no different. I would either find a copycat killer or the real one. I sincerely hoped that these new murders were a copycat because the implication of the latter

meant that the FBI had falsely accused and helped imprison an innocent man.

I had to make sure I didn't fuck this case up.

This case was under intense scrutiny, so I know I will be operating under a microscope. The sooner I close it, the sooner I can get out of this small town and back to New York, where cell reception actually exists. I am eager to settle the score with this prick once and for all.

“Her lane is on the right here.”

“Should we go lights on?” Everett asked.

Everett had been my partner and best friend for over five years. He was a young go-getter that balanced me. Many newer agents tried to ride along on my coattails when I solved high-profile cases. They wanted to be brought along to further their careers and sit in the glow of the spotlight. Everett was happy being a part of the action, regardless of accolades and saved my ass more times than I could count. We kept each other breathing, and I trusted him with my life. He joined the agency to break away from his white trash roots and make something of himself.

Well, that, and fuck anything that walked.

Everett is a ladies' man through and through, and for some reason, women love a man in a suit. He was overweight most of his life, and as he got older, he spent every minute of his free time in the gym. The more fit he became, the more attention he garnered from women. And he didn't waste his time making full use of the newfound attention. It wouldn't be long before he had a girl or two infatuated with him during this assignment too.

Even though he is a man whore, he is a loyal friend and partner to me, and that's what I appreciate the most about him. He has my back and trusts my calls, and supports me on every front, but he isn't afraid to tell me when I am being a jackass.

I did not join the agency to get girls. Sure, I had been with my fair share of women in my life, but when the sun came up, I kicked them to the curb. I don't really have the time

for anything serious, and frankly, I don't care for the baggage *easy* girls bring with them. With their daddy issues and abandonment issues, blowing my phone up 24/7 when I am balls-deep in another assignment. It just gets messy, and I don't do messy. I fuck, and I catch bad guys. My focus has always been on my job and the adrenaline rush that comes with it. I thrive in high-pressure situations and the thrill of taking down criminals. Relationships and emotional *entanglements* only serve as distractions, and I prefer to keep my personal life separate from my work life.

Life is *simpler* that way.

For this assignment, though, I am happy to have Everett by my side and look forward to finally closing the case and bringing justice to the piece of shit murdering women. It takes a twisted fuck not just to kill but torture and mutilate his victims to the point of being unrecognizable. I had no sympathy for someone like that. And I would do everything in my power to make sure that he never saw the light of day again.

“Let's go lights off. I don't want to alert the whole town if someone *is* watching her. I doubt Miss. Monroe will be pleased about us being here. If she doesn't already know we are on our way, let's keep our arrival as peaceful as possible.”

Everett turned on her road and drove up toward her house. Her lane is muddy because of all this fucking rain. There is a single set of tire tracks that run the length of the lane that Everett follows until her house looms ahead.

The lake house stands proudly on the shore of the dark blue water. A large dark gray-two-story structure with black hurricane shutters prepared to shield the windows from the elements. Colorful flower arrangements hang cheerfully from the deck roof, nestled between each thick pillar that supports the veranda running the length of the upper level. The flowers sway back and forth in the wind from the storm.

An immaculately cut lawn of lush green grass surrounds the house, stretching away to meet the edge of the dark forest that encircles the acres of ground. Towering pine



and oak trees rise from the undergrowth, their thick trunks and gnarled branches creating a sense of privacy and seclusion for the lake house and its inhabitants.

The forest seems to swallow all sounds, leaving only the gentle lap of the waves against the shore and the whisper of wind through their leaves. The home stands like a bastion, secure and timeless, overlooking the stormy waters and wooded shore. It was a beautiful, secluded property.

But seclusion was not a good thing this time.

The number of potential hiding spots in the woods around the house concerns me. Anyone could watch her, hidden in the darkness between the trees.

“Sarah, tell vehicles 2 and 3 to comb around the house and set up a brain center. Instruct the technicians to install cameras with motion sensors on the property line. I want eyes on within the next fifteen minutes. If we did fuck up, let’s not make it worse by letting that asshole finish what he started with her. The least we can do is protect her. Everett, you’re with me.” I slid the file back into my briefcase and waited for Everett to put the car in park before I opened my door.

Sarah Ryan was the youngest agent on my team, but she has a tenacity that can’t be taught. She is a tall skinny blonde with a spunky attitude and a drive to rise in the agency. She has only been with the FBI for three years, but she was at the top of her class and didn’t mind taking jobs no one else wanted. It didn’t take long for her to gain favor with leadership. When I was asked who I wanted on my task force, I chose her. She was the only female, but I could count on her to get shit done. She is not interested in fucking her way through the force like some agents; instead, she works her ass off. She is smart and takes no shit, and in the event Ava is uncomfortable with speaking with Everett because of our gender, Sarah has the confidence I need to run point during the difficult questioning that I have prepared. And none of this is going to be easy for anyone, least of all the only person to survive the first time.

I head towards the house and up the wide wooden stairs that lead up to the wraparound porch. Dark green ferns sit at the end of each stair in stone pots with iridescent mosaic glass pressed into them. The lights on the first floor are on, casting a soft white glow on the property.

As I walk up the stairs, I can't help but feel uneasy as I scan the area. The woods seemed to press in all around the house, providing ample cover for anyone who wished to spy on its inhabitant unseen. That makes me uneasy, and I am mentally contemplating the best way to get eyes on the entire property. In my line of work, leaving a stone unturned can end badly for my team and the people we protect.

The porch was spacious and inviting, with potted plants of various sizes scattered across the railings. The porch floor is lined with shiny black wood panels. There is a country-style black wooden swing on the right side of the door and bright metal café style chairs and a table on the left. I am surprised to find so many plants and flower arrangements in pots adorning the entire porch and hanging between the pillars. The house has been taken care of meticulously, no small detail left untouched. I ring the doorbell next to the thick wooden front door, take a few steps back, and wait.

I don't see any other cars parked outside the two-car garage, but that doesn't mean someone else doesn't live here with her, even though her file said she was unmarried. The bureau keeps files on each individual sent into protective custody for situations such as this.

Ava's situation was less protective custody and more of a pay-off funding program for her testimony against David Commons. In the event she had a roommate or a paramour, they would be protecting not one but two people. This may make my job more difficult, but it isn't anything I wouldn't be able to handle.

The bright-motion lights around the house suddenly flickered on as my agents surveyed the property.

*If she didn't realize we were there before, she would now.*

I knock loudly on the large wooden door, waiting patiently for an answer. I look over at Everett, who stands a couple of feet behind me on my right, his eyes scanning our surroundings.

# SEVEN

AVA

The doorbell rings while I am in the middle of pulling banana nut muffins out of the oven. I check the front doorbell camera on my phone and see two men in dark suits. One has dark brown hair, and the other has light brown hair. I don't recognize the agents they sent this time. These two look too young to have been involved in the first investigation. I assume they are old enough to be familiar with my case and were likely chosen because they are the best agents that stand a decent chance of cleaning up the enormous fuck-up by their predecessors. If the FBI sent their guys out, there is a big chance the FBI finally realized that the guy sitting on death row was not the right guy. This confirms my gut feeling that *He* has been looking for me all these years. A cold shiver moves down my spine at the thought.

*It did take the FBI longer than I expected to knock on my door. They had to believe he was here, too, right? Why else would they send a team to comb all over my property? The local murders were not just coincidence. He was hunting me. Toying with me. He wanted me to know he had found me before making his presence known. He was predatory and loved the thrill of the chase. But could he really hold out this long to let me know he was here? To come and get me? That is the part that didn't make sense.*

I suddenly feel dizzy, so I grip the counter to steady myself. The doorbell rings again, followed by loud knocking. I take a drink of water and exhale as I force my feet to walk toward my front door. I punched in the code for the alarm, turned it off, and then began the process of unlocking each of the locks knowing that my quiet life was about to get very loud.

I consider for the briefest moment not opening the door and ignoring them. Maybe they would leave. Or maybe I could leave Harborview and never look back. But I can't fathom the thought of being on the run, constantly looking over my

shoulder for the Boogeyman. And I love the life I have built here. I have spent many years building a home for myself. I created a life I never thought I would have the chance to create. I am beyond grateful for the inadvertent second chance I was given so many years ago.

*A chance that the other girls should have been given.*

All those years ago, I promised them that I would live the life they were not afforded. I would carve a place for myself in the world. I didn't crawl through Hell to get to where I was today for nothing. I may not have gotten rid of *him* completely, but I could wake up each day and live. I will never let *him* take that from me. *He* has taken enough already.

I inhale a sharp breath and unlock the final lock, wiping my sweaty palms against my jeans. I turn the doorknob and pull the heavy door open.

No turning back now.

The dark-haired agent wears a composed look and gives me a curt smile, assessing me before I speak. His dark black hair is combed to the side, and his eyes are blue like the ocean after a storm, with a hint of grey and mystery hidden within. His sharp gaze makes me wonder what secrets he holds behind those piercing eyes. I can't help but notice the air of confidence that surrounds him, leaving me intrigued. The other one has hazel eyes and light brown hair with caramel highlights from the porch light. The dark blonde guy looks me up and down and gives me an approving glance. *Interesting*. They both tower over me, easily more than a foot above my petite, barely five-foot height. The short pause makes me uncomfortable, so I awkwardly blurt out the first thing I can think of.

"I wondered how long it would be before the FBI sent a team out here to clean up their mess."

That came out harsher than I intended. *Fuck. Oh well.*

"Mrs. Monroe, my name is Agent James Buchanan, and this is my partner Agent Everett Matthews. May we come

in and talk with you?” He responds politely, unphased by my tone, but his eyes flash with a look I can’t yet decipher.

“Yes.” I hold the door open, allowing them to come inside. “We can talk in the kitchen,” I state in a clipped tone I, again, did not entirely mean to have. *What is wrong with me right now?* I close the door and push past them, waving them on to follow me as I hurry away, trying to hide my embarrassment.

“Yes, ma’am.” Agent Buchanan responds. I don’t wait to see if they follow. Instead, I busy myself with pulling the muffins out of the cupcake tin and onto a plate. When I hear their footsteps behind me, I turn around to face them and do my best to steady my racing heart.

# EIGHT

JAMES

When the door opens, I am startled to see a beautiful brunette standing before me instead of the pale ghost from her file. The stark contrast between the blood-covered, lifeless, emaciated young girl I had seen in the pictures in her file to the one standing before me left me pleasantly surprised. She wears an unamused expression on her face, and the intensity in her grey eyes as she observes Everett and me has me speechless for a moment. I expect a look of shock, but instead, there is just sadness lingering behind her eyes. Her very presence exudes a quiet strength that belies the horrors she has endured, and I wonder if the untold stories in her eyes are etched deep in the depths of her soul.

Something I am very familiar with.

It was like she wasn't surprised that we were here.

*Had she lived ten years with that look, like she knew he would come back for her? Damn. What kind of life would that have been? She had to see that we were going to protect her. If the actual killer was still out there, I would not stop until I found him. I felt this inherent need to make sure this wouldn't happen again. She deserved to live in peace and safety, and I would do whatever it took to make that happen.*

The house has a charming and comforting vibe. There is a sense of simplicity and connection to nature that flows from the outside in. The sweet aroma of banana nut muffins fills the air reminding me of my childhood. A dark wooden staircase with intricate black iron railings wound upward from the left of the entrance. To the right, under the stairs, is an arched opening leading to the kitchen. The dark cherry wood floors were spotlessly clean, and everything had its place. Her fondness for plants extended indoors as well, with houseplants dotting the rooms.

We follow her into the kitchen, passing numerous artworks of landscapes and ancient civilizations on the walls

but noticeably, no personal photos. She gestures for us to sit at the breakfast nook facing the window with the deep red curtains still drawn. Silently she shuffles through the kitchen and returns with a plate of banana nut muffins and several small plates. She then wordlessly goes back into the kitchen, fetches three white marble coffee cups, and places them before us.

I take a deep breath, hoping to regain my composure before speaking. “I apologize for my abruptness,” I say, forcing a smile. “Please, have a seat.”

“Coffee?” She offers.

Everett and I nod appreciatively. “Thank you for the hospitality, Mrs. Monroe.”

“It’s Miss. I’m not married. And I would prefer to be called Ava. Mrs. Monroe makes me feel old.”

She pours us each a cup and gestures toward the coffee pot in the kitchen. “Sugar is in the jar, milk and creamer are in the fridge. You and your team can set up in any of the rooms downstairs. There are four guest rooms upstairs. All of you are welcome to stay where you can find space.” She says matter-of-factly.

I nod at Everett, signaling him to move forward with the set-up.

“Thank you for being so accommodating.” Everett grabs a muffin taking a big bite before he leaves the kitchen, leaving me alone with her.

I took a sip of my coffee and cleared my throat. “Ava, I first want to reassure you that the FBI is committed to protecting you and doing what we can to catch whoever is committing these murders so you can get back to living your life.”

She nods towards me in subtle acknowledgment, and a shiver moves through her petite body. She composes herself quickly, but not before I notice her uncomfortable shifting. I pretend like I don’t notice before continuing.



I pull my tape recorder from my jacket pocket and set it on the table. She watches my movements like a hawk, and I can tell she is on edge.

“I was hoping I could talk to you and hear your story about what you experienced in your own words. I know that there is a lot in your file, but I am interested in listening to your version of events and see if there is anything you may have remembered over the years that we don’t know.”

“I wonder if he is out there watching me now.” She says, barely above a whisper staring aimlessly out the window, gripping her coffee cup tightly between her hands. So tight that her fingertips are turning white.

I can see the weight she is carrying and likely has for so many years, and I feel sorry for her. Her eyes flash with pain, and her body is tense. I hate that my presence is causing such noticeable non-verbal cues to her uncomfortableness.

“I feel as if I should tell you that we are not sure that this is not the work of a copycat.”

“We or I?” She counters, lifting her eyes to look at me. Her gaze challenges me, and I feel my stomach jump in a way that I am not expecting and for reasons I don’t understand.

“There are some details from the most recent murders that match details from the first murders. It matches details that were kept secure and only given to those that had a need to know. The trial was a closed trial, and there was no media allowed in the courtroom. We have ruled out a breach in our secure files, so that leaves someone with intimate knowledge of the crimes committed. We have ruled out those directly involved in the trial, and David Commons is still sitting in prison on death row, so there is no way he is directly involved. However, we are running through his communication in and out of the prison with a fine-tooth comb. In cases such as these, killers tend to gain a fan club full of twisted perverts that get their rocks off, living vicariously through the murderers. We are checking to see if he was indirectly involved by giving intimate details to someone outside of the prison who is using that information to commit these murders.

If that is the case, that means we did put the right man behind bars, but we are dealing with a copycat. So far, we haven't found anything to indicate that Commons has been providing nefarious information to anyone."

She chuckles and turns her gaze to me. "So, I am your last resort, then?"

"I wouldn't say that. I think we are just exploring every angle. It is not our intention to cause you distress or interrupt your life. We are at a standstill, Miss Monroe and we really need your help to determine if we missed something the first time around. If there is anything you can remember that may lead us in a different direction so we can catch the individual terrorizing your town."

"And what do you believe, Agent Buchanan?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe. I am here on behalf of the FBI, and we are determined to catch the killer regardless of who it is."

"So, you don't have any thoughts? You're just a tool for the FBI doing what you're told?" Her eyes narrow, and she inclines her head, crossing her arms on her chest.

I am taken aback for a minute at her boldness. She says what she feels, and I admire her for that. No one has ever asked me what I believe, let alone challenge my professional response.

"That's not it," I respond.

"Then what do you believe, Agent Buchanan? Do you believe that these murders, conveniently in the town I disappeared to after my fake death, are just a coincidence? Or do you believe that your agency fucked up and used me to imprison an innocent man? Take your time, I have all the time in the world, or maybe I don't. I guess that will be determined eventually." She settles back into her seat and waits for my response. Her stubbornness both irritates and excites me at the same time.

I clear my throat again, and I smile.

“What I believe is that the FBI believes they did their job in putting Commons behind bars. But I also believe that there are a lot of similarities that are at this time unexplainable between the murders ten years ago and the murders now. However, at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what I believe. It matters what I can prove, and it matters that I do everything in my power to not only keep you safe but find whoever is killing these women before he gets the chance to murder someone else. The sooner we find him, the sooner you can return to the peaceful life you are living.”

“Peaceful?” She smirks but changes the subject. “I assume you have the crime scene photos and autopsy reports for the victims with you?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

She gestures towards my briefcase, and I reach inside and pull them out. I lean forward and slide the files toward her but keep my hand on them.

“I would like to caution you that the images inside are quite difficult to look at, Miss Monroe.”

“There is nothing in those files that I have not seen or had nightmares about for ten years. I would still like to see them, please.” She waved her hand toward the files.

I nod and remove my hand. I sit quietly, watching her flip through the pages; her face never changing.

*What horror did the killer put her through that the graphic images and descriptions of what the killer did to each of these women don’t phase her?*

I would be remiss if I didn’t appreciate her beauty while I watched her. She is gorgeous. Her hair is dark brown and straight. She wears it parted on the right side and down to her waist, and when it falls in front of her face, she gently pushes it back behind her ear and continues reading. Her eyes are colored a luminescent gray that reminds me of the ethereal glow of the moon on a pitch-black night. I move my eyes down from her face, taking in her high cheekbones and her

narrow nose above her full pink lips that she currently has pressed tightly together.

As I observe her, I notice a subtle dimple on her left cheek when she smiles, adding an endearing charm to her already captivating features. Her slender neck gracefully supports a delicate silver necklace, accentuating her beauty.

I can see why she stood out to the killer and why someone had spent the last ten years searching for her. The Skinner always picked pretty brunettes, but none of the girls compared to her. She was different from the others, not just in physical attractiveness, but in spirit. Everything that should have broken her hadn't.

She was the girl who got away.

And I knew that this would only go two ways.

With the killer dead or with her dead.

And I would do everything I could to protect her.

I briefly catch the slightest change in her eyes, but if you were a normal person on the street, without the training I have, the chances of catching the shift would be almost nonexistent. I assume she has spent all these years hiding her emotions from the world. Putting on a brave face to hide the torment in her soul. To fit in somewhere and feel normal. A pillar of strength on the outside so no one could hurt her. The way she controlled her emotions was impressive, and I had a hard time taking my eyes off her.

# NINE

## AVA

The files he gave me contained chilling details of the torture and murders of the Harborview Five, the news had called the newest victims in my town. The second generation of innocent women tortured and killed for no reason.

Blunt-force trauma marred their heads, necks, stomachs, and chests. Multiple stab wounds riddle their bodies, violently tearing through skin and muscles. Signs of sexual assault, including anal penetration, likely carried out with objects like broom handles or baseball bats, were evident. The level of brutality inflicted upon the victims was truly horrifying. Although I was familiar with his level of sadism, the evidence showed that he had taken pleasure in causing physical harm but also sought to degrade and humiliate them in the most deplorable ways imaginable.

I scanned my eyes through each document, lingering on their faces. Though once beautiful, they are now distorted and grotesque. Reviewing the files, I saw what I sought—the brand. The tiny “S” burned into their flesh, matching my own. A chilling reminder of the painful past I shared with them, the mark that bound us all together.

I didn't believe in coincidences.

As much as I wanted to believe this was the work of a copycat living out its perverted obsession with the original killer, the sick feeling in my stomach told me the truth.

*He was close.*

I hand the file back to Agent Buchanan and brace myself for the questions I know will follow. At the same time, the other agent, Agent Matthews, returns with a cute blonde female agent behind him, granting me a much-needed reprieve to collect my thoughts and settle my stomach.

“This is Agent Sarah Ryan.” Agent Matthews introduced her into the conversation. “She is available to speak

if you would prefer a female.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Monroe. I am sorry we are intruding into your life like this again.” Sarah extended her hand.

“Ava, please.” I take her hand and do my best to give her a warm smile, even though I want to curl up in the fetal position and cry. “I am okay speaking to whomever I need to.” I choke out.

Sarah looks at me with concern, her eyes filled with empathy. “I know this is tough for you, but you’re strong,” she reassures me softly. “If you change your mind, I am here for you anytime you need me. You don’t have to face this alone.”

“Thank you,” I say sincerely. “I appreciate your kindness,” I add, trying to convey my gratitude. I hate the way everyone looks at me. It’s the same way they looked at me ten years ago. Their eyes are full of pity and fear, like they aren’t sure how to be around me.

“We are going to go finish setting up the brain,” Agent Matthews turned towards Agent Buchanan.

“Thank you.” He nods towards them.

Once they are gone, I sigh, fighting back the tears that prick my eyes. So much for keeping my composure. Agent Buchanan notices, and a look of compassion is expressed on his face.

“We can do this later. I understand this is difficult for you.” He offers, sensing my hesitation.

“No.” I shake my head. “The longer we wait, the more women he will kill.” I swallow the lump in my throat and meet his gaze. “Where do you want me to start?”

“At the beginning, if you could. Anything you can remember.” James responds and gives me a reassuring smile.

I let out a whoosh of air and wiped my sweaty, soaked hands on my jeans. “The beginning. Let’s see, I was 19 and was going to school at Boston State University. I was in my second year of medical school. I worked at a local gentleman’s

club, as I am sure you saw in my file. Med school was expensive, and I didn't have rich parents to pay my tuition like many students who were in the program with me. My parents died when I was eighteen in a car crash, so it was just me. I was leaving work around 4 a.m. on a Saturday. Normally one of the bouncers walks each of the girls to their cars, but that morning, they were busy. I can't say any of us really had a fear of leaving alone. It was a college town, and most of the guys that had been at the bar had already gone home with other dancers. It was just the normal ebb and flow. I was nineteen, and it's not that I didn't fear anything, but I think at that age, you just don't have the capacity in your brain to think about being kidnapped. I mean, what was the likelihood of that happening to anyone, really?"

I pause for a second, my mouth dry, and take a sip of my coffee before continuing.

"Over the years, I kept replaying that day in my head. Did I miss something? Was something off? But I keep coming back empty. Nothing was out of the ordinary that morning. Nothing felt different than usual."

I rubbed my hand down my neck, pushing away the tension that was creeping up.

"I had spent the night in the VIP section, which was typical for me. I had my normal creepy and handsy customers, but no one made me feel fearful for my life. I remember when I left, it was raining out. There was a hurricane coming in from the east coast. Isabella, I think they called it. The parking lot was empty except for the dancers and bouncers' cars. I parked in the second row but still within view of the front door. I made it to my car and was about to unlock it when I felt a hand wrap around my mouth and a sharp pinch in my neck. Everything went black. And when I woke up, I was in what looked like a cellar or something or a dilapidated basement. It was dark, and I didn't see any windows. The floor and the walls were rock, and it was cold. Bitterly cold. I was completely naked. My arms and legs were tied to the metal spokes of the bed. I tried so hard to pull my hands free, but the chains didn't budge. They didn't even loosen just a bit. The

spokes were solid, like they were cemented to the bed. I thought if I could give myself a little room, I might be able to slip my wrists out and free myself. I exhausted myself trying. The only thing I could see was this stainless-steel table with all of these tools on it. Different types of knives and needles. My throat was on fire, and my head felt like it was going to explode. I could hear the rain, and there was water that was dripping somewhere in the room. The rhythm of the dripping was enough to drive me crazy. I pulled at the chains for what felt like hours. And then I heard him laughing. He had been in the room with me the whole time, watching me from the dark corner of the room. I begged him to let me go. But he just walked towards me without saying anything. He had this sick smirk on his face. There was no feeling behind his eyes.”

I shut my eyes, forcing myself back to that day. I hadn't returned to that memory in a long time. I felt the abhorrent suffocation like no time had passed. I could still smell the air that carried a musty smell, hinting at years of neglect and dampness. I could see the walls made of rough, weathered stone illuminated by the light underneath a metal door. The eerie silence consumed me. I could still feel the cold air that caused chills to run down my spine. My fingers and toes were numb from the chains that bound me. The way the floor was uneven, covered in a layer of dirt and worn-out wooden planks. Cobwebs were hanging in forgotten corners, swaying gently in the stagnant air. The only sound I could hear was the distant drip of water. The darkness was almost tangible, as if it were carrying a weight of its own. Shadows dance and flicker, playing tricks on my imagination. It was a tomb that he had created for me. I knew I would never escape.

But I did.

I felt Agent Buchanan's eyes boring into me. He listens attentively, hanging onto every word I say, waiting for me to continue telling my story. He doesn't look at me with pity. Not at all like everyone else. It seems more of an expression of understanding, as if he has personal knowledge of the trauma I carried with me. I am not sure why I find comfort in it, but I do.



I hadn't spoken about what had happened in so many years. And if someone asked me to talk about what happened, especially in the early years, I am not sure if I could have without falling apart. Talking about it now, after years of therapy and medications, it felt only a little bit easier. What began as a faraway memory that I had tucked away in the deepest recesses of my mind became familiar again, like I was back in the dungeon he created for me.

*Fuck.*

The memories were acid in my throat, burning my tongue and stealing my breath. I was so immersed in them I didn't realize that he had slid a glass of water in front of me. I graciously accepted it and drank several gulps, a feeble attempt to quell the painful desert in my throat.

I give him a small smile and then continue.

“For a while, he would watch me struggle to get free. He never said a word while he watched me. He just watched me like I was an animal in a trap and, like any predator, waited for me to exhaust myself before he attacked. Sometimes he sat in a chair beside the bed, touched himself, and masturbated. I tried to drown out the sounds of his arousal, his grunting and panting until he came. That was when he covered me in his semen. The hot liquid splashed over my eyes and mouth, and he laughed. I gagged and was barely able to turn my head to throw up. I begged him to stop. I promised I would do anything. I would give anything if he just stopped. He just laughed at me. I was his amusement. I screamed until I lost my voice.”

I pause, putting my hands in my lap to hide how badly they were shaking. After a minute or two of silence, Agent Buchanan softly spoke.

“Why don't you take a break?” he says, his voice deep and smooth.

I rolled my hands in my lap in an awkward attempt to comfort myself. I shook my head, unsure if it was in response to him or myself.

“When I could no longer scream, he started touching me. At first, he would shove his ice-cold fingers inside of me. Then he started using the knives and tools he had on that table. He would cut into my skin with small cuts and put his mouth on them, drinking my blood until it clotted. Then he started raping me. It happened over and over again. I tried to focus on something else in the room. A fly that had landed on the wall or a stream of water flowing down the wall. Anything I could to leave the hell I was in. And when I closed my eyes so I didn’t have to see his face while he fucked me, he became enraged. The rage that would overtake him... I called it *The Beast*. There was nothing human about what he did when The Beast came out. When he walked towards me with a broom, I had no idea what he was planning to do. Until he shoved it inside of me. Fuck.”

My breath hitched, and I was nauseous. I abruptly stood and headed into the kitchen, my head was dizzy, and my hands tingled. I ran them up and down my thighs, a nervous habit, and grabbed the first whiskey bottle I found.

“I need something stronger than coffee,” I said to no one in particular.

I return with two glasses and the bottle of Jameson, pouring both of us a glass. I don’t wait for him to drink his before I down mine and pour another. He watches me, giving me the time I need. When I realize he is not going to drink his, I drink his glass too.

“Okay, where was I?” I sipped at the new drink in front of me and gathered my thoughts.

“He was not pleased when the broom no longer caused a reaction in me. I don’t know if it was because I laughed at him or because I was not reacting the way he thought I should in the way that brought him the most pleasure. He had caused so much damage that I just stopped feeling. I was exhausted, and in my mind, I thought if I just ignored him, and didn’t let him know he was hurting me, maybe he would get bored and leave me alone. Maybe he would let me go. I mean, this is what it was all about for him, right? He wanted to cause pain. He wanted to watch me cry and beg him to stop. He was sick.

Worse than a sadist. I knew that, but sometimes sick fucks like him need a certain reaction to feel like they are in control. I guess I just kept thinking if I just shut my eyes and stayed still, he would tire of me. I was so fucking wrong. I just angered The Beast again. Worse than I ever had before. I don't know what it was that he grabbed, but this time he shoved it in my ass and shoved it in there over and over. He was ripping me apart, and I was comforted by the heat of my own blood. I was so cold, and my own blood was the only thing keeping me warm. Isn't that fucked up? I wanted to bleed because, for a few moments, it was warm. It was mine. And it was all I had left."

He nodded his head, encouraging me to go on.

"Down there, I had no concept of time. I didn't know how many days had passed or how many times he had raped me. I closed my eyes and refused to look at him, so the next time he came, he brought a lid speculum with him. He made sure I couldn't shut my eyes then. I watched him pull his greasy hair back into a ponytail. And the crazed look in his black eyes. I thought he would never stop. I silently begged for death. I lay there dying, but it eluded me. I thought, eventually, he was going to let me die in peace. Maybe during the times he would leave through the metal door. I could feel the blood I lost caked to my thighs, dried underneath my body. I honestly don't know how I survived as long as I did, and for what felt like an eternity, it never came. But then, one morning, I felt a shift in my body. My heart raced, my stomach sick. I couldn't stop the chills from wracking through my body. I was weak and could barely move. It was then that I knew I was going to die, and I was joyful because I knew that the pain would finally be gone. My body started shutting down. My hands and feet were numb, and I knew enough to know that I was going into shock. And all I could think was, I hope I hurry up and die before he comes back and tortures me again.

I finished the rest of my drink; my mouth was dry, and I forced myself to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat.

“I wasn’t that lucky, though. I guess he realized that I was dying too. That was the first time I saw any expression other than pure evil on his face. Instead of letting me die, he panicked and removed my restraints, carried me out of the dungeon, up some stairs, and into a bathroom. I would go in and out of consciousness, and I couldn’t say what he did. But when I woke, I was in a warm bath and hooked up to an IV of fluids and a blood bag. The sun shone through a window above the tub. He had removed my blindfold, but my eyes were crusted shut from his semen and my tears. I couldn’t see him, but he was there, comforting me. He told me I was his favorite, and he wasn’t ready to say goodbye yet. He begged me to stay alive for him. He wanted more time with me. Even now, the fucker wouldn’t just let me die in peace. I pretended I couldn’t hear him because I hoped he would just leave. By the grace of God, a miracle came in the form of the doorbell ringing. I rubbed water over my eyes so I could see. My vision was blurry, but I was in this quaint, salmon-colored bathroom. Nothing like the torture dungeon I had been in. It was like I was in an entirely different house. These clamshell towels were hanging from the towel bar next to the toilet. And expensive-looking soaps and bubble baths lining the tub I was in. To this day, I can’t explain where the strength to get out of the tub came from. I had no way of knowing when he would come back, and I had to try and get away. I was terrified that he would hear me. But he never came. I listened to two sets of voices further away in the house. A woman and his. They were arguing, I think. She kept saying something like *you promised. What am I going to tell him now?*

I ripped out my IV and crawled out of the window above the bathtub. I chanted in my head to keep going. I would be safe if I could make it to a road or something. I kept running. I think I was running. I don’t know. I remember the twigs cutting my feet, and I kept getting hit by branches and leaves. I don’t know how long I was running. I just never stopped until I hit the cold pavement. There was a road, and someone was driving towards me. I was afraid it was him, so I grabbed a rock. It was an old lady. Her little dog kept barking at me. I don’t remember much of anything after getting

into her car. I begged her to drive and take me to the police station, but she took me to the hospital.”

I trailed off, “The police told me I had been missing for fifteen days. Twelve days more than the other victims.” Again, I poured a drink and gulped it down.

“Thank you for trusting me with your story. I know that this was not easy, and I am truly sorry for what you went through. The strength you have exhibited after going through this trauma is admirable. I promise that we are going to catch him this time.”

I meet his eyes, raising my eyebrows, “So the FBI believes that this is not a copycat, then?”

“It is *my* position that there are details consistent with the first murders. Details that a copycat would not have known unless Commons is communicating with them, which at this point, we have no evidence that suggests he is in communication with anyone. That said, I will admit I think it’s not a coincidence that the murders are happening here in Harborview, where you live. I don’t want to scare you, but I do want to be transparent with my thoughts on the case. I am concerned about how he found you and will coordinate with the agency to dig into this. Your file was sealed, and your location was kept secret.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Agent Buchanan.” I close my eyes, letting the weight of his words settle.

He touched my hand softly, and I flinched, not at him but at the simple gesture of human contact.

He gave me an apologetic look and removed his hand from mine and leaned back in his chair in an effort to give me space. I appreciate the gesture. I understand how people who did not go through what I had, had difficulty truly sympathizing with me. They may pretend to be empathetic, and I was sure they were sorry to hear what had happened, but when they left work and went home to their families, the horrific things they had heard were not thought about again. They did not wake up in the middle of the night in cold sweats clutching a knife under their pillow, seeing shadows of the

killer coming to finish the job, or feeling the constant paranoia that they would never be safe. This kind of life is exhausting.

“Why don’t we stop for the night? I think I have the information I need,” he said, concern in his voice.

I nod in agreement, thankful for the break. “I am aware that this only ends with him dead or me dead.” I clear my throat and continue. “He kept me longer than the others, and he spent all these years looking for me. Why me?” I chuckled dryly. “I guess I should feel flattered that I’m worth all this trouble,” I say sarcastically. “But it’s unsettling to think about what makes me so special in his eyes. What does he want from me that he couldn’t find in anyone else?”

I saw his mouth open like he was going to offer a response, but at this point, I was too tired to talk anymore. The heaviness in my chest was overwhelming, and I did my best to suppress the emotions that threatened to spill out. The room felt suddenly suffocating, and I knew I needed to be alone. I stand up, clear the table, and put my cups in the sink. “I am going to go to bed. You are all welcome to make yourselves at home.”

Agent Buchanan stood up and gave me an apologetic smile, but he didn’t press any further. “Yes, ma’am. Please let me know if you need anything.”

I grab the bottle of whiskey and practically run upstairs to my room. I can feel everyone’s eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to meet their gaze. Closing the door behind me, I finally allowed the tears to flow freely, seeking solace in the bottle of whiskey and the darkness of my own thoughts. And for the first time in years, I had one of my familiar nightmares.

*When my shift was over, I did what I always do. I count my cash, put it in my purse, and walk to my car. Except I didn’t do what I always do.*

*This time, I walked out alone.*

*The bouncers always walk us out to our cars after our shifts. Chad, our regular bouncer, is in a meeting with the owner, and not wanting to wait, I walk out to my car alone. I*

*unlock my car door, and there is a gloved hand on my mouth. The smell of leather hits my nose briefly before I feel a sharp pinch in my neck. As panic sets in, my vision blurs and I start to lose consciousness. Desperately, I try to fight back, but my body feels weak and unresponsive. The last thing I remember is the sound of scuffling footsteps approaching before everything fades into darkness.*

*I wake up chained to something. Everything is dark, but I can feel the cloth blindfold digging into my face. I rub my face against my arm, pushing the blindfold off my eyes. The chains dig into my wrists. I am lying on something soft. A bed, maybe? My hands are restrained above my head, and the chains clanking against the metal, mocking me. I pull at them, hoping to break free, but they don't budge. I lay there for what seemed like hours before the sound of heavy footsteps walked over to me. My heart races as the footsteps draw closer, echoing ominously in the darkness. Panic sets in as I realize I am not alone. The anticipation of what awaits me intensifies with each passing second.*

*Was I alone the whole time, or had someone been in the room watching me struggle to get free?*

*"Whose there?" I ask, shaking in fear. The darkness in the room was depthless. Not a sliver of light gives me clues to where I am or who is approaching me. My heart pounds in my chest as I strain to hear any response, but the silence only amplifies my growing unease. The air feels heavy with a menacing presence.*

*The deep tone of a male voice breaks the eerie silence. His voice is deep, almost hypnotic, when he speaks, "I have been searching for someone like you for a long time." His words hang in the air, sending shivers down my spine, and I try to comprehend their meaning.*

*Cold hands yanked my legs down flat and spread them roughly apart. Fear shivers through my spine, and I kick at him, but my efforts are in vain. So, I squeeze my thighs shut tight, and he laughs as his fingers dig into them and shove them open, tsking me mockingly. I desperately search for a*

*way to escape his grasp. I summon the courage to scream for help, hoping that someone nearby will come to my rescue.*

*“Please let me go. Please.” I plead with him. He ignores me and wraps his icy hands around my ankles, pulling them further apart and securing the chain to keep me from closing them again. Fear grips my heart as I realize the gravity of my situation. Desperation fills my voice as I beg him to let me go before he does what I think he might do.*

*I cry and scream and lift my body up, trying to release my bonds, but it doesn't matter.*

*He waited for me to fall flat against the bed, exhausted. As I gasp for breath, tears streaming down my face, I realize the futility of my efforts. The tight metal around my wrists and ankles holds firm, mocking my desperate struggle. With each passing moment, exhaustion seeps into my bones, weakening me further.*

*Then those unforgiving hands slide slowly from my ankles to my thighs. My efforts to clench them shut are useless. And as his hands continue their unwelcome advance, sheer terror and vulnerability wash over me, leaving me feeling helpless and exposed.*

*He's too strong.*

*He is calm.*

*He is methodical in his movements.*

*Effortlessly adjusting the chains to keep me in the position he desired.*

*This wasn't the first time he had done this. He took his time, savoring every second, saving it to his memory. I continue to yank at the chains until blood runs down my wrists. I feel his weight on the bed and hear him unzip his pants.*

*I knew what was coming.*

*I just hoped that it was quick.*

*I was dead wrong.*



*Nothing about what was about to happen would be quick.*

*He pushed himself inside of me.*

*Hard.*

*There was no passion.*

*It was just force.*

*Control.*

*Pain.*

*He slammed inside of me, deep into my core.*

*When his body began to stiffen, he fumbled around for something, and I was hit by the worst pain in my ass that I had ever felt.*

*The pain caused me to cry out in shock. He violated me again and again, my mind racing with fear and confusion as I struggled to comprehend the brutality of the situation.*

*The excruciating pain intensified, my cries echoing in the room.*

*I didn't recognize the sound that came out of my mouth. My vision threatened to go out, and tears stung as they poured down my cheeks.*

*I could feel my insides tear by the force he shoved inside of me. My warm blood soaked the mattress under me.*

*My screams seemed to excite him more. I promised him I would do anything he wanted if he just stopped.*

*He pulled his cock out of me but left whatever he had shoved inside and left the room. The door slammed shut, and I broke to pieces.*

*I was hurt.*

*Terrified.*

*I fell asleep, and when I woke, he was shoving himself inside me again.*

*Panting and sweating on top of me.*

*When he came, he let his hot cum pour all over my face.*

*He defiled me repeatedly, finding new ways to cause me pain.*

*I lost track of how many hard tools he would shove inside of me, each one larger than the last. The physical and emotional torment seemed never-ending as he continued to violate me with increasing brutality. Each time, my body screamed in agony, and my spirit shattered further. The relentless cycle of abuse left me feeling utterly broken and devoid of hope.*

*As the old blood dried, he'd tear me apart, and new blood would take its place. When I stopped fighting him, the cutting began.*

*Small at first, experimenting with my arms and legs. He saved the deeper cuts for my stomach and vagina.*

*I tried to reason with him, but he didn't stop. He just gave me a sick smile and smeared my blood all over his face, sucking his fingers clean. His eyes gleamed with disturbing satisfaction, his twisted enjoyment evident as he reveled in the grotesque act, completely unfazed by my attempts to appeal to his rationality. The chilling sight of him savoring the taste of my blood filled me with dread.*

I startled awake, drenched in sweat, and my hands shook as I fumbled to turn my light on. My heart raced, pounding against my chest as I struggled to catch my breath. The remnants of a nightmare clung to my thoughts, leaving me disoriented.

*Fuck.*

I put my head on my pillow and scream until the anguish subsides.

I glance over at my clock.

*5:00 a.m.*

I get up, go into my bathroom, and turn on the shower. I can feel the throbbing in my temples, partly because I was

hungover and partly because of the shitty sleep I had.

I need to wash the nightmares off before I head to work. It was Saturday, one of my busiest days of the week for the shop. Staying busy was always a go-to for my mental health process.

# TEN

JAMES

This never happens to me. I sleep great most nights, but not last night.

For some reason, this case had sunk its claws into me. The gray eyes of the beautiful brunette next door haunted me in my dreams.

After Ava had retired upstairs, I helped my team set up the brain in the office space on the first floor.

The brain is the central hub where our equipment communicates with a centralized computer station. It allows me to see all the cameras on the property and the status of the motion sensors we placed.

It was after midnight when I found a room to settle into.

It was the guest room closest to Ava's room.

I could have picked a different room, but I wanted to be near her for reasons I can't quite explain.

Either way, it felt right.

Everett and Sarah chose rooms past mine.

As I rolled out of bed, I yawned, running my fingers through my hair. The room has a cozy and charming atmosphere, adorned with warm, earthy tones and rustic-themed décor. The wall behind the wrought-iron bed I lay on is covered in shiplap wooden paneling that is distressed white. The morning sun shines through the sheer curtains covering the window. A comfortable rattan armchair adorned with plush cushions in calming hues provides the perfect spot to bask in the warm sunlight. A small side table, crafted from reclaimed wood, holds a delicate vase filled with freshly picked flowers. The lush greenery of the forest peeks through the sheer linen drapes, with the sunlight shining through the delicate fabric.

I stare up at the ceiling, watch the blades of the ceiling fan spin, and think about her story. Her file left out the intimate details that she shared—deeply personal details that left my head reeling.

Rarely did someone live to talk about the horrors they faced.

*Ava did.*

Like many, I saw the tension in her shoulders and knew she still carried the burden of what happened to her for all these years.

I could hear the pain in her voice as she relived the horrific details she had survived. I didn't realize the extent of the torture he subjected her to. The report mentioned sodomy but was vague on the specifics or the physical damage. The description didn't hold a candle to hearing it come out of her mouth. When I think about this happening to my sister, my blood boils.

My sister, Amelia, and I basically raised ourselves. Our dad bolted when I was seven, and our mother started drinking when he left, and she never actually stopped. Last I heard, she had been picked up on a disorderly conduct charge in Manhattan and was spending some time in prison for multiple offenses. Growing up in such a chaotic environment, Amelia and I had to rely on each other for support and guidance. Despite the hardships we grew up with, we managed to create a strong bond that has only grown stronger over the years. However, the news of our mother's recent arrest added another layer of frustration and disappointment to our already complicated relationship. It's disheartening to witness her constant struggles with addiction and the consequences it brings to both of our lives. She would call from prison once or twice a month, asking for money for her commissary, but in the last few weeks, I had been ignoring her phone calls. There was too much at stake with this case. It was under immense scrutiny, and I couldn't afford to be distracted by my family drama.

Amelia was two years younger than me, and I cared for her when my mother couldn't, which was most of her life. I made sure she got to school on time, took her to her ballet lessons, and made sure she had a full stomach every day. I was just a kid raising a kid and had no idea what I was doing.

When I joined the Navy and became a Navy Seal, I sent checks home to my sister and paid her tuition so she could get an arts degree.

It paid off, though.

When Amelia graduated, she opened up her own ballet studio and was doing well for herself, and she really didn't need me as much anymore.

But I would always protect her.

I would burn the world if something happened to Amelia, like what happened to Ava.

Badge aside, I would stop at nothing to get this fucker off the streets and behind bars where he rightfully belonged.

Ava deserved to have a life without the paranoia and fear he had caused.

I would not stop until he was caught or dead.

Although, to be honest, I prefer the latter.

I stand, stretching my arms above my head, and get dressed. It was time to make sure that everything was good to go and work on finding this fucker.

# ELEVEN

AVA

In a matter of hours, they set up an impressive number of cameras and motion detectors. There was round-the-clock security on my property and inside my house. Although intrusive, I felt safer with all the agents and cameras. Agent Matthews gave me a tour of The Brain, and honestly, it made my own brain hurt.

I smiled as I excused myself. I needed coffee.

Agent Buchanan stood at the kitchen counter, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Good morning,” He greeted with a soft smile.

“Good morning, Agent Buchanan.” I smiled back.

“Please, call me James. Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” I sat on the center bar stool and yawned.

He handed me a cup of coffee and leaned against the countertop, watching me. He looked as tired as I felt. His hair was dark and disheveled but in a sexy bedhead way, and he wore a five-clock shadow, which suited him. His eyes are the deepest blue, with a bit of green. He has one of those refined jawlines, like the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. And judging by how his muscles filled his t-shirt, he doesn't seem like one to skip the gym.

I couldn't deny that he was attractive. His rugged features and confident demeanor exuded a magnetic charm that was hard to resist. A faint smile played on his lips as he sipped his coffee, revealing a hint of mischief beneath his tired facade.

My stomach flipped, a sudden rush of nervousness washing over me. He was here to do his job protecting me, yes, but it doesn't hurt to have some eye candy to stare at. Especially after the terrible night I had last night.

When his gaze met mine, I knew he caught me checking him out, and my face burned with embarrassment.

“I have to go to work, uhm, so how does this work?” I quickly shift my gaze, pretending to look at something in my coffee cup. The dark liquid just stared back at me as I cleared my throat.

“You’ll have an agent with you at all times. We go where you go.”

“But won’t that draw attention?” I dare to look up at him.

If there was any indication that he noticed my red face, he didn’t outwardly show it, and I was grateful for it.

“We will be in plain clothes. You likely won’t even know we are there. But until we get a better idea of where he is, it’s best if we stick close to you.”

“Ok. Well, I need to open my shop today, so I am ready to go when you are—or whoever you are sending today.” I felt my face flush again.

*Shit why am I so awkward.*

His jaw tensed like he was trying to hide his laughter, but he spared me further embarrassment and kept it business as usual.

“Let me go change, and I’ll meet you out front.”

I nod and watch him leave the kitchen, letting my eyes wander again.

“Get a grip, Ava.” I rolled my eyes, finishing the rest of my coffee before I headed outside.

The morning air hit my face as I stepped outside, instantly waking me up. There was a slight chill in the air, so I pulled my jacket on and headed to my car, which was already running in the driveway.

James was standing next to it in conversation with Everett. He is wearing blue jeans and a dark gray long-sleeve shirt. His unruly hair was now brushed and combed over to the



side. As I approached, James turned toward me and greeted me with a warm smile. I couldn't help but notice the serious expression on Everett's face as they wrapped up their conversation.

"Hey, Miss Monroe." Everett greeted me with a cheerful smile.

"Ava, please."

"Ah yes, sorry. I forgot to update the team with your name preference." James apologized and gave me a sheepish grin, running his hand down the back of his neck. "I will ride in your car with you, and Everett and a couple of others will follow in our suburban. Sarah and the remainder of the team will stay here and keep an eye on things."

"Okay, sounds good." I nod and walk around to the driver's side and get in.

The drive to downtown, where my shop is, was relatively quiet. James would talk into his earpiece while performing security checks with the rest of his team, but otherwise, we didn't really talk. Every once in a while, he asked about landmarks or buildings we passed, and I got into a long-winded story about the rich history behind the town.

I loved living in Harborview.

It was the most beautiful place I had ever lived.

Every Saturday, there is a farmer's market that closes the downtown streets, so I pull into the alley next to my shop, and James follows me.

He enters first to make sure that the shop is clear before he gestures for me to come in. Everett and the other agents park a little bit further down the street, with a clear view of the front of my shop.

I stay busy, spending the day watering plants and filling bouquet orders while James wanders aimlessly around, looking at the plants and reading the plant magazines I keep stocked at the counter. Every once in a while, he offers his help, but otherwise, he keeps to himself, just like he told me he would. Despite his wandering, I catch him watching me. When

he sees me looking at him, he swiftly shifts his eyes away from me and pretends to be engaged in reading or some other activity. I'm not sure what to think about it, but I can't pretend like my stomach isn't doing backflips.

When customers come in, he pretends to browse the shelves, but I see the small-town curiosity in their eyes. No one goes unnoticed in this town. Although no one has asked me who he is yet, I see how they watch him, waiting to see if I will introduce him to them, but I let them wonder for now.

Several weeks pass, and nothing new develops in my case. No new murders. There was no sign of him at all. I don't know why, but it makes me more uneasy than if there were another murder. I can't explain it, but I feel like he is watching me, but he's blending in even though my routine stays the same. James says it is best to keep things status quo until we know more about what is going on. He believes that the killer might be following me and wants to maintain as much control as we can over my routine for now. He suggested that I continue my regular daily activities as if nothing has changed to avoid alerting the killer or giving away any information that could potentially put me in danger. While waiting for him to make a mistake and get caught is frustrating, I understand the importance of being cautious, especially with lives on the line.

Everything remains monotonous—a waiting game.

*Work.*

*Home.*

*Nightmares.*

*Wake early.*

*Repeat.*

Everett, Sarah, and James alternate shifts as my *protection*. Some days, I don't even notice they are there. It isn't until I search for them that I see them lingering nearby. It is weird having people around all the time, especially at my house. I made the decision to live in solitude because it made me feel safe, but having trained agents who could literally save my life wasn't a bad touch.

When I went to work, they were there.

When I ate and slept, they were there.

When I went to the grocery store, they were there.

I know they would probably just say it was their job, but the three of them made an effort to connect with me and ask me questions about my life before my trauma, and it felt nice to have some normalcy, *fake or not*. I honestly can't recall the last time someone was interested in who I was. So, I took advantage of the human contact, and as the days passed, James started opening up to me about his life.

He told me about his younger sister, Amelia, and how he had practically raised her. Their dad split when he was young, and their mother was an alcoholic and is in prison right now. After high school, he joined the Navy and became a Navy Seal. He spent ten years in the service before getting out and becoming an agent.

I enjoyed hearing him talk about his friends in the Navy and the shenanigans they would get into after they got home from deployments. I listened intently as he spoke about the lives he saved and the lives he took in the name of freedom. He felt like his job became less about saving people and more of a political chess game, where the lives of his team were expendable, and there was no accountability of the suits above him. I listened when he told me how deeply he was affected each time he had to bury one of his teammates—his *brothers*. He made the difficult decision to walk away and join the agency after eight years of being a Navy Seal.

But his demons haunted him too.

I knew well enough that a job like that never leaves you. He, too, carried burdens no one else understood, and as silly as it may seem, I felt a connection with him. A connection between his trauma and mine. Although vastly different traumatic situations, we were damaged, nonetheless.

I felt safe with him.

All of them.

No new murders had occurred, and everyone was getting restless.

*What was he waiting for? I knew he was here. Why not make a move?*

I started to question if it was actually him. I couldn't quiet the panic and fear I felt when I thought about what he had done to me. He was real and out there hiding in the shadows, biding his time.

As the days turned into weeks, the uncertainty gnawed at me. The lack of progress in finding him only fueled my growing frustration. But deep down, I knew he was always a cunning predator, carefully calculating his next move.

# TWELVE

JAMES

It was another beautiful Saturday morning, and it was my day to shadow Ava. But instead of unlocking her shop like every Saturday, she headed towards the Farmer's Market.

"Wait, no shop today?" I follow.

"In a bit." She turned her head and smiled mischievously. "I want a muffin from the Farmer's market first."

I plan to protest, but when I see the smile on her face, I bite my tongue.

My curiosity was piqued, and I trailed behind her as she weaved through the bustling market. The vibrant colors and fragrant aromas filled the air, creating a lively atmosphere. As we approached a stall selling fresh flowers, the sun hit her beautiful brown hair just right, and she had this angelic glow surrounding her.

*Holy shit.* She is really gorgeous. And I don't think she realizes that she is. The way that I crave her very presence has me scratching my head. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and I can't help but be drawn to her and want to be around her. To see her smile, laugh, and converse with the locals is the real treat this morning.

The stall owner greets her with a warm smile, and she eagerly selects a bouquet of vibrant blooms.

I trail her through the market as she flits from booth to booth, buying produce, meats, and canned vegetables. When her arms are full, and she can't carry anything else, I become her pack mule.

And I do it gladly.

I am enjoying this way more than I thought I would. There's a part of me that could see myself spending my days with her, following her around a farmer's market, watching her

create bouquets for her customers. The way she bites her lip when she is concentrating on deciding which flowers to use, I don't know exactly when it happened, but this woman completely entralls me.

They all seemed to adore her, asking about how her plants were coming along this year and making plans to stop by soon to visit. She happily engages with them, and I listen as they tell her how they missed her coming out to bingo night or that someone's daughter found out they were pregnant, and she should come to the baby shower.

I chuckled to myself because I didn't peg her as a bingo night kind of girl, but it made me smile. Her smile was contagious, and I could see why she stood out to the killer.

Her very being was likely why the killer couldn't let her go. She was different, and it was right in front of my face now. If the killer got to her again, he would never let her go. And I couldn't let him. No matter what the cost, I wouldn't let him have her. I would kill him first and risk everything for her.

She returned to me, eating a muffin, her eyes fluttering shut, and she moaned in pleasure.

My cock jumped, imagining her under me, moaning my name.

I collect these moments with her inside myself, with a newfound desperation to know every part of her.

"The best muffins in the entire world." She explained in between chewing. "Here, open your mouth."

*I did.*

Her fingers plopped a piece of a warm banana nut muffin into my mouth, and my eyes met hers as she watched me chew, waiting for my reaction. I savored how her fingers grazed my lips as she removed them, and I wanted more.

"So? What do you think?" She asked eagerly.

"I think I need another bite, just to be sure." I tease. I knew what I was asking her, but she didn't realize it was her

that I wanted near me again. I needed her fingers near my lips just one more time to be sure.

Her lips curl at the end, and her cheeks flush red as she realizes I am flirting with her. She pulls apart another piece and brings it to my mouth. This time she is careful when she sets it in my mouth, but her hand still lingers there for the briefest moment, her eyes watching me as her curiosity is peaked.

I chew slower this time, leaving my eyes on her, and I raise a brow and smile. “These muffins are, in fact, tasty, but I prefer the taste of your muffins better.”

Her eyes light up, and she swallows hard. “My muffins?”

“Yep,” I reply.

She bites her lip and nervously looks down at her feet. “Well, thank you. I haven’t had anyone to share them with. I didn’t realize they were that good.”

She steps back, straightening her top, and gives me a warm smile before heading toward another booth.

I think she feels this tension between us too.

*God, she is fucking gorgeous.*

When she stops at another booth, one with vegetables, she begins chatting with an older woman who continues to glance my way. I watch her close her eyes to smell each of the herbs and laugh at something the older woman is saying. As I observe her interacting with the older woman, a sense of longing fills me, and I wish I could be the one to make her laugh and share those intimate moments.

I move closer to hear their conversation and let my gaze linger on her face, aware that the old lady is still eyeballing me.

This old lady may become a problem.





# THIRTEEN

AVA

“This basil is truly divine, Sherrie. You know I grew some out in my greenhouse, but I swear mine is never as flavorful as yours.” I inhale the robust smell of the basil and follow Sherrie’s gaze to James.

I didn’t realize how close he was to me.

But I want him closer.

When our eyes met, there was something different in his ocean-blue eyes that made me weak at the knees.

My stomach tightens, and I see an emotion I haven’t seen in a long time. An emotion that I share with him.

*Want.*

It is intense, and I feel it too.

When he ate the muffin I gave him, his lips touched my fingers, and I felt a shift in the air around us. The way my stomach jumped and my thighs clenched together was a reaction I was not expecting. It felt like I couldn’t recognize my own bodily reactions. Not that I was at any point complaining. No, this was curiosity. I want to understand these feelings—I need to understand them.

But surely, I was mistaken. I had to be misinterpreting his signals, *right?*

I won’t say Sherrie’s expression was accusatory, but it was not trusting. As friendly as the locals were, they did not trust *outsiders*. And right now, James is an outsider.

“Oh, Sherrie, this is James. He’s my, well, you see.” I stuttered, looking back at James for help.

I was at a loss for words. I desperately searched for the right words to explain the situation to Sherrie, but nothing came to mind. The silence between us grew uncomfortable, and I could feel James’ eyes on me, silently urging me to say

something. He allowed me the opportunity to create a narrative that I was comfortable with, but what words do I use to describe the man I had grown fond of when I wasn't sure he felt the same way? I had yet to plan out what to say if someone asked. My mind had gone blank, leaving me at a loss for how to articulate my feelings for this man. Or at least give an explanation of who he was while protecting my secrets.

*Fuck.*

James gave me an amused grin, fighting his laughter.

*Prick.*

“Boyfriend,” James stated like it was a fact. I stared at James, my heart racing.

I jerked my neck, and my eyes were wide at his admission. My shocked expression didn't seem to bother him at all. I hadn't yet mustered the courage to confess my feelings, whatever they were. The word lingered in the air, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was a slip of the tongue or if James was giving me a subtle clue about his own feelings toward me. He casually moved my bags to one arm and shook Sherrie's hand with the other.

Then he met my gaze and gave me that boyish grin that made me weak in the knees. He has this effect on people...Not just me.

Sherrie broke the tension, and I let out a nervous whoosh of air and turned my attention back to her.

“Oh, Ava, this is wonderful news. When Patricia said she had seen a handsome boy following you around, I couldn't figure out why you hadn't introduced him yet. But I see now that you wanted to keep him to yourself. I mean, who wouldn't? Look at him. Absolutely delicious. If I were a few years younger, I would climb that tree of a man like a bear.”

“Oh God, Sherrie, please.” My cheeks were on fire. I was caught off guard by her bold comment, and I knew if I looked at James, I would self-combust with embarrassment.

“Oh, Ava, relax. I am an old woman, and you know we don't get handsome men like him in town. You've got to

appreciate the art while you can. Anyway, it is lovely to meet you, James. We have all been wondering if Ava would ever settle down with a handsome fella such as yourself. It isn't safe for a pretty girl like her to be alone in that big ole house in the forest. Well, since Colin, we have all been so worried about you."

"I agree, Sherrie. Ava needs someone to protect her, especially with the murders that have been occurring lately." James responded. I could feel his eyes on me, but I couldn't bring myself to look up at him.

"Yes, those poor girls. It is dreadful to be afraid in a town like this. I sure hope they find whoever is doing this soon. Although I don't have much faith in our local officers, I did hear that they brought the FBI in to help, so I am sure it won't be long before he is caught. I am glad that Ava has someone who can keep her safe too. She is so far away from town, and she's one of the good girls in town, James. Don't get me wrong, I love our town, but some of these other girls are not on the same level as our beautiful Ava here."

"On that, we agree again, Sherrie. No one holds a candle to her," James stated while looking at me.

*He was enjoying this.*

Sherrie was absolutely enamored by James, and there was no turning back now. The whole town would know before I made it back to my shop.

*Kill me now. My cheeks were on fire.*

"Well, that's neither here nor there. Colin is ancient history; well, with James now, I am sure you two lovebirds probably have things to do; I won't keep you. Take the basil for free and make your stud of a man a nice dinner."

"Thank you, Sherrie. I will see you next week." I gave her a tight smile and all but ran away from her, back towards my shop.

James put the bags into my car and then hovered over me as I unlocked my shop. I keep my eyes on the ground as he heads in to make sure the shop is clear.

When he came back outside, I pushed past him and busied myself with organizing shelves. Anything to put distance between us and calm this raging storm inside me. My heart was beating so fast. I could feel the weight of his gaze on me, but I couldn't bring myself to meet his eyes. I knew that if I did, the floodgates of emotions would burst open, and I wasn't ready to confront them just yet. Instead, I focused on arranging the items on the shelves with trembling hands, desperately trying to regain control over my racing heart.

I can't explain the emotions that are washing over me, but I have to stay busy because every time he looks at me, all I want to do is pull him closer.

I felt him come up behind me.

"Ava, I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable out there. I shouldn't have called myself your boyfriend. I was just trying to help get the attention off of you and keep people from knowing what I really am to you."

I turned around to face him, feeling a mix of relief and confusion. "What do you mean, what you really are to me?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. His eyes met mine, filled with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

*God, his eyes were so gorgeous.*

His eyes pulled me in, and his lips were full of secrets waiting to be whispered. There was more to him than met the eye—a hidden depth that both intrigued and scared me.

My heart pounded when he moved toward me and reached out to touch my face. His touch was gentle yet electric, igniting a fire within me. As his fingers grazed my cheek, I couldn't help but lean into his touch, craving more of his intoxicating presence.

"Nothing makes sense in my life, but when I am around you, everything makes sense. You make sense to me, Ava. And I can't explain it, and I am probably fucking this all up, but I need you to know that I feel something...for you."

I stared into his eyes for a couple of seconds as a wave of emotions washed over me, and I struggled to find the right

words. Finally, I managed to whisper, “I’m not sorry.”

“What?” His eyebrows raise as he looks at me with curiosity.

“I know this sounds stupid, but I am glad you told her you were my boyfriend. And you’re not fucking this all up.”

“So, you’re not angry at me?” He replied, giving me a grin.

I stare into his cool eyes, and the air around us crackles. “No, not in the slightest. All I know is I can’t think clearly around you. I don’t know what is wrong with me. But when you called yourself my boyfriend, I can’t help but wish it were true.”

His eyes darken, and he brings his face closer to mine. “Ava.” He growls my name.

The way he says my name has heat pooling between my legs.

“I really want to kiss you.”

This man is sin and desire, power, and authority, wrapped up all into one and my heart throbs wildly in my chest as I whisper, “So, kiss me.”

His eyes lock onto mine, and the air between us crackles with energy. Before I can even blink, his fingertips are tracing my face tenderly before our lips meet. His kiss is electric, a surge of warmth that courses down my spine like lightning. All that matters now is the perfect pressure of his lips against mine as if we were made to fit together.

I cling to his body with every ounce of strength I can muster. His hands slide possessively down my back as our kiss deepens, and my heart races in anticipation. I’m lost in the sensation of his lips moving against mine, and it feels like time has stopped. Every nerve in my body is alive with electricity as we explore each other’s mouths, our breaths mingling together in a passionate embrace. Everything else melts away until nothing remains but us and this moment of pure pleasure. This is unlike any kiss I’ve ever had before; his lips create an inferno within me that threatens to consume me whole. With

each passing second, the intensity grows, consuming my mind and soul until there's nothing left but him.

The front door chimed, breaking the contact between us, and he took a step back.

I instantly missed the warmth of his lips on mine.

It was the mailman, Lennie.

“Hi, Ava. Good to see you. I have some mail for you.”

I fought to catch my breath and cleared my throat, pretending I wasn't just making out with James before Lennie came in. If Lennie saw anything, he didn't say anything.

“Thank you, Lennie.” I accept the bundle of mail from him, and James starts laughing next to me.

“Have a good day.”

“You too, Lennie.” I chirped.

Heat flooded my face, the skin on my lips felt swollen and sensitized. I stood there in front of him. My eyes were hazy with desire, and he smiled at me, running his hand down my arm so that a shiver ran through me.

I laughed and pushed him away with a teasing smile. He danced away, holding his hands up defensively. I flipped through the envelopes reading each label.

Power bill.

Junk.

Water bill.

Envelope with my *name* on it.

No return address.

I tremble as I rip open the envelope, my heart pounding in my chest. The moment I pull out the Polaroid from inside, a chill courses through me, and I freeze.

The horrific image stares back at me, one of me chained to a bed, naked—with his semen covering my face. At the bottom of the photo is a single word scrawled in a menacing script.

*Mine.*

My stomach lurches, and my knees buckle.

“Ava, what is it?” James’ voice surges through me, penetrating the fog that has clouded my mind. He snatches the photo out of my hand and grips it tightly, his face full of anger, before yanking me towards the back office and locking us inside.

He gently sits me down in my chair. I sink into the soft cushions. He kneels in front of me and places his hands on either side of my face, thumbs on my cheeks, fingertips resting against my temples. His touch is tender and kind. My eyes fill with tears as I see him: his hands, lips, shoulders. Darkness crawls across my vision and leaks out over the borders like it’s waiting for something.

“Everett, check the parameter and her car now,” he instructs over his cell phone, never letting his eyes leave mine. “He sent something in the mail to her. I don’t want any more surprises.”

He notices my discomfort and leans forward, brushing his lips against my forehead. His breath tickles my skin and makes me shiver. I close my eyes and inhale his scent - a mixture of mahogany and evergreen, a smell that comforts me. He whispers soothing words, telling me everything is okay and that he is going to protect me. His voice is soft and calming, like a gentle breeze on a summer night. I feel my body loosen, and my muscles relax under his touch.

As I open my eyes, I see him gazing closely at me. His eyes are dark and intense, filled with an emotion that I cannot decipher. He leans forward, his lips moving closer to mine, and I feel my heart skip a beat. My mind tells me to stop, but my body responds to his touch, yearning for more. He kisses me tenderly, his lips moving slowly against mine. I feel a surge of pleasure coursing through my body. His hands wrap around my waist and pull me closer, and I am grateful for the distraction. For the comfort of his touch while my world is spinning.

He pulls his lips away from mine, the heat between us still heavy in the air. His eyes filled with remorse, and he gruffly whispered, "Ava, I am sorry. I should have looked at the mail sooner. I fucked up."

I give him a slight nod, my mind whirling with confusion and fear.

"All clear, boss," Everett squawks over the radio after several minutes,

"We are heading out. Team two sweep and lock her store, and team one follow closely behind us."

James grabs me firmly by the arm and guides me through the dark shop to the front entrance. Like a madman, he drives frantically back home while I helplessly sit in his passenger seat, replaying that terrible moment when I saw the word, *mine* staring up at me.

An icy chill runs down my spine as I recall all of the emotions I had felt when I was under someone else's control - fear, terror, anguish - it all comes rushing back like an avalanche.

I fight and fight to keep the gates of my mind closed until, finally, a great crack appears, and I feel the darkness begin to seep out slowly. My body aches from keeping the floodgates closed for so long, but it was all in vain.

James is trying to speak to me, but his words sound like jumbled nonsense in my mind. I walk blindly into my house, past the agents upstairs, and slam my bedroom door behind me.

The noise of James calling after me fades away as Sarah steps in and questions what happened.

*Thank God.*

I need to get away from everyone.

My emotions come crashing down, and I cannot contain the cries that escape from my throat. I reach the bathroom just in time to empty my stomach in the toilet bowl. Memories of him lash against my brain - his yellow teeth



shining in a sinister smile as he leans closer towards me, his hot breath filling every corner of my skin with revulsion. Tears blind my vision as panic crashes over me like an unstoppable wave, and I feel as if a boa constrictor is slowly squeezing away all life from me. In a frenzy, I rip off my clothes and step into the shower, hoping the running water would drown out the noise of his laughter echoing in my head.

# FOURTEEN

JAMES

I lunge forward, desperate to follow Ava up the stairs, but Sarah moves in front of me, stopping me firmly with a hand on my chest.

“What the hell happened!”

“He sent her a Polaroid, taken when he had kidnapped her to the shop. *Here.*” I thrust the photo into Sarah’s hands, and she stares at it, her eyes widening and her breath catching in her throat.

“Oh, my God! Is she alright?”

“I don’t know. We all have to be hyper-vigilant now. Check that every security measure is functioning properly—all the cameras and agents should be on high alert. Do a full sweep of the house and boathouse, inside and outside, and make sure that nothing else has been left behind for her to find.”

Sarah presses her lips together before replying firmly, “You got it, Boss.”

My heart thumps wildly as I take the steps two at a time. My heart plunges into my stomach as I march up the stairs, anger and sadness bubbling in my core. I approach Ava’s door and hesitate before knocking, my knuckles rapping against the wood like a heavy drum roll.

*No response.*

“Ava, it’s James. Can I come in?”

*Still nothing.*

The sound of running water can be heard from within her room, making me even more uneasy. Taking a deep breath, I try the knob and find it unlocked. Steeling myself for whatever I might find inside, I enter the room and close the door quietly behind me, not seeing any sign of Ava.

As I move closer to the bathroom door, my fear rises - why isn't she answering?

The door creaks open to reveal a foggy bathroom, the sea-green tiles reflecting off the steamy mirror. Ava's sobs echo through the room, and I hurry closer until I can make out her figure huddled in the corner of the shower, trembling uncontrollably.

My protective instincts overwhelm me, and I enter without hesitation, desperate to shield her from whatever darkness has taken hold of her.

I quietly go in and pull back the shower curtain, careful not to startle her.

She has her knees tucked up to her chest, her arms wrapped tightly around them, and her face buried. Her body shakes in rhythm with her sobs.

I get in the shower with her and pull her into my arms.

"Ava, it's okay," I urgently whisper, trembling as I grasp her tightly in my arms.

With an iron grip, she clings to me, tears streaming down her face in endless streams that spark into a frenzied sobbing. Quickly turning the shower off, I snatch her robe and a towel and run towards her bedroom, cradling her close to me.

Sitting on the bed, I observe the thin white scars lining her body like painful reminders of the horrors she had survived – a reminder that would stay with her forever. Uncovering herself, she silently stares off into nothingness, forcing me to tie the sash around her waist and gingerly dry her long, dark hair with a towel.

As I gently brush her hair, she stays silent, closing her eyes. I kneel in front of her and lift her chin to get her to look at me. "Let's get you into bed."

Her mouth twitched, a frown etched across her forehead. Her gray eyes finally met mine. They were red and swollen like she had been crying for hours, and she looked like she was miles away in her head.

Moving up the bed, she rested against the headboard and let me cover her legs with her pumpkin-colored comforter.

“I am going to change my clothes, and I will be right back, okay?”

Again, she nodded. I close her door and head to my room. I pull off my wet clothes and change into a fresh dark grey t-shirt and navy sweatpants.

Everett and Sarah were waiting for me outside Ava’s room, their faces full of worry.

“Is she ok?” Everett asked, his voice laced with concern.

“I don’t know. She was crying when I went in there.” My throat was dry as I rubbed the back of my neck.

“I made her some broth. I would bring it to her, but maybe it would be better if you did.” Sarah handed me the bowl.

“Let us know if we can do anything to help. We are here for her.” Everett gave me a sad smile.

“We have everything else handled downstairs. Everything is secure.” Sarah reassured, then nudged Everett to follow her back downstairs.

I wait a few seconds before heading back to Ava’s room. I hesitate for a moment before entering her room again.

Nothing had changed; Ava was still curled up on the bed, facing away from me.

I place the soup on her nightstand and sit beside her, my arm brushing against hers ever so slightly.

“Sarah made you some broth in case you were hungry.”

“Ava, I am sorry about the photo. We should have vetted the mail at the shop. I don’t know how that slipped past us.”

My words hung in the air, and all that followed was an unsettling silence until she finally spoke.

“If you need anything, I will be next door or downstairs.” Maybe leaving her was the best thing I could do for her now.

I stood up and headed towards the door.

“James?” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

I turn to face her and see her grey eyes full of tears looking at me pleadingly.

“Stay with me. Please,” she whispers, her voice trembling with emotion.

I creep back to her bed, aching to be near her. She scoots closer so I can get under the covers, and I greedily gulp up every inch of her body against mine. Her small frame presses into me like she was made to fit there. At that moment, we became one as I enveloped her in my arms.

The tears kept flowing down her face, and my heart ached with every sob that left her mouth. I watched silently as the sun began its descent until finally, the last light disappeared, and her crying slowed to a whimper before; finally, she slipped off into an exhausted sleep.

My eyes drooped heavily, and soon enough, I followed her into dreamland, cradling her close in my longing embrace.

# FIFTEEN

AVA

My eyes are bloodshot and sting like acid when I open them, relishing in the morning sun that was raining rainbows across my bedroom. A welcome reminder that a new day had come and a sense of hope that I could outrun yesterday's nightmares.

James lay peacefully next to me, his chest rising and falling with each steady breath. I wanted to watch him sleep for an eternity, but I knew time was ticking, and eventually, I'd have to wake him.

A surge of electricity sparked through my body as I thought about the strength of his arms around me. His scent lingered on my skin, and I could smell hints of mahogany and evergreen mixed in complete harmony.

I had leaned against him last night, needing the comfort he so willingly gave me those days ago. He hadn't pushed nor asked questions; he just embraced me in silent understanding until I felt safe enough to drift off into oblivion.

Seeing that picture was like ripping a scab off an old wound; every agonizing second brought back memories of the killer's malicious acts. My eyes were crusted shut with his semen, and I used the salt from my tears to help break apart the crust that had formed on my eyes.

*He* delighted in torturing me, destroying me, and degrading me.

At first, I could do nothing but plead for it to end, but his perverse enjoyment only increased when my protests grew louder. To witness myself lying there, reduced to a battered and bruised figure, streaked with dried blood and completely exposed, raped, bleeding, and tortured, was unbearable. It made every fearful thought Dr. Larsen had unwound become real once more.

At the bottom of the picture was the word *mine*, as though he were claiming me for himself, a reminder that he was waiting, lurking nearby like a spider in its web. He desired my fear and desperation to fuel him till he finally succeeded in subduing me - tearing apart my spirit bit by bit until I no longer had any strength left.

The past few weeks had been an emotional onslaught that had brought all of those dormant fears screaming back to life, this image only further confirming that he had never been caught and that he had been watching my every move.

Dread surrounded me.

*What did he have planned? How long had he been here? Stalking me? Toying with me through these other women around me?*

I knew it was only his desire for terror that drove him forward and kept him coming ever closer. But I refused to give into despair; I wouldn't let go of my life so quickly- it was time to stand up and fight.

Whatever that meant, I would fight back.

I would not let him drag me back into the abyss of fear.

He had taken enough of my life. I deserved to be free.

I stretch my arms above my head and pull myself out of the crook of James' arm. He stirred at my movements and opened his eyes, giving me that boyish grin.

His blue eyes gleamed in the light with his classic boyish grin. "Good morning," I said softly with an appreciative smile in his direction.

"Good morning, Ava," his voice came out husky as he ran his fingers through his signature tousled brown hair. "How are you doing today?"

"A bit better. Thanks for not leaving me last night..." I blushed as shame set in.

How embarrassing that he had seen me in such a state - collapsed on the shower floor, naked. With unspoken understanding, he picked me up and put my bathrobe on me

before carrying me to bed and tending to my needs until I fell asleep again.

He could sense my apprehension when I mentioned my therapist's opinion if she had seen what happened.

Clearing his throat, he sat up and held my eyes with fierce determination. "Ava, you have endured more than anyone ever should. You built this life for yourself and deserve nothing less than respect. Do not apologize for being human or feeling pain. This man will not win while I'm here, and you can't let him either."

I slowly nod my head, unable to muster up a response to the words he had uttered. I feel his intense gaze scrutinizing me, and the close proximity of his body makes my heartbeat wildly in my chest. His presence invades my space, and I struggle for breath, feeling as if the air has been sucked away from around me.

"Do you normally stay overnight with the victims in your cases?" I blurt out impulsively, regretting it almost instantly when I see an amused sparkle in his eyes.

He moves closer towards me, close enough that I can smell the faint scent of his cologne and feel the warmth radiating from him.

"It's a first for me," he admits confidently, a smirk pulling at his lips. Before I can respond, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear as his molten gaze lingers on my lips hungrily, as if he wants to say something.

In that split second, everything changes as James withdraws abruptly and takes several steps back. The sudden chill between us causes a shiver to run down my spine.

"This is a job, Ava," James states in an emotionless voice while averting his eyes away from mine. "You are nothing more than just another job to me."

His words crash into me like a wave of ice-cold water while tears threaten to fall from my eyes. My mouth hangs open in disbelief as bile rises in my throat and raging heat floods through my veins. I bite hard on my lip, trying to steady



the tremble that threatens to crack through my voice as all the words I want to say die on my tongue. All that escapes my mouth is a single word.

“Wow.”

James turns away and strides towards the door without another glance back at me.

“Everett and Sarah will take over escorting you from now on,” he informs me coolly, leaving me standing there alone with shattered pieces of my heart strewn across the floor.

“Fuck you!” My words ricochet off the walls like lit gunpowder, and I can barely choke back my rage.

His face contorts as if in pain from my blow, but he attempts to reply. “Ava, I’m—”

He never finishes that sentence.

My eyes are ablaze with fury, and my muscles tense as I launch toward him with every ounce of strength, I have. Pushing him out of the room, I scream again and slam the door behind him.

The force of the action sends me crashing onto the floor, where I feel every bit of devastation coursing through my veins. The tears come without hesitation like a river overflowing its banks and crashing down an embankment.

Did he ever really care?

The look in his eyes when he made looked at me.

His gentle hands running through my hair and wrapping me up in a warm robe when I was so cold—had I imagined everything?

The time we spent together meant nothing more to him and I was just a *job* to him.

My heart aches until, finally, the sadness fades into white-hot anger.

My emotional fortress had been breached, and I would not let it happen again. From here on out, no one would be allowed to take advantage of my vulnerability ever again. A

deep resolve fills me as I stand tall amidst the ruins of everything he left behind.

My heart pounded in my chest as I rummaged through my closet, determined to put on a brave face and live my life despite the fear surrounding me.

With trembling hands, I pulled out a pair of dark denim jeans and a heathered grey long-sleeve shirt, preparing for battle. I braided my hair and applied more makeup than I normally wear—my fingers shaking with nervousness.

I marched downstairs, determined to forget all about James and the killer and enjoy whatever time I had left in my life.

# SIXTEEN

JAMES

I loathe myself for what I said to her. The pained expression on her face when I told her she was simply a job to me broke me, and burned into my memory like a branding iron. Because she wasn't just a job to me. She was so much more.

The feelings I had for her didn't start out that way. She *had* been an assignment of mine and nothing more. But then suddenly, she became something else entirely, something far deeper and more powerful than I ever expected. It was as if the walls around my hardened heart were slowly crumbling away as I watched her work in her shop - carefully repotting plants with a smile on her face and dirt smeared across her cheek.

Her grey eyes glimmered with life, and her cheeks turned pink at even the slightest hint of embarrassment. She wore overalls with a tight pink tee underneath and pink Converse - a look I found oddly endearing. Despite all the tragedy she endured, she chose to keep living, to channel her energy into bettering herself and helping others - never speaking ill of anyone or anything. Whenever customers entered the shop, she'd greet them cheerfully and offer to help carry their items out to their car.

My gaze often lingered on Ava when I thought she wasn't looking, and each time our eyes met, she would blush crimson and avert her gaze shyly. I began to refer to myself as her boyfriend, but deep down, I knew this was much more than that. Though it felt wrong to become involved with someone from one of my cases, being near Ava brought me joy in a way that no one else could. Despite all reason telling me not to, I allowed myself to become entwined in something real.

I wanted to spend my days with Ava in bed, helping her tend to her garden and her shop, and then make love to her each night. But my foolishness was clear as day - when I told

her that every emotion she experienced because of me was nothing but an assignment I had to complete.

As tears ran down her cheeks, my heart shattered in two. My insides twisted knowing the agony I caused her - she deserved so much better than a selfish asshole like me.

So, then I went downstairs, letting out my frustration on everyone around me, searching for errors in their jobs. Everett noticed my strange behavior immediately and pulled me aside.

“What’s wrong? You’re yelling at everyone for no reason,” he stated cautiously.

Taking a deep breath, I set down my phone and confessed what had happened with Ava. Everett stared at me incredulously.

“Why would you say that?” he questioned.

I sighed deeply, explaining all that happened prior; how I saw her crying in the shower and stayed with her until we both fell asleep in each other’s arms. When I realized how much she meant to me, I panicked and tried to cut her off. I shouldn’t have told her she was nothing but a job to me. That was cruel even for me.

“If you saw her face, man, I fucked up. I shouldn’t have been that harsh on her. I completely destroyed her” I shook my head in disgust at my actions. It sounded worse when I told Everett.

“Then why did you do it?”

“God damnit, Everett! I don’t have any idea why I did that. It’s like I can’t stay focused when she’s around. It doesn’t excuse my behavior, but as an agent, I shouldn’t be fucking around with people involved in our investigations.”

“Why not? I do it all the time.” Everett snickered.

I rolled my eyes at him in frustration.

“But I don’t! No matter what kind of women throw themselves at me, I have always kept a professional attitude toward them. I have never taken advantage of anyone.”

“Taken advantage? From what I’ve gathered, because I have spent a lot of time with Ava, she is not someone who is taken advantage of. And you know that yourself. She is a survivor who has been through horrible shit. But she has never asked anyone to feel sorry for her. She is stronger than you give her credit for.”

“I know.”

“Then fix it.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Figure it out. She’s a grown woman, not a child. Shit, I have been hitting on Ava since we got here, and she wants nothing to do with me like that, so if she is giving you attention, you owe it to her and yourself to see if there is anything there.”

“What do I say?” I asked.

“Fuck if I know, Bro. I don’t understand women at all. They seem happy enough for me to fuck them, but Ava is nothing like those girls. She is different, and you know it.” Everett squeezed my shoulder. “Speaking of Ava.” He cleared his throat as a warning.

Everett’s grip tightened on my shoulder with each word. “Speak of the devil…”

I spin to see Ava descending with her purse tightly strapped over her shoulder. Her dark jeans clung to every curve in her body, while her heathered grey long-sleeve shirt was loosely draped over her, making her look simply stunning. Her long chocolate tresses cascaded down one shoulder in an intricate, tight braid. She’s done up with more makeup than usual, emphasizing her beauty and captivating my gaze.

“I’m going to open my shop for a bit today,” she says without glancing at me, her voice laced with frigid anger.

“Agent Buchanan is on rotation,” Everett interjects, gesturing to me reluctantly.

“No, thank you. I’d rather have you or Sarah.” Her eyes are like arctic glaciers, challenging and unyielding.

“Uhm, okay.” My heart sinks as Everett stutters and averts his gaze.

My rage boils inside when I realize she doesn't want anything to do with me, despite my efforts to make amends. I nod in acceptance as Ava strides out the front door, ready to face whatever lies ahead of her.

“Damn. Man, I am sorry.” Everett apologizes as he slips into his coat and leaves me alone in The Brain.

# SEVENTEEN

AVA

My heart thudded so loudly I was sure James could hear it. Every molecule in my body strained to turn and look at him, but I resisted, knowing that if I did, all my will would collapse like a house of cards.

I forced myself to keep my gaze firmly on Everett as I scurried to my car, finally releasing the breath I had been holding.

When Everett approached me, my face froze into a strained mask of politeness. Had James filled him in on what happened, or had my rebuff of allowing James to be my bodyguard told him enough?

Nevertheless, I engaged in the conversation with Everett as we drove to my shop, and it almost felt to me like he was intentionally trying to cheer me up. Time flew by as I tended to my plants and chatted with customers, but relief flooded over me when closing time arrived, and I could escape the oppressive presence of James in my mind.

“I’ll wrap things up for you.” Everett suddenly announced, jolting me out of my thoughts.

“Thank you,” I replied, printing out the receipts and gathering the cash from the register – money I would spend tonight.

It had been ages since I’d gone to Duke’s bar – usually, it was crowded with college students out enjoying their weekend - but this night promised no expectations other than loud music and wild dancing.

As I set the alarm, I brace myself, and Everett follows me out the front door. His confusion is palpable in the air when he notices I am not heading to the car.

“I’m not ready to go home yet.” I proclaim, my voice steady despite my nerves.

“Huh?” He questions me as if he hasn’t heard correctly.

The darkness creeps around us as the laughter and chatter from Duke’s nightlife patrons grow louder.

“I want to go dancing.”

“Ava, I am not sure that’s a good idea. I need to check back in with James and let him know.” He grabs my arm.

“Do what you need to do, Everett, but I’m going inside.”

His face scrunches up in disbelief, but I untangle my arm from his grip and push my way through the doors of Duke’s.

My heart pounds with a mix of excitement and fear as I make a beeline toward the bar.

The music is loud, and each beat matches the pulse of my veins as I spot the bartender - a beautiful blonde woman with pink highlights in her hair, wearing a crop top and shorts. Her nametag reads Meg.

“What can I get you to love?” She says in an inviting tone.

“Jameson on the rocks,” I say authoritatively, handing her my card. “Start me a tab, please.”

She swipes it before sliding my card and whiskey over to me with a smile. My first sip calms me enough to order another round, and Everett soon joins me at the barstool beside mine.

“James is on his way,” he warns, barely audible above The Weeknd’s “*Blinding Lights*” playing through the speakers.

“Well then, I guess I better order you a drink.” I gesture for two more drinks for Everett and me before James arrives.

I am already on my sixth drink, feeling the warmth spread through my veins like wildfire. The pain in my heart is slowly numbing with each swallow of alcohol, and my head begins to spin just a little.



Actually, more than a little bit.

Everett had finished his first drink but refused to order any more. He kept warning me to pace myself, but I felt as if nothing else mattered. When he got up to use the restroom, he sternly warned me not to move from my seat and that we were leaving when he returned.

*That's what he thinks.*

In the middle of my seventh drink, I hear a familiar voice behind me.

“Ava?”

His voice sends shivers down my spine, and I slowly turn around to see Colin standing there with an amused look on his face.

“Holy shit! I haven't seen you in so long. How the hell are you?”

My mouth curls into a wide smile as I embrace him in a hug. “Colin, I'm good. How are you?”

His hands grip my waist for longer than necessary before finally releasing me.

“I'm good. I just got promoted to sheriff's deputy.”

“Oh, congrats! That's great to hear. You deserve it.” My smile widens as I say this.

“Thank you. Anyway, you look great. What have you been up to?” His gaze lingers on me for a second too long before turning away again.

I blush uncontrollably and reply, “Just busy with my shop as usual. It's planting season, so I have been working on my garden at the house.” My eyebrows rise inquisitively as I say, “What about you, Sheriff's Deputy?”

Swallowing hard, he clears his throat before saying softly, “Not too much. I have been working a lot. With the murders going on, it's been really busy.”

I nod understandingly before asking, “Any idea who it might be?”

“None. I heard the FBI was getting involved, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

I hiss through gritted teeth before shutting my lips for extra emphasis as Everett returns from the bathroom.

“Ready to go?”

Colin looks confused at the sudden change in conversation.

“Colin, this is my friend, Everett. Everett, this is Colin. Colin is a Sheriff’s Deputy.”

Everett reluctantly shakes his hand with an arched brow and downturned mouth as he takes in Colin’s uniform.

“Nice to meet you.” Colin smiles warmly and accepts the handshake.

I feel the change in the atmosphere, feeling his presence before seeing him.

My attention snaps to the door where James stands, glowering through the crowd of people until our eyes meet.

*Fuck.*

The no-fun police are here, and he looks pissed.

His intense stare sends electricity sparking across my skin, and I find myself clenching my thighs together. I don’t dare break away first from our locked gaze; all my anger towards him hasn’t dissipated yet despite the current tension between us. He pours energy into every step as he strides through the room, and I shudder beneath his seething stare.

My veins course with molten rage, yet something else is simmering beneath the surface; a heat radiates between us, making my thighs quiver ever so slightly.

I quickly avert my gaze as I feel myself beginning to melt under the weight of his anger.

“Hey Colin, I want to dance. Come with me?” I slam my glass on the bar top and grab him by the arm. Not giving Colin a chance to protest, I yank him towards the dancefloor while surreptitiously stealing a glance behind me; James has

reached Everett now, who holds his hands up defensively in apparent capitulation. Guilt boils inside me, but no longer caring about making amends later, I instead focus on blowing off some steam as I dance with my ex under James' watchful eye.

*Obsessed* by Zandros and Limi's thunderous beats filled the bar. I clutched tightly onto Colin's hand as we moved through throngs of people, my skin tingling with anticipation.

My head swam, but my body was loose and warm.

A fire ignited within me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and swayed to the captivating music with wild abandon.

His hands explored my curves hungrily, and I pressed my forehead against his chin.

I could feel his hard arousal against my thigh, inciting an uncontrollable urge that begged to be met.

He groaned into my ear, "What are you doing to me, baby girl?"

A shiver runs down my spine at the familiarity of his words, reminding me of how it felt when we were together. I want him more than ever; I feel drawn to him like a magnet, needing this reunion just as much as he does. I close my eyes and stand on my toes, pressing my lips urgently to his. He takes over with a passionate intensity, probing deep into the depths of me with his tongue.

At that moment, I forget what happened with James—the raw pain of rejection slipping away with every kiss Colin plants on my lips. The warmth from his body wraps around me like an old blanket, and I drink in the sweetness of our reunion—memories of us together flooding back with each caress. For tonight there will be no pressure, no expectations—just an easy connection between two lost souls.

# EIGHTEEN

JAMES

My fists clench as I watch Ava slowly back away from me with another man in tow. His eyes cling to her body like a leech while her hips swing sensually as she leads him to the dance floor.

Rage rips through me as his hands roam over her body, cupping her ass and pulling her hard against him. This was all my fault for not being there when she needed me.

“What happened, Everett?” I seethe, ready to strangle the life out of him.

He throws his hands up in defense. “We just finished closing up her shop, so we decided to get a drink—but then she wouldn’t leave!” He shakes his head in frustration.

“So, you just let her do whatever she wants?” I furiously grab him by the shirt, my knuckles turning white with anger. “It’s our job to make sure she’s safe!”

Everett’s face blinks in fear as he steps back from me. “James, come on! You know how stubborn she can be. What was I supposed to do? Carry her out slung over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes?”

My grip loosens at his words, and I take a deep breath, slowly releasing my hold on him. Shame courses through me for putting my hands on Everett like that—it was completely uncalled for.

He smirks knowingly and gestures towards the bar stool beside him, nodding for the bartender to pour us a round.

“What is so funny?” I sit down, keeping my back to the bar top and scanning through the crowd to keep Ava in my sight.

He handed me a whiskey with a grin. “In all the years I’ve known you, I have never seen you get so worked up over a woman before. You have always been the level-headed one,

and I'm the hothead." He took a sip of his drink before continuing. "Shit, you've saved my ass more than I can count in bars and from angry boyfriends. I can't say that I don't enjoy seeing you like this."

I grind my teeth in anger as I see Ava, the woman of my dreams, being groped and held tightly by her ex-boyfriend at the bar. Fury boils in my blood, and my hands curl into tight fists at my sides, ready to march over there and show him who she truly belongs to. But instead of making a scene, I sit here in silence as I witness the girl I want in the arms of another man.

"You should go and talk with her," Everett says.

But I know it won't make any difference - not yet. She's still mad at me for how I handled things between us; there's no way to deny that.

"And say what?"

Everett takes a sip from his glass. "Beats me. But I think a sorry is a good start."

A deep sigh escapes my lips as I look at my hands – a reminder that this is all my fault. If only I had been more open and honest with her about how I felt, then maybe this wouldn't have happened at all. My friend places an arm on my shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Be a man and go talk to her. Give her your apology before blondie gets her pregnant with all that thrusting." Everett snickers at his joke, but I know he is trying to help.

I crack a smile. "Thanks, dick."

Taking a deep breath, I steel my resolve and put on my big boy pants. With one final glance towards Ava, I take off into the crowd.

# NINETEEN

AVA

Colin whispers in my ear, “Do you want to get out of here?” I look past him and see James, his gaze piercing through me with a feral intensity. Everett speaks loudly to him, but he keeps his eyes fixed on me alone.

My body hums with anticipation as I nod at Colin. A spark lights within me, begging me to take a risk.

*Fuck it.*

He gives me a wicked grin and presses a soft kiss to my lips before heading towards the restroom.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to go back to the bar—but before I can take more than two steps, someone grabs me hard from behind and yanks me back into their body.

Startled, I feel their hands groping me painfully and squeezing my ass. I cry in pain, shouting for them to stop, but it’s too late. Before I can react, a hot tongue snakes its way into my ear.

Furious and terrified all at once, I knee them viciously in the groin with what little strength I have left, and they keel over with a roar of rage.

My heart races as they drop their grip on me and stumble backward. Gasping for air, I spin around and crash into someone else dancing behind me who helps steady me once more.

The man who had grabbed me rises again with fire in his eyes, face reddening as he clutches his crotch while spitting out an insult.

“You fucking cunt!” He looms over me like a vengeful beast ready to strike.

The air around us hummed with electricity; a single spark could ignite the charged atmosphere. With dizzying

speed, James' fist made contact with his assailant's face, sending him flying across the dance floor in a blur of clothing. The ferocious rage that thrashed inside James was shocking, and I watched in awe as he defended me.

“Don't fucking touch her again, or I'll break your fucking arms off and beat you to death with them!” he growled menacingly, blocking my view of the stranger. His voice thundering through me like an electric surge.

Everett wrapped me up in his protective embrace, steering me away from the scene. “That knee strike to the groin was impressive, by the way,” he praised me proudly. But I couldn't think about that now - James consumed all of my thoughts.

He reached out to brush a strand of hair from my face, his calloused fingertips caressing my skin gently, sending warmth spreading throughout my body like wildfire. His gaze smoldering with primal desire, threatened to consume me in its intensity. I trembled beneath his touch, conflicting emotions swirling inside me until I had to break our physical contact for fear of losing control completely.

“Are you alright? Did he hurt you?” His voice is husky and deep; it resonated through my core as though he had touched my soul itself.

I pulled away quickly, trying desperately to fill my head with something other than memories of his embrace. But before I could formulate any reply, Colin stepped forward and draped his arm around my waist possessively.

I don't look at him but instead keep my gaze firmly on James, who is seething with rage. His eyes shoot burning flames at Colin, and his jaw tightens until the muscles in his neck bulge like hard lines of steel. I can see his displeasure, but he doesn't speak it out loud.

“Yes, I am ready.”

“Don't you think it's best for you to go home?” James snarls, clenching his fists in frustration. He holds himself back

from spitting out his anger, instead mumbling an icy response through gritted teeth.

The moment James defended me, I felt conflicted. When he touched me, his mere presence sent sparks of electricity throughout my body, and I could feel the longing heat deep within me. My mind sang with visions of his hands caressing my skin, even as fury burned through me for his rejection. Though I wanted more than anything to crumble and succumb to his touch, I hardened myself against him, vowing never to let him see how much he affected me.

“I believe it is none of your concern,” I retort sharply, keeping my voice as calm as a venomous snake. Linking my arm with Colin’s, I give them both a daring look before curling my lip in mocking contempt. “Have a pleasant evening, gentlemen.”

Without another word, Colin leads me out of the bar and into his truck as I fight back tears.



# TWENTY

JAMES

I can't find the words to express my primal urge to pummel her ex into an unrecognizable pulp. I hastily put on my jacket and venture outside to trail them.

Everett follows close behind.

We are both in sync like usual, and I appreciate him even more right now.

As Colin's truck reverses out of its parking space, I quickly head to my truck, with Everett getting in the passenger side.

Our eyes meet, and I see him clutching Ava's purse tightly in his hands, a look of panic etched on his face.

"She left both her purse and cell phone behind. We can't track her, James." He exclaims.

Anxiety spills down my spine like ice in my veins.

I barely give him time to shut his door before I speed backward out of the spot in my truck, burning with desperation.

A group of intoxicated kids is blocking my path, and that's when I see the taillights of Colin's truck vanish in the fog down the street.

I roll down my window and shout at the pedestrians taking their sweet ass time to cross, "Hey! Get the fuck across the street now!"

The group merely responds with drunken laughter and offensive gestures.

By the time they reach the sidewalk, Colin and Ava have disappeared. I have no idea which way they went, and I am trying to stay calm as I speed down the street.

Everett is already on the phone, coordinating with Sarah and the tech guys back at the house, searching through

the names and addresses of every individual named Colin in the area.

By then, Colin and Ava have disappeared without a trace. Seething with rage and panic, I push down hard on the accelerator, determined to find them at any cost.

# TWENTY-ONE

AVA

As Colin drives through the backroads to his house, rain starts pouring down, creating a dreary atmosphere.

It has been years since I last visited his place, but as we pull up, I notice that it remains unchanged.

Tucked away in the woods, his property has a serene waterfront view, much like mine.

After parking in his driveway, he gallantly opens the door for me.

“What a gentleman.” I teasingly remark, giving him a coy smile.

Despite the rain drenching us, we hurriedly ran to his front door. Once inside, Colin locks us in and pulls me close to him with an urgency that sends shivers down my spine.

Our lips connect in a passionate kiss that sends shivers of pleasure down my spine. He takes my hand and leads me to his bedroom, which has remained the same since I last saw it.

The familiar sight of his intricately placed red comforted adorned matching pillows greets us. He is always meticulous when it comes to tidiness when we are together.

As I glance around, I catch a glimpse of a photograph on his dresser. It was of us at the county fair a couple of years ago, and my heart swells with nostalgia as I remember how he won me a teddy bear that night.

Colin eagerly unbuttons my jeans with trembling fingers while peppering my neck with soft kisses. Our bodies move in sync as he helps me remove my pants, and I can't help but admire his perfectly chiseled physique.

I miss this intensity... and him.

I hastily remove my shirt and toss it across the room, tauntingly as I collapse onto the bed excitedly. Colin's piercing eyes seem to darken with desire as his head dips lower, and he starts planting kisses on my stomach. His lips tickle me, and I moan in pleasure, finally feeling blissfully intoxicated and giddy as he moves up my body, slowly sucking on my neck.

A sudden chill races through my veins when I see something move in the corner of my eye. A menacing silhouette stands in the doorway, carrying something frightening above their head.

"Colin!" I scream, terror rooting me to the spot.

"There's someone here!" I exclaim, my breath catching in my throat as fear grips me. I am paralyzed, unable to move as the shadowy figure ominously draws closer.

Desperate to alert Colin, I push his head upward in an attempt to capture his attention.

"What is it?" he questions, his voice confused.

He moves to sit up, but as he does, the shadow lurking in the room moves.

He looks up, confusion etched in his features. He reaches out a hand towards me as if seeking comfort.

An ear-splitting thud shatters the trance-like atmosphere.

I realize that this shadow is real and has just driven an axe into Colin's back.

Warm droplets of blood spray onto my face and chest like a shower of rain, and it sends a surge of fear throughout my body so intense that I feel as if I'm choking on air. My heart beats wildly against my ribs until it feels like it might break free. Pure terror engulfs me, and I scream as I roll off the bed, colliding forcefully into the wall.

"Colin!" I scream, yet my plea goes unheard as the dark figure relentlessly smashes his axe down on Colin's limp body, every strike emitting a sickening squelch that pierces my ears. The sound of flesh and bone crunching under the might

of the axe is like daggers to my heart, while its acrid stench seeps into my veins and infects every molecule of my being.

Muted brown eyes stare back at me with an air of lifelessness. A chill runs through me, almost making me faint. The malevolent figure towers above the body, panting heavily from the effort, his face contorted in a heinous manner.

Mustering whatever strength I have left within me, I slither and sprint away from the bedroom. Still brandishing his K-bar knife, the fiend continues to track me down. His sharp blade slices through my left arm, accompanied by a thud and a guttural groan.

Desperate to escape, I chance a glance backward only to find him losing his balance and slipping on Colin's spilled blood before colliding with the wall.

Without wasting a second, I race towards the front door and frantically grip the deadbolt with my gory hands. Yet again, fear grips me when it fails to open, and panic bubbles within me.

As desperation sets in, strong fingers entwine in my hair, forcefully yanking my head backward. Blazing pain sings my scalp as I struggle to free myself from the vice-like grip, but it doesn't budge an inch.

The black-clad figure shoves my body into the wall so hard that it knocks all air out of my lungs. With no oxygen entering them, my efforts to inhale are futile; it is then that I gaze upon the tormentor's face and realize he is no shadow; instead, he is everything that I dread most.

*He found me.*

Terror pumps through my veins as I stare into the face of evil—his twisted smile, depthless black eyes, and oily black hair illuminated by the toppled table lamp.

“Did you miss me?” he hisses, and the warmth of his breath sends chills spiraling down my spine.

“Fuck you!” I cry out; my words choked with fear. His grip on my neck tightens as he presses the cold steel of his

blade against my skin; it slices against my sensitive flesh, and a searing pain explodes through me.

“Oh, believe me,” he sneers, “there will be plenty of fucking... or maybe I should skip straight to the cutting. My knife has missed your cunt.” He slides his knife up along the inside of my thigh until it reaches my slit.

“Do it,” I challenge him masquerading indifference in my voice. His gaze locks onto mine, a feral mix of rage and sadistic pleasure blazing from its depths.

“You were always an eager slut,” he murmurs before I can stop him.

“You always talked too much.” My defiance resurfaces despite the fear crawling through my veins. “If you’re going to kill me, kill me. But save me the lip service. I’m not afraid of you anymore.”

My words awaken something inside him, “Well, I’ll have to do something to rectify that, won’t I?”

He yanks my head back with a violent motion, then slams it against the wall. White-hot agony radiates through me, and everything fades to black for a moment.

I woke *The Beast*.

He doesn’t like my show of bravery, so he retaliates by dragging his blade across my side, and I watch in horror as my blood splashes onto the floor.

I press my hand to my side and cling to the table with my other one, fighting to remain upright, gripping it with white knuckles as a scream of pain rips from my lips. I gasp in pain as he savors the moment, running his tongue slowly up the blade, tasting my blood.

Colin’s truck keys lay on the table inches from my fingertips. Without hesitation, I seize them, letting the biggest one settle between my pointer and middle finger like a claw.

I plunge it into his neck, and he lets out an agonizing roar. While he is momentarily stunned, I grab a vase and use all my strength to slam it down on his head.

His body immediately slumps to the floor, but not before the knife clatters away from him, far enough that he will have to travel away from me to reclaim it.

Leaping over his fallen body, my hands find the lock and miraculously twist it open. My hands twist open the lock, and I launch myself through the doorway, running faster than I ever had before - running for freedom once again.

# TWENTY-TWO

JAMES

I sped through the winding roads, heading towards Colin's residence. Everett was on the phone coordinating assistance with the local authorities.

I admire his calmness because, at this moment, I was not calm. A slick sheen of sweat had broken out on my forehead as fear for Ava began to claw at my chest.

The police chief had tried calling Colin on his cell phone and his police radio he took everywhere with him, and there was no answer.

All I thought about was something happening to Ava, and I didn't get the chance to apologize to her for my cruelty.

I didn't mean what I had said. I panicked when she made me feel things I never felt about anyone.

I am a fucking idiot, and I might not get to tell her that.

Sarah had managed to locate his address by looking through a dozen potential Colins in the area - only one of them a Sheriff's Deputy with ties to Ava, which I had missed when snooping through her records.

If this psychopath were tracking Ava like he seemed to be doing all these weeks, then he would've seen her leave with Colin without us. Without me there to protect her.

My blood ran cold as I prayed Colin could keep Ava safe until I arrived, but no one could get ahold of him, and an icy fear crept into my bones at the possibility that something horrific might have already happened.



# TWENTY-THREE

AVA

The frigid night air enveloped me, the icy rain pelted my skin like tiny needles, and I exhaled a cloud of fog as I raced down the stairs and across the lawn. My bare feet pounded against the wet ground, propelled by fear.

Rage coursed through my veins as I remembered leaving my purse behind and thinking nothing of it. At that moment, I only wanted to feel something — anything — like I mattered to someone. Now, I could die because of my foolishness.

Either way, I refused to die without a fight.

*Damn it, my side hurt.*

I knew he cut deep, but I would run until I died on my terms.

*Not his.*

I kept my hand pressed firmly against my wounded side, and if he finds me, I'll laugh in his face as he realizes he won't get to torture me again.

I'll never have to endure being raped and defiled repeatedly.

The distant whine of sirens grew louder until blinding headlights illuminated the night sky. The cop cars shot past me, followed closely by a black suburban. As the cop cars whiz past me, the black suburban screeches to a halt and several figures emerge.

It's Everett...and James.

*Please let them be real.*

“Ava?” James' voice is an anxious whisper.

I ran into his arms, seeking refuge from the horror that had engulfed me. I inhale his mahogany scent and savor his warmth, clinging to him like a lifeline.

“Thank fucking God. Are you hurt? Is this your blood?” He frantically inspects my wounds, but I can barely feel his touch over the thundering of my heart.

As Everett appears with an umbrella, shielding us from the relentless rain, James removes his jacket and drapes it over my trembling shoulders. My teeth chatter uncontrollably, and my legs threaten to give way beneath me.

“He’s inside. He killed Colin,” I manage to gasp.

James barks orders to the other agents and police officers while I glance back to see the front door ajar, but no signs of him. Spotlights illuminate the house, and law enforcement officers hurry inside and search the premises.

“The ambulance is almost here,” Everett informs us with a reassuring smile.

“Let me see.” James gently pulls my hand from the side, hissing in dismay. “Damn it, Ava.

He guides me towards the rear of the suburban and opens the back door gently. As he lifts me up into the car, my vision darkens around the edges as waves of nausea wash over me.

I am overcome with chills from the cold, and my eyelids are growing heavy as James wraps a warm woolen blanket around me. The combination of the adrenaline rush fading away and losing too much blood left me utterly exhausted and on the brink of unconsciousness. I just need to rest my eyes for a brief moment.

*Just a few minutes.*

# TWENTY-FOUR

JAMES

“Ava? I need you to stay awake.” I plead, gently shaking her as her eyes threaten to close, and she begins to lean backward. I feel a chill run through my body as I take in Ava’s battered and bleeding form. She is drenched in blood, and with trembling hands, I move around her body, searching for any wounds that have been overlooked.

My stomach lurches as I find what I’m looking for a deep gash on her left side. Clad only in her bra and panties, her beautiful olive skin is covered in blood. Her forehead and right cheek are cut deeply, scratches creating zigzag patterns across her skin, and purple bruises starting to form.

Gripping her tightly against my chest, I can feel her trembling uncontrollably as she whispers against my heart,

“It’s not all mine,” she croaks, her voice weak and strained.

The terror in her eyes tells me all I need to know about what happened inside.

“He killed him right in front of me.”

Gripping her close to me, I whisper fiercely into her ear, “It’s okay, baby. You’re safe now.”

“He’ll never stop,” she sputters against my chest.

“He will when I kill him,” I respond through clenched teeth, tightening my grasp around Ava as she shivers uncontrollably.

“The ambulance is here,” Everett announces.

I scoop her up in my arms and approach the ambulance. Once inside, I gently lay her on the stretcher, and the paramedics assessed her injuries.

“She has a knife wound on her left side and contusions and lacerations on her face. The rest of the blood is from the

deceased inside,” I whisper the last part, careful not to upset Ava further.

The paramedics apply a thick wad of gauze to her side and apply pressure, securing it in place.

One of them radios the hospital, “We have a female patient between the ages of 25 and 35 with a knife wound on her left side. Multiple contusions on her face and head and a suspected concussion. The patient is awake but not fully alert. The estimated time of arrival is approximately 25 minutes.”

“Are you family?” the paramedic asked me, motioning for me to step out of the ambulance. The paramedic’s question takes me by surprise, and I can only manage a tight-lipped nod, not letting on that I don’t know what I am to her.

I look at Ava as she lies unconscious, pale, and vulnerable against the stark white of the interior, “Yeah, I am.”

“Alright, you can ride with us or drive to Harborview Mercy Hospital.”

Without hesitation, I climb inside to take her hand in mine, feeling its icy chill and praying she will make it through. “I’m coming with,” I reply, sitting next to Ava, holding her cold hand in mine.

“I’ll take care of things and meet you at the hospital after,” Everett tells me, giving me a thumbs up.

I nod, and the ambulance doors close.

At the hospital, I remain at her side every second, watching the doctors stitch her wounds and nurses attend to her. I count each and every stitch they make; eight on her side, three on a laceration at the back of her head, and steri-strips on her cheek to minimize scarring.

But for all their efforts, none of it seemed to matter - because I know that I almost lost her. The guilt wells up inside me until it threatens to choke me - if only I hadn’t been such an idiot, she never would have gone to the bar searching for someone else’s love.

An innocent bystander got caught in our drama that night, too - poor guy. I am not happy that he touched the girl I love, but he did not deserve what happened to him.

His mangled body was found barely recognizable, inflicted with over twenty ax wounds. The killer had vanished into the forest without a trace - not a single footprint survived the torrential downpour that followed.

Ava had escaped twice now, but I knew that sooner or later, Lady Luck would turn a cold shoulder. With a silent oath beneath my breath, I vowed never to let anything like this happen to her again. I should have told her how I really felt that day instead of the cruel words I gave her instead. All I can do is hope that she will forgive me when she wakes up.

I should have protected her, and I make a vow that from now on, I will. No matter the cost.

# TWENTY-FIVE

## AVA

The incessant beeping snapped me awake, and my vision was blurry and unfocused. I groan in pain as I survey the sterile hospital room and the monitor to my left that keeps beeping. My throat is dry and scratchy as I call out for James, asleep on the chair, his eyes still closed and his grip on my hand tight. He stirs at my voice, his exhausted blue eyes slowly opening and widening when he sees me awake. The corners of his mouth turn up into a relieved smile, white teeth glinting against his tan skin.

“Ava.” His voice is a soft whisper.

“How long have I been out?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“Two days,” he responds without hesitation.

“Damn,” I groan and attempt to sit up.

I try to sit up, and a white-hot pain sears through me from the injury on my side. I press my hand against the wound, a reminder of what happened that night at the bar. James quickly moves to assist me, placing his hands around my back with caution and care.

“Take it slow,” he murmurs softly as he helps lift me onto the bed.

Looking down at him, I can see he hasn’t changed since that night - same clothes, same anxious facial expressions, yet somehow more comforting now than before.

“Did you stay here the entire time?” I question as I reach out to touch him.

He looks away nervously before facing me again with an affirmative nod, “Yeah.” My heart swells with admiration for this man’s devotion - small habits like the way he averts his gaze or rubs the back of his neck. Those little movements that make him who he is have grown on me over time.

“Thank you, James,” I murmur as I intertwine our fingers together in gratitude. He looks up at me with his gentle blue eyes and offers a quivering smile in response.

A part of me hoped that Colin was still alive, but it seemed that the darkness that had taken so much from me had claimed another life. Tears brimmed my eyes, blurring my vision as I searched for answers in James’ expression.

This was all my fault. I put him in danger, and now he is gone forever. My tears poured down my cheeks, and I choke, “Did you find him?”

I study his face.

James uttered a single word that ripped away any last shred of hope I held onto.

“No. There’s no trace of him. We searched for two days. Forensics is analyzing the blood left at the scene, hoping to find a match. They mentioned evidence of a struggle in the entryway. You managed to wound him?”

I close my eyes, flashes of our struggle flooding back.

“I stabbed him with Colin’s keys and hit him on the head with a vase.”

James grasped my hand in comfort.

He murmured, “You survived him again. That alone is remarkable,” before saying something unexpected, “Ava, I’m so sorry. This is my fault.”

Shocked by his words, I argued vehemently against this notion and pleaded with him to take back his guilt. With tears streaming down my face, I whispered, “No, no. This is not your fault. I am the one that went home with Colin. I led the killer straight to him. Colin’s death is on me, not you.”

My eyes fill with tears as I realize the despair etched on James’s face.

“If I hadn’t said what I said to you, maybe you wouldn’t have felt the need to go home with someone else. I would give anything to take back those words. I didn’t mean

them. We should have been together that night,” he says, his fingers caressing my cheek softly.

“I should have been there, and I am so sorry.” He confesses, pain evident in his eyes.

He tries to conceal it, but I can see it seeping through.

I stare at him, realizing the agony he is carrying. He hurt me, but I couldn’t bear to make him feel worse after what happened.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter if James was the reason I went out that night; Colin was gone, and it would always be my fault.

James reached forward to touch my face, his eyes filled with guilt and regret to match my own. He tried to mask it, but the anguish was visible on his face, and at that moment, I knew all too well that he, too, was carrying his own burden. The thought of Colin made me nauseous with dread and guilt as I remembered how foolishly my actions had led us both astray.

James deserved none of this blame; it was mine and mine alone to bear.

Suddenly, Everett and Sarah entered the room with a sweet bouquet of pink roses. Everett set the flowers on my bedside table while Sarah gently embraced me in a tight hug.

“Look who’s awake!” Everett exclaimed.

“Good to see you both,” I respond.

“It’s been so quiet without you. I finally got some quality sleep,” Everett teases.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny,” I chuckle.

I was glad to see my friends.

“How are you feeling?” Sarah asked.

“I’m ok. Sore. But I am alive.” I answered earnestly, and I was grateful for it.



We all chatted briefly about nothing in particular while waiting for the doctor to discharge me. Sarah and Everett carried my flowers like offerings to the car, positioned at the entrance like sentinels.

Sarah had thoughtfully brought clothes for me—black yoga pants and a loose black sweatshirt since I had nothing. James stayed behind to help me, his eyes not once shifting away from mine despite my inability to cover myself. His hands moved gently yet firmly to untie the back of my gown, my body instantly consuming its warmth.

I felt an undeniable pull towards his touch, wanting him to explore further than he did, but he remained honorable.

When I was dressed, the nurse wheeled me out to meet Everett and Sarah at the entrance. James sat beside me in silence, stealing glances out of the window, though still laughing occasionally at their tales.

I reached out and clasped his hand in mine, surprising us both with what it conveyed beyond words. He squeezed my hand tightly, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

He makes me feel safe.

And safe was something that I didn't get to experience very often lately.

# TWENTY-SIX

AVA

As we walk through the door of my house, James never leaves my side. He helps me climb the stairs to my bedroom, his strong grip keeping me upright. When we reach the room, he closes the curtains and turns to face me.

“Can I get you something to eat or drink?” he asks.

I hesitate before answering. “Actually, I think a shower is what I need right now.”

My entire body is covered in dried blood, a constant reminder of everything that happened tonight.

He helps me undress and stands by as I turn on the water. Relief washes through me as it flows over my skin - if only for a moment.

Despite everything I’ve just been through, small moments like these are keeping me going right now.

My heart starts racing when I step out of my pants and stand in my bra.

Gently, I take James’s hand and place it on my chest.

“Do you feel that?” I whisper urgently. My heart beats against his palm like it’s trying to escape.

“My heart is still beating because of you,” I say fervently. “I am alive because of you.”

James shakes his head without hesitation. “No, Ava. You’re alive because you’re a fighter.”

My heart sinks with disappointment at his response.

“But if you hadn’t come when you did...” I can’t finish the sentence. The image of the killer flashes into my mind again.

“It doesn’t matter,” James interrupts firmly. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Tears well up in my eyes again as he wraps his arms around me, holding me close until the sobs subside.

I shake my head. “If you hadn’t arrived when you did, he would have either killed me or held me captive, torturing me like before.”

My heart feels like it’s going to burst from my chest as I take in the sight of him. “I know you said I was just a job to you, but I can’t control how you make me feel.”

His gaze pierces through me before his hand comes up to cup my face, and I’m powerless to resist. Leaning into his touch, I hear him say something that makes my body tremble with anticipation.

“You are not just a job to me, Ava. You are more. You’ve always been more. And it terrifies me.”

Heat races through my veins at his declaration, my breath catching in my throat as I drink in his deep blue eyes full of wild desire. I can’t deny the electricity running between us, and I hope that he feels it too. I want something more than fear...something with him.

Before I can think twice, I close the gap between us, pushing my body flush against his. “Touch me,” I whisper.

His lips part slightly at the intimate contact, and all inhibitions fade away.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes,” I breathe.

With one last glance of questioning hesitation, his fingers trail down my cheek before encircling the back of my neck and pulling me closer to him for our kiss. The moment his lips press against mine, a wave of pleasure crashes over me—his fingertips tracing soft circles on my spine while his hands delicately find their way to the small of my back and grasp tightly as our kiss grows more intense. Nothing else

exists in that moment but us; lost in him and consumed by the sensation of his mouth on mine, I melt into him completely.

I pull him in closer, breathing in his scent until I am dizzy with lust.

“I’ve wanted you since the first time I laid eyes on you.” He whispers into my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

The heated bathroom envelops us, and I can’t help myself anymore. My fingertips slide under his shirt and lightly caress his toned stomach before tugging it off him.

He gazes at me in a trance as each layer of clothing drops to the floor, revealing more of his perfect body. His sculpted muscles gleam in the steamy air, and a hint of desire escapes his mouth, his cock springing free from his underwear.

I want to feel him inside me.

My hand wraps around him, stroking up and down his hot length. His breath quickens, and he locks eyes with me in anticipation.

I take a step back into the shower as an inviting gesture, and he follows me hungrily, towering over my petite frame with a look of awe plastered on his face.

The burning water cascades over us and heats my skin as he presses me harder against the tiled wall.

“Are you okay?” he questions, peering into my eyes with genuine concern.

I nod, and he crashes our lips together with an intensity that steals my breath away.

I gasp as his hands move up my legs and firmly grip my bottom, sending an electrifying shiver through my body. His touch is addictive, and I tilt my head back in pleasure as he trails kisses along my neck.

He takes a bar of soap, lathering it between his palms until the suds turn into a thick cream. Tenderly he washes every inch of my skin, making sure to linger between my thighs.

My breathing quickens with anticipation, and I moan in appreciation as he moves his hand in slow circles over my sex. His chest is adorned with intricate tattoos, black and bold against his tanned skin. The artwork captivates me with its perfect blend of colors, and I nearly burn from the inside out with desire.

The water cascades down his hard body, and I trace my fingers through the dark hair that leads down to his cock, mesmerized by its size. He lathers shampoo gently into my hair, massaging my scalp until all traces of dried blood have gone. Red swirls circle the drain before disappearing forever as he gently massages conditioner in my hair. As I rinse out the suds, I feel like I'm being pulled back into the moment again, hypnotized by his touch.

“You are so goddamn beautiful, Ava. So, fucking beautiful. You are my goddess.” His voice is rough with need as he runs his hands over my curves, grasping me tightly as if I were precious gold. His mouth greedily kisses me, and his eyes smolder with a deep hunger.

My body trembles as I feel an unknown fervor within me—a passion that I have never experienced before, and it courses through my veins like liquid fire. Any restraint I still had evaporated, and I need to touch him. I need to feel him touching me.

My chest heaves uncontrollably as I explore him, tracing the contours of his muscles and memorizing every inch of his body. I let my hand drift down, and my grip tightens around his hard erection as I take over, giving him back all the pleasure he has shown me. His hard cock throbs under my hand.

He shudders and growls my name rough through gritted teeth as I stroke him slowly and firmly, increasing the pressure as I feel him getting harder than before. His body tightens beneath me as if about to explode. His skin tightens under my touch as he calls out my name in a strained groan. “Ava, your hands feel so good, baby.”

His moans captivate me, urging me to keep touching him. I feel his body trembling with anticipation, his breath growing heavier. Gradually, I apply more pressure, coaxing him closer to the edge.

He stops me with a gentle hand, opening his eyes to meet mine. He reaches behind me, turns the shower off, and takes my hand. He leads me out of the shower and gently pats my skin dry with a towel, being careful around my stitches.

I freeze for a moment as he leans close and plants soft kisses on each scar left by the killer. With every kiss, it is like he is reminding me that I will never belong to anyone else, as if his lips are speaking an unspoken promise that only he can deliver.

He presses his lips to every part of my body that the towel touches. I watch as he dries himself off, and I impatiently wait for him to finish. I get the feeling that he is enjoying himself, relishing in the hungry gaze I wear.

He drops the towel and leads me to the bedroom, lowering himself onto my body as we land on the bed together. Our bodies glisten with warmth; our skin is still damp as he kisses me passionately. His lips carry the taste of sweet honey, and his hands cup my face as he explores my mouth with his tongue.

A shiver of excitement and fear run through me as he hovers his face near my thighs, the stubble on his cheeks brushing against the brand that had been burnt into my skin—a lasting reminder from the killer. I quickly sit up in shame, trying to cover the “S” with my hands.

He takes my hands gently into his own and looks deep into my eyes, a burning intensity reflected back at me.

“I want to see all of you. Every scar. Every mark. Every shadow,” he whispers, planting soft kisses against the rough brand that was etched by another man’s violent act. “He doesn’t own you anymore. You are mine.”

My emotions overwhelm me, and tears stream down my face as I nod, trusting him completely. He lays me back

down on the bed, his gaze worshipping every inch of my body as if it were his first time seeing me.

“You deserve to be worshipped every second of every day,” he murmurs against my lips. His hand cups me, lightly stroking my slit before slipping one finger inside me, then another, moving them in a circular motion until I’m moaning with pleasure and barely able to contain myself. His touch becomes more urgent as he adds another finger, and pleasure engulfs me in its flames.

His mouth remains locked with mine, taking my breaths into him and tasting my moans.

“Give yourself to me, Ava,” he begs his thumb spinning circles on my clit in sync with the thrusts of his fingers inside me.

I cling to him, my body trembling, moaning my desire for him, begging him not to stop.

My breath quickens, and I arch my back to meet his movements.

Inside I feel as though a blazing supernova has ignited within me, in the vast emptiness of my soul—consuming me by an internal fire. It has taken root inside me, the explosive pleasure burning me inside—the blaze of my orgasm threatening to reduce me to ashes. And I cry out as my orgasm reaches its peak. I scream in pleasure, my body shuddering in waves of ecstasy.

“I want you inside of me,” I pant, parting my legs and offering myself to him completely.

He smiles and kisses me.

“I am going to fuck you, Ava. I am going to fuck you until you feel only me inside of you. No one else. I will erase any trace of your past, and I will be your present and your future, do you understand?” he whispers possessively.

*Holy fuck.*

I am breathless and dripping at his affirmation. My whole body trembles at his promise, and I can only nod.

Slowly and deliberately, he enters me, filling me to the brim with his length until nothing else matters except this moment between us. His thrusts become stronger with each passing second as he takes complete control of my body and my heart. My world blurs into him and me; there is no past or future, only this moment.

A feral groan rips through his throat as he pushes himself into me, sinking deeper and deeper. I grip his backside, pulling him closer to my grasp, wanting to feel every inch of him merging with me and destroying every dark corner of my soul. His tongue ravages mine, consuming my breath and leaving me thirsty for more. With each thrust, the pleasure intensifies until I am soaked, dripping down my thighs and soaking the bedsheets beneath me.

“You are so fucking wet. God, you feel so *good*.” His breathing grows ragged as I feel him tighten inside me.

“Come with me,” he pleads. His breathing grows ragged as his moans intertwine with mine. With one final thrust, he sends me over the edge. I cry out his name as he comes, releasing himself inside me.

His body stills, and he collapses next to me. His chest gleams with sweat, and he pulls me into his arms, kissing my forehead.

I fall asleep, tracing the curves of his tattoos.



# TWENTY-SEVEN

AVA

I found myself once again at Colin's house, my heart pounding in my chest like a jackhammer. The eerie silence was shattered by the sound of footsteps, but this time it was not Colin who stood before me, but the killer. I tried to scream for James, but my voice failed me as the killer ominously circled the bed, his eyes locked on me with predatory delight.

James remained unaware of the unfolding horror behind him, lost in pleasure as he thrusts inside me.

Then came the vile sound of an ax striking his skull, a wet and sickening noise reverberating through the room and making bile rise in my throat. I screamed and pleaded for the killer to stop, but he ignored me and continued his merciless assault on the man I think I was in love with.

*"Ava."*

I hear James calling out to me.

His voice is distant at first but gradually grows closer.

But I am being held tight by the killer's arms, and I struggle to break free, but he is too strong.

I kick and scream and call out for James, pleading to be let go. The voice gets closer, and then I am abruptly pulled from my nightmare, and when my eyes open, I am back in my room.

James is there, holding me in his arms, and I cling to him. My heart is racing, and I am drenched in sweat.

"It's ok, baby. You're safe. I'm here," he whispered soothingly. His gentle touch caresses my wet hair, and he kisses my forehead and cheeks, pulling me out of my nightmare.

I hold onto him tightly, gradually calming down as my breathing slows and my heart rate returns to normal.

I look up at him, the moon's soft light illuminates his face, and concern is etched on his face.

"I'm here. You're safe." He pushed a chunk of my hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear.

My entire body trembled with terror and exhaustion as I clung to him tightly.

"I was back at Colin's house. Except it wasn't Colin this time—it was you," I murmur in a strained whisper, my voice small.

"Hey, it's ok. It isn't real," he comforted me, leaning in to kiss my lips.

I gasped as I felt his lips on mine, every part of my body trembling under his touch. His breath is warm against my cheek, and I can feel his heart beating rapidly in his chest. I press myself even closer to him, feeling the heat radiating through his skin, melting away any coldness that used to exist. He wraps his arms around me tightly and pulls away.

"But my lips on yours, that is what's real."

Unable to resist him, I lean in closer, inhaling his calming scent. I tuck my forehead into his neck and sigh, "Who knew you could be so romantic?" I tease.

"Oh yeah, baby. Just call me Romeo." He chuckled, gently stroking my cheek.

Reluctantly, I pull away from him, pull my robe back on, and head to the bathroom to wash my sweaty face.

As I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, I can't help but smile. My dark hair is disheveled, and my grey eyes are lighter than usual. The cut on my cheek has nearly healed, leaving only a faint scar—a reminder that I am a fighter.

I splash water on my face and pat my face dry, and my cheeks redden as I think about what James and I did only

hours before. My core tightens, remembering how he felt inside me, and I still feel him.

“Ava?” James calls, startling me from my thoughts. He followed me into the bathroom, his gaze fixated on my side. “You’re bleeding,” he exclaims, sounding alarmed.

“What?” I look down in the direction of his eyes, and there’s a dark red stain pooling through the thin fabric of my robe.

“One of my stitches must have torn open,” I realize, undoing my robe and wincing when it sticks to my stitches.

“Sit down on the toilet. Let me take a look,” He gestures, carefully peeling the fabric away for me.

“It must have happened when I had my nightmare,” I explain.

“There was a spot of blood on the sheets, and I thought I had hurt you,” he pressed the towel against my wound.

“You didn’t hurt me. I’m fine,” I reassure him with a smile.

“Are you sure?” His eyes search mine, looking like he isn’t convinced that he isn’t at fault.

“Yes, James. I promise. I have a first aid kit downstairs in the hall closet by the front door.”

He hesitates but nods after a few seconds and leaves. I hear him rustling in the bedroom and then my door closing.

I remove the towel, run it under the faucet, and gently clean up the blood drying on my side. It looks like only one stitch came undone, but nothing that couldn’t be fixed with a little bit of super glue and a new bandage.

When James returns, I clean up all the blood and stopped the bleeding.

“I think a little bit of super glue should hold it closed,” I suggest.

He opens the kit and looks through for the glue. I raise my arm, giving him a clearer view of my wound. He works

silently, and his expression is focused and thoughtful.

“You’re quite serious, Mr. Buchanan,” I playfully tease.

A grin breaks his concentration, and he kisses my forehead, “I think you’ll survive.”

“I always do,” I tell him and enter my closet to put on sweatpants and a loose T-shirt.

James leans against the doorframe and watches me as I dress, his eyes fill with desire, and my stomach jumps at the thought of him inside me again.

*This man will be the death of me.*

“I need to wash my sheets before the blood stains,” I go to him, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him deeply.

He growls, the deep rumble tickling my mouth, and he returns my kiss, his tongue grazing my teeth, “I’d rather stay up here and keep kissing this perfect mouth of yours.”

“As much as I want to, I’m famished. I need some food in my stomach,” I admit, my stomach growling in appreciation.

He groans, pushing his hard length against my stomach. I reluctantly untangle myself from his embrace, heading downstairs.

I load my robe and sheets into the washing machine, selecting the cold and heavy-duty settings.

James followed me downstairs but disappeared to check on his team.

The house is quiet and dimly lit. The only sound is the faint radio checks in the distance. I venture into the kitchen and open my refrigerator.

My stomach growls as I find an untouched cheese stick and a forgotten blueberry muffin.

I stand at the counter, my mouth drooling as I break apart the muffin when James enters the room. His gaze burns

through me from across the kitchen.

“You hungry?” he inquires in low, velvety tones.

“The cheese is gone, but there’s some muffin left if you want it,” I reply breathlessly, my heart racing as he begins to approach me. “You go ahead and eat it. You need your strength,” he tells me, wrapping his arms around me from behind and pressing his lips to my neck.

“Oh really? And why is that?” I ask, turning my body and leaning into his embrace.

He cups my face in his hands and brushes a thumb across my bottom lip.

“No food for me... just you,” he murmurs, his voice deep with desire as he brings himself closer to me until our lips are almost touching.

My body trembles with anticipation when we hear footsteps and laughter approaching us. In an instant, I step away, and James reads the newspaper casually as a gorgeous blonde girl strides into the kitchen wearing nothing but an oversized man’s shirt. Her red lipstick smudged across her face.

Everett follows closely behind, clad only in his underwear. They are pawing at each other before realizing they aren’t alone. Everett’s jaw drops, and the blonde blushes, hastily pulling her shirt down.

I clear my throat and greet them, attempting to sound cheerful and like I wasn’t considering letting James fuck me on my kitchen counter before they came in.

“Hey, Everett.”

His face turns red with embarrassment and shock, and his voice squeaks in response, “Ava and James, hey.”

He turns towards his guest, “Hey babe, why don’t you go upstairs and wait for me? I’ll get us some sustenance. Be up in just a second.”

The blonde glances between James and me, then hurriedly leaves the kitchen.

“I didn’t know anyone else was awake. I’m sorry,” Everett apologizes and shrugs his shoulders.

“Sustenance, huh?” I tease, trying hard to hide my laughter.

James doesn’t, however.

He bursts into laughter, and I can’t help but laugh along with him.

“Hey, now! A sexual beast like me needs fuel because I keep the ladies in the bedroom all night,” he teases back, grinning at me.

I shake my head, still giggling. “Oh, you’re something else,” I remark, popping the rest of the muffin into my mouth. “But, seriously, Everett, who did you bring into my house?”

“That’s Emily, or maybe her name is Amanda? Regardless, she is a dancer,” he replies with a shrug and a sly grin.

“A dancer? Like a ballerina.” I ask.

“Not exactly. She is more of the exotic type.”

My mouth drops open, “A stripper!”

Everett nods, giving me a wink.

“Ok, then,” I mutter softly, a blush creeping up my neck.

Everett smirks, clearly amused by my reaction. I look to James for support and see his bright blue eyes shining with tears of amusement as he struggles to contain his laughter.

“Well, you two, it’s been fun, but I don’t want to keep my lady waiting. I’ll see you guys in the morning,” Everett grabs a bag of chips and a couple of sodas, throws a short wave, and leaves us.

“Goodnight,” we both say simultaneously.

I exhale and take a sip of my water.

“I will address this with him in the morning,” James states.

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” I casually reply.

James appeared perplexed.

“I honestly couldn’t care less that he is getting laid. In the grand scheme of things, that is the least of my worries. As long as my shit isn’t stolen, I don’t care if he brings a new girl each night.”

“Really?” James inquired.

“Absolutely,” I affirm.

James chuckled. “I suppose it’s somewhat hypocritical of us, considering what we have been up to.”

“That it is,” I playfully say, taking his hand and pulling him closer.

“Speaking of us...”

“Lead the way.”

He looked up at me with a dangerous glint in his eye as though he could sense what was coming next. A wicked smile curved on his lips as we moved towards the kitchen door. I grabbed his hand and walked towards the kitchen door, leading him upstairs.

# TWENTY-EIGHT

AVA

When I wake, I am greeted by sunlight streaming through my window. The warmth on my face and birds chirping outside fill the room.

I inhale deeply and stretch, feeling a wave of contentment wash over me. A comfortable soreness between my legs greets me.

I reach over and find an empty bed beside me.

James is not there.

In his place is a piece of paper.

I opened it and read, *"I am sorry I was not there when you woke up. I had some fires to put out. Be back soon. James."*

I sigh but smile.

After last night, I feel content and, dare I say, *happy*.

Placing the note back on the bed, I rise to start my day.

Today, I plan on spending some time in my greenhouse, anything to divert my thoughts from James and the mind-blowing sex we had.

As I walk towards the greenhouse, humming softly to myself. As I swing open the door, I am overwhelmed by the scent of damp soil and fresh flowers that hit me in the face. I open the door and inhale the fresh morning air, taking a moment to savor it before stepping inside.



# TWENTY-NINE

JAMES

The call from the police chief hit me like a physical blow as I listened to Chief Brash describe yet another missing girl. An overwhelming dread rose inside me as I threw on my clothes, knowing that if The Skinner was behind this disappearance, it was up to me to stop him.

My eyes lingered on Ava, sleeping peacefully in the bed, her dark eyelashes framing her angelic face, and my chest tightened with fear for her safety. I didn't want to leave her, having other things in mind, but part of keeping her safe was acting as a buffer between her and the missing girl. I kissed her forehead and whispered that I'd be back soon. I went to the police station, determined to get answers. Even though I already knew the answer, I had to be sure that The Skinner was involved.

The police station smelled of stale coffee and burnt paper when I walked through the door. Chief Brash, the grizzled police chief who had been patrolling these streets for twenty-five years, greeted me with a stern shake of his hand.

Chief Brash was already waiting for me. He was an old-school cop, gruff and straight to the point. He was one of the few people who understood why the FBI protected Ava, and he knew all too well the danger posed by The Skinner.

I greeted him, shaking his hand.

“Good to see you, Chief Brash.”

“I only wish it was under better circumstances.”

I nodded in agreement.

The only thing I had been told on the phone was that a 20-year-old college girl hadn't attended class in the past few days.

“The missing girl is Lacey Michaels. She is a Harborview College student. Her roommate Beverly reported her missing this morning. She said Lacey didn’t come home after a late-night shift at a local diner Saturday morning. Beverly and Lacey’s professors all said it was completely out of character that she didn’t return to the dorms or attend class. She was last seen at the diner after her shift, but no one has seen or heard from her since clocking out. Her cell phone was not found, but the last known location was the diner. I have deputies searching for Lacey since the report was filed, and her family has been notified. There have been no leads in the investigation so far. Diner staff have been questioned, but no leads on Lacey’s whereabouts. It may be nothing, but with the recent murders and what happened to Colin, it might be tied to your killer. We have to be careful and consider all possibilities. I hope she is still alive, but we don’t want to take any chances. We have to act fast.”

Chief Brash handed me a photograph of the missing girl - young and brunette, vaguely resembling Ava.

“Copy, Chief. I’ll get some agents to help with the search,” I said solemnly. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Chief Brash replied urgently. “The sooner this monster is caught, the better.”

I nodded in agreement.

“How is Ava doing?” He asked.

“She’s had a rough couple of days, but I think she is doing her best.”

“It’s a shame that she has had to deal with so much. She’s always been kind to everyone in town, and Colin adored her, even after they broke up. Speaking of his funeral, the service is tomorrow at 6 pm. If Ava feels up to attending.” He added.

“I’ll let her know,” I replied.

I hurried home, eager to find Ava, but only found her room empty. It was only 8:30 in the morning, so I assumed she must have gone out for a walk and taken in the morning air.

However, Sarah told me Ava had gone out to the greenhouse about an hour ago.

The agent standing guard outside the greenhouse door was an excellent agent. It made me grateful that I had agents who followed my orders to watch Ava when I was not around. It had been almost two months of searching for the killer, but he had always managed to stay one step ahead of them. Fear seized me at the thought of him slipping away once more; I wanted Ava to have a life free of paranoia and worry, and I would do anything to make sure she got it.

*How many times would Ava escape before he caught her for good?*

I knew the killer was likely enraged that she had slipped through his fingers again. I hoped his rage would cause him to slip up and make mistakes. Mistakes I could use to find him.

*But when I found him, what would happen to Ava and me? Would I stay? Would that even be something she wanted?*

My heart pounded erratically as I realized that my feelings for Ava were no longer a result of obligation but something far more powerful. Fear and exhilaration coursed through me like an electric current, further intensifying when our eyes met. Nothing else mattered more than my promise to protect her at all costs - even if it meant giving my own life.

“Has she come out at all?”

“No, Sir.” Agent Young responded.

“Go ahead and take a break. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Yes, Sir.” He nodded in appreciation and made his way towards the house.

I opened the glass door and secured it behind me.

The sun shone through the glass panes, filling the space with a golden warmth that radiated across everything, making it feel alive. I was astonished by how idyllic it all looked, nothing like I had ever seen before. The atmosphere

was so calming and tranquil as I meandered through the labyrinth of plants and shrubs.

I gazed in awe at Ava's figure. Her form was silhouetted by the sun, with jean overalls hugging her curves and a white T-shirt that clung to her body like a second skin. Her hair was tied back with a red bandana but still framed her face as if it were an artwork. Sweat glistened on her tanned skin, making me want to reach out and touch her. My heartbeat faster when I spotted the black bra peeking through her wet shirt.

She was breathtakingly beautiful, radiating a soft golden glow that could only be described as angelic. The gentle smile on her face spoke of devotion as she pushed fresh soil into a cream-colored ceramic pot – clearly, this was her passion. I could see how much love she held for these little plants and the time she dedicated to them. A wooden table stood close to her, adorned with various-sized pots, while Sleep Token's *The Summoning* echoed through the air.

“Ava,” I shouted above the blaring music.

She glanced in my direction and smiled.

“Hey,” she said before setting down the scissors and turning to face me, her back resting against the table's edge.

Our eyes met, and the air crackled around us. My desire to touch her skin increased with every second that passed.

“Everything okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah.”

“I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up.”

“It's ok. I needed to get some work done out here, and if you were there, I would probably never get out of bed.”

“Are you implying that I'm a distraction?”

A mischievous smirk crossed my lips as I said it, and I moved closer until our faces were just inches apart. Her gaze lingered on me, filled with longing. Dirt coated her cheeks,

and I noticed her chest rising faster than normal as I moved toward her.

“A good distraction,” she replied with a wink.

I leaned in then and kissed her softly, moans escaping from her lips as they parted slightly, inviting me to go further. With one arm wrapped around her waist, I pulled her closer while our tongues intertwined. Her body quivered beneath my touch, sending shivers down my spine.

The glass walls of the greenhouse had condensation dripping down them. I enjoyed being secluded inside, sheltered away from the outside world. She wrapped her arms around my neck and returned my kiss eagerly, and I pressed my hardness against her. I slowly undressed her, trailing kisses down her neck as I moved down her body. I cupped her breasts and kissed them tenderly, licking and teasing her nipples until they were taut and erect. My hands moved lower, exploring her curves and teasing her skin.

She pulled me closer, pressing her body against mine as my hands moved lower, tracing circles around her core. I teased her with my fingers, pushing her closer to the edge of pleasure. She let out a soft cry as I brushed against her sensitive core. I licked the salt from her skin, biting at her thighs until she squirmed beneath me. I twisted my tongue around her clit, and she grabbed my head and pushed it down with an insistence that sent fire through my veins. She moaned louder and louder, her grip on my hair tightening as I buried my face between her legs and lapped her sweet nectar. She tightened her hands on my hair and called my name, and I continued to toy with her clit, rolling it between my tongue and teeth. As she begged for more, I responded by pressing my mouth to hers and pushing my tongue past her lips. She wrapped her legs around me, pushing her hips up to meet mine.

“Make love to me, James,” she begged.

I laid her down in the soft dirt and unbuttoned my pants. She impatiently pulled them down below my ass. I entered her fast and unforgiving, determined to give her what

she begged for. She moaned and gripped my back, her fingernails scratching my skin. I moved with an urgency trying not to come too quickly, but I was already tingling, and I knew I wouldn't last long.

The heat of the greenhouse, mixed with the heat of our bodies and the taste of her honey lips, was intoxicating. I felt myself about to climax and grabbed her tighter, wanting to push her as far as possible. With a few more thrusts, I released a guttural yell of satisfaction and spilled my hot seed deep inside of her.

We both lay there still, panting and trembling in the sauna-like atmosphere. My heart raced and my breathing shallow as I gazed into her eyes, sparkles of light refracting off them like diamond shards. As raindrops tapped rhythmically against the glass ceiling above us, she snuggled closer to me and smiled; her spell over me complete.

“What spell have you cast on me?” I whispered, pressing my lips tenderly against her forehead.

“What do you mean?”

I propped myself up on my elbows and stared at her.

“When I am inside you, the whole world disappears. All I see is you. I can't explain it. All I know is that when I'm with you, I feel complete. Nothing else matters.”

She blushed and looked back at me.

“I feel the same way.”

“I won't let anything happen to you,” I promised her.

“I know.” She smiled, her eyes shining with trust.

I gripped her hand, and we both got up from the floor. Once dressed, we stumbled outside into the dewy morning air, surrounded by the smell of newly cut grass and rain. She was caked with dirt and sweat, desperate for a shower. Knowing that discretion was necessary, she hurried towards the house while I waited patiently before following. As I heard the hot water beat against her body, I made breakfast to distract

myself. Once she came downstairs, I decided to have the conversation I knew would hurt her.

“Colin’s funeral is tomorrow at 6 pm. I whispered heavily, feeling a deep pain in my stomach at the thought of her having to say goodbye to someone she cared so deeply about. I wished desperately to take away some of her guilt.

“Ok,” she replied with a voice quivering from emotion as tears filled her glassy eyes. My heart ached for her; if only words could be enough to console her. I desperately tried to show her it wasn’t her fault and that I would be right there with her if she wanted, but she seemed lost inside herself for the rest of the day.

I felt helpless and wished that I could take away her pain.

# THIRTY

AVA

The setting sun draped its last blaze of light upon the cemetery, illuminating a ghostly glow onto the solemn funeral service. The air was thick and heavy with emotion and grief as family and friends stood around Colin's casket. Their faces were wet with tears as they shared stories of Colin, while the priest's words of comfort offered assurance of life beyond death in a moment where hope seemed lost.

His casket was adorned with white roses and red carnations that glistened in the fading light, like a symbol of beauty amidst the sadness. As pallbearers prepared to carry him away, his family followed in a river of sorrowful cries, struggling to accept that this was their final goodbye.

The searing pain in my chest was almost unbearable as I watched his loved ones mourn him. His fellow law enforcement officers lined up in uniform and paid tribute to him with a salute, but all I could feel was the blinding guilt for being responsible for his death.

My choices had led me down this path, and with every condemning glare from his friends, I knew they were aware that I'd been there when he died. The memories of my prideful behavior to show James that someone else wanted me and my selfishness to forget about him still echoed in my mind—my recklessness was the cause of his demise.

With a heavy heart, I sat immobile as the murderer brutally took Colin's life. Regret was etched into every fiber of my being, realizing he would still be alive if only I'd gone home that night. To those left behind, there was no way to make up for what occurred, and nothing would ever fill the void his absence created. All I could do was accept the consequences of my actions and learn how to live with the grief and guilt that had suddenly become a part of me.



The service at the cemetery was painfully brief, a constant reminder of how life can be cruelly taken away in an instant. As the casket lowered into the ground, my throat clenched, a lump forming as I tried to hold back tears already spilling from my eyes.

The mourners slowly dispersed, and I stayed rooted in my spot as I said one last goodbye to the man who had once been my world. But now, my love for him had changed; it was no longer passionate but filled with respect, admiration, and guilt. I watched the casket disappear beneath the ground and felt the total weight of my grief crash into me.

James, Everett, and Sarah waited for me in the car - they had known enough to give me space - but my heart felt too heavy to move until I was alone at the cemetery.

Slowly, reluctantly, I walked away.

The next few days blurred together as James continued to slip away without any explanation. Whenever I asked where he had been, he just said not to worry and there was nothing to fear. Yet every time he returned home, his face seemed worn out and drained of emotion.

Some nights we would lay together in silence, his body warm beside me while he drifted asleep. Other nights, he slept before I could even whisper my love for him. I stayed up late on those nights, reading by moonlight as agents patrolled the grounds outside our window. I couldn't help but worry that something was terribly wrong, and no one was telling me what. When I asked Everett or Sarah, they wouldn't look at me when they answered, but I knew enough about them to know they were hiding something. They told me not to worry, and James and the rest of the team were just busy trying to find the killer before someone else died.

It was one of those evenings when James slipped off to sleep without a word or a touch to me. As I sat by the window, watching the full moon cast its luminous rays over the lawn, I watched him lay still on his back with a peacefulness that seemed to seep from his pores. His tattooed chest rises and falls deeply into a peaceful sleep.

Setting down my book, I got up and quietly made my way over to him. I softly crawled to where he lay and straddled him. My hand crept under the waistband of his underwear and gripped his stiff shaft.

His eyes opened, dark and smoldering, his lips curling as he savored the feeling of my tight grip. I let his hands roam hungrily over my body, pulling me closer, His breathing quickened as my hands touched him inside his underwear, and with a few strokes of my hand, his cock pulsed against me.

His hands found my hips and pulled me closer as I leaned down to press my lips against his. In one swift motion, I slid off my underwear and positioned myself atop him, feeling my arousal mix with his own. His eyes were fiery with desire as I held him tightly in my grasp and started to move up and down, our bodies melting together.

His eyes were heavy with lust as he looked up, and all I could do was gasp. All hesitation vanished as his hands moved to my waist and guided me faster and faster until our bodies melded together. My heart hammered in my chest, and I felt my orgasm hovering ever so close.

I leaned forward, my dark hair falling around my shoulders as I increased my pace. My own breaths came out in short, shallow bursts. My body quivered and shook as I felt my climax coming. I let out a loud cry, and he joined me, releasing his hot cum inside me, moaning and panting as it spilled deep inside me. I opened my eyes and looked into his, feeling like I could see into his soul. Everything else faded away, and all that mattered was us. I collapsed on top of him, entwined in his arms.

“That was amazing.” He breathed.

“Yes, it was.” I grinned.

“I don’t know what got into you, but you can wake me up like that whenever you want.”

“That good, huh?” I teased.

“Phenomenal. The best sex I’ve ever had.” He turned towards me, rested his head on his hand, and pulled me over,

planting a soft, lingering kiss on my lips. I smiled, ran my hand through his hair, and settled into his arm.

The next morning, a soft knock on my door woke me. I rolled over and nudged James, “Someone’s knocking.”

James jumped out of bed and pulled his sweatpants on as I rolled over in exhaustion. With a deep sigh, he opened the door to reveal Everett standing there, a smirk plastered across his face.

“Good morning, sunshine. You look like you had a good night.”

James groaned and glanced back at me apologetically as Everett stepped into the room with coffee.

Everett fist-bumped me and snickered, ” You dirty dogs. Sarah owes me 50 bucks, by the way.” His tone was full of amusement.

“You bet on us?” asked James incredulously.

Everett nodded proudly, “I bet on you guys fucking like wild animals and not letting anyone else sleep. Like seriously, I thought I was a machine, but I ain’t got nothing on you two.”

“Oh my gosh.” I rolled my eyes.

“Also, I will not turn down a chance to win money by participating in a wager for money on sexual relations.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Is there anything you need, Everett?” James asked, donning a bored expression.

“Nope, I just wanted to check on you lovebirds. See if you need anything,” Everett said.

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m fine, thank you.

“Ok,” Everett said, shrugging. “Just wanted to say hi.” He looked around the room, sniffing loudly before adding, “It smells like sex in here, by the way.”

“Ok, time to go.” James pushed him out of the room. Everett laughed loudly as he was shoved out of the room. James closed the door and locked it. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He means well.”

Yeah, he does.”

“I need to run into town. Do you want to come with me? James asked. “We can get breakfast or something if you want.”

“Did you just ask me on a breakfast date, Agent Buchanan?”

He gave me a boyish grin and came toward me, kneeling on the bed before me and leaning in. My heartbeat quickened. The way he looked at me like he could devour me left me breathless.

His face was inches away from mine, and I could feel his breath on my skin. He moved closer, and his lips brushed against mine. I tilted my face up and let him kiss me. His kiss was passionate and tender at the same time. I felt my body tremble as I felt the warmth of his touch, his fingers brushing against my thigh as he slowly lifted my nightgown up.

He pushed me gently back on the bed and spread my legs apart. His lips kissed the inside of my thighs as he trailed kisses down and buried his face in me. His tongue flicked my clit, teasing me, and he pushed a finger inside, performing a figure-eight motion. My thighs were dripping wet, a combination of his saliva and my arousal. I cried out in pleasure as his tongue worked its magic, my body trembling with each touch. I felt myself creeping closer to the edge with every lick. When he started sucking, I couldn’t stop my orgasm, and I came hard, arching my back and crying out his name.

He grinned up at me, his face glistening with my cum, licking his lips and tasting my pleasure. My body was still trembling from the intensity of my orgasm, and I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment when I realized how loud I had climaxed and the volume at which I called his name.

But he wasn't done with me. He flipped me over, yanked my hips back toward him, and entered me in one thrust, pushing himself deep inside me, further than he had gone before. As soon as he started thrusting into me again, I knew I wouldn't last long. James started fucking me fast and hard. His fingers dug into my hips, causing me to scream out in pain—but pain that I relished right now. I tried to keep myself from climaxing, but the familiar wave of pleasure consumed me. When James started kissing my neck, his own moans in my ear, I couldn't hold it anymore. I pressed my face down, my moans muffled by the mattress as I came again. James let out a guttural groan, his orgasm following mine.

“You feel so fucking good when I am inside you.” He whispered against my cheek.

“I don't know where you've been all my life, but please don't go.”

He looked at me with a serious expression, “I'm not going anywhere.”

James took me to Voila, a breakfast place next to my plant shop. The restaurant was tight and cramped but cozy, with ivy creeping up its walls like veins coursing through an arm. We ordered our food and talked for hours on end, delving into stories of our time before everything changed. His voice filled with excitement as he recounted his dangerous escapades as a Navy Seal—the friends he made, the places he visited, the people he lost. Every word that left his lips tugged at my heartstrings, and it warmed me to see him smiling when he spoke of his antics with his trusty second-in-command, Brock.

Brock was James' Bravo 1. He glowed with pride when he talked about them as if they were an immortal duo. He told me stories of their daring adventures that captivated me, each vivid detail sending goosebumps down my arms. I watched his face light up with nostalgia, and it felt like I was getting a glimpse into a part of himself that he kept hidden from the world. Brock had also left the Navy and joined the FBI when James did, but he had been in the Miami office for the past eight years.

“When this is over, I know he would love to meet you,” James told me. His face lit up as he thought about seeing his old friend again.

I loved seeing him smile. It was almost impossible not to feel his happiness when he was happy. “I would love to meet him.”

He looked at me with reverence. He smiled like he was preparing to say something else, but his phone rang. He answered. “Hey, Chief.” He mouthed the word *sorry*. “I’m in town, so I can be there in a few minutes. Ok, see you soon.”

He hung up, put his phone in his pocket, and looked back at me with a sad smile. “I’m sorry, but I need to meet Chief Brash.”

“Chief Brash? Everything ok?”

“I’m sure it is, but it’s urgent.” He waved the waitress down for the bill and threw down way more cash than our meals cost. “You can ride along, or I can have one of the other agents drive you back home.”

“I’ll come along.”

He nodded, and we left the restaurant.

When we got to the car, he entered an address on his GPS. He drove us to an industrial section of old steel mills on the outskirts of the city. As we arrived, there were several police cars with flashing lights. They had put crime scene tape around the entrance to one of the mills. I watched Everett and Sarah pull up in another SUV, and James unbuckled as Sarah got into the back seat.

“Hey, Ava.” She greeted me cheerfully.

“I am going to head in and see what is going on. You stay out here with Sarah, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Wait, what is going on, James? Why are you meeting Chief Brash here? What aren’t you telling me?”

He didn’t say a word, but his message was painfully clear. There had been another murder, and the FBI was here because of the killer—who was hunting for me.

“Just stay here, Ava. Let me figure out what is going on, and I’ll be back.”

His words were strained, and I knew there was another murder, but he wouldn’t tell me. He didn’t want me to take the blame because he knew I would. His face revealed his regret for not telling me what he had been up to all this time—all those times he had vanished without explanation.

Anger boiled just below my skin because he told me not to worry, but now another girl was dead inside that mill because I was still alive.

# THIRTY-ONE

JAMES

I walked away from the car, and I knew by looking at Ava's face that she was unhappy with my decision not to give her any information. I didn't want to keep any secrets from her, but I didn't want her to take the blame for what was happening, and I knew she would. She would blame herself for this girl's death.

Whatever happened, I would protect her. Even if that meant she was angry at me.

She had lived through enough and didn't need to bear the burden of another death onto herself.

The officer standing at the mill doorway nodded and lifted the crime scene tape to let me inside. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the scene before me. The mill was dilapidated and smelled of mildew and decay. I could not distinguish whether the smell was animal, human, or a combination of both.

The air was thick and humid. It was difficult to breathe. I coughed, the copper smell of blood overtaking my nose. I stepped closer to where a naked woman's body was suspended from a chain above her head. Her toes barely touched the dirty ground, and the ground was littered with broken glass and coagulated blood. Her fingernails were broken and dirty, and the edges were ragged like she had tried to claw her way out of a tomb. Her skin was pale and waxy and had a greenish tint to it. The skin on the left side of her face was filleted off in inch-by-inch strips, then meticulously peeled away. She was almost unrecognizable from the torture she had endured.

The further my eyes traveled down, the deeper her skin had been peeled, exposing muscle and bone. The evidence at the crime scene suggested that whoever killed her had become increasingly violent and intended to cause her immense



suffering before her death. Her eyes were swollen and red, and a trail of tears ran down her dirt-stained cheek. Her body was covered in cuts and bruises, dried blood covering the flesh he hadn't taken from her.

On her thigh, I noticed the familiar red angry "S." She had been bound and gagged, and marks on her wrists and ankles indicated she had been tied up before being moved to the mill.

The medical examiner determined that the cause of death had been severe blood loss due to multiple stab wounds and injuries. There were a couple of footprints that did not match the victim, as she was barefoot, and there were no signs that she had been wearing shoes.

The decomposition of her body and the presence of flies revealed that she had been killed recently. There was an air of urgency, with the familiar taste of lack of remorse for his violence.

This sadistic son-of-a-bitch was getting reckless.

*Why else would he kill her in a place anyone could stumble across?*

There was no way he had not left DNA evidence, not with this much violence. Every other victim was killed in whatever house of horrors he felt safe in and transported to different areas to be found. Most of the areas were high drug traffic areas, places where he probably felt confident that no one would remember him being there. Places with immense crime scene contamination, so even if they did find DNA, it would be so trampled on and corrupted that they could never get a solid match.

Chief Brash recoiled in disgust, his handkerchief providing little protection against the reeking odor of decomposition. His eyes widened in horror as I went over my assessment of the body, confirming what I already knew deep in my gut - that this was the young woman who had been missing for days.

“We will have to positively ID her through dental records. However, comparing the right side of her face to her picture, I believe this is the missing college girl, Lacey Michaels. Forensics has already completed evidence collection around the body. But we won’t stop here, and we’ll comb through every inch of this wasteland until we find something that’ll help us catch this son-of-a-bitch.”

“He chose this place for that reason. He knew there would be mounds of contaminated evidence to sift through. However, I hope he was careless enough to leave a strand of hair or that his skin is under her nails.” I continued.

Everett entered and observed the whole scene before speaking. “Sorry, Boss. I had a phone call.”

“Everything ok?”

“Yeah. It’s just my mom. She’s freaking out because her dog slipped out the door and hasn’t returned yet. But a neighbor brought him home while we were on the phone.”

I was about to respond when I heard the loud popping of gunshots outside. My heart raced as we all instinctively ducked for cover. We quickly realized that the bullets were not directed at us.

“Stay here, and contact dispatch and tell them we need backup now!” I yelled at Chief Brash.

Everett and I moved in sync to the entrance. The steel hinges groaned as we opened the door, and we cautiously stepped outside. Two local cops hid behind a police car, returning fire toward the tree line. Fire lights flashed in short bursts from the barrels of both guns as they aimed toward the still-darkened woods on the edge of town. We took cover behind the coroner’s van, and I carefully peered around the edge to assess the scene playing in front of me.

My only thought was on Ava. I had to get to her.

# THIRTY-TWO

AVA

There was some movement in the corner of my eye, and when I looked, I thought I saw someone in the tree line. I squinted my eyes, and there *he* was. The stringy brown hair, the grotesque smirk, the sweaty skin, and he was staring right at me.

He started walking slowly through the field towards us with something long in his hand. I focused my eyes on what he was holding...It was an assault rifle.

“Sarah, *he’s* here.” I stammered.

“What?” She asked, looking up from her phone.

“He’s right there,” I pointed out.

Her eyes followed my finger, and her jaw dropped. He raised the rifle and pointed it at us.

“Ava, get down now.” She yelled.

I ducked for cover. The sound of bullets filled the air as he opened fire. Bullets hit the car, breaking the windshield, and glass poured down around me. I held my arms over my head and screamed. The noise was deafening. There was yelling and returning fire, drawing gunfire away from our car. My ears rang. My door opened, and I jumped back, afraid it was him.

“Get out and stay low.” Sarah pulled me out of the car and used her body to shield me as she led me to the back of the car. “Stay down. When I tell you, I want you to run to my suburban and get out of here.”

“No, Sarah, I’m not leaving you.”

“Ava, yes, you are. You drive until you get back to the house, and you don’t look back.”

The two cops, engaged in a shooting battle, called for backup on their radios. I saw James and Everett come out of the mill and duck behind the coroner's van. James looked at me helplessly. We both knew it was too dangerous for him to run past two cars to get to me.

A loud explosion sounded to the left of me, sending cops flying through the air. The heat sent me ducking for cover. Sarah covered me with her body, debris landing around us. The gunshots stopped briefly, and I couldn't see James through the burning flames and smoke.

Sarah peered carefully around the car.

"I'm going to lead him away from you, and when I do, you run like hell."

She squeezed my hand and jumped up before I could say anything. She aimed her gun at the killer and fired off several rounds before he returned fire. She dodged and ran, drawing his attention away from me.

"Now, Ava!" Sarah screamed, her voice shrill with urgency. She shoved me forward before turning in the direction of the killer. She unleashed a barrage of bullets at him, but he was too quick and returned fire with a vengeance. Bullets whizzed through the air as she ducked in and out of cover, desperately trying to get away from him and draw his attention away from me.

I stumbled to my feet and ran towards the suburban. I was almost there when I heard a scream. I turned to look, and Sarah had been shot. She fell to the ground, gripping her leg. She had fallen between two cars, and I couldn't see anyone else coming to our rescue.

*Did he kill James and Everett?*

Several bodies were littered across the ground, but no one shot at the killer anymore. He stood up from behind another car and walked towards Sarah. She groaned in pain, trying to crawl toward the weapon she had dropped.

I watched in horror as the killer walked towards Sarah. He raised his gun, pointing it at her, smiling.

I yelled at him to stop, but he ignored me. I ran as fast as my feet could carry me and dove for the pistol a few feet from a dead cop. I felt my finger curl around the trigger, and with shaking hands, I fired two shots, missing him both times but gaining his full attention. He ducked, looking at me in surprise, and I fired another shot, missing his head by mere inches. However, my actions caused him to drop his gun. He cocked his head to the side, hesitating briefly before ducking and sprinting toward the tree line.

“Ava!” James shouted my name, limping toward me with Everett leaning on him. I looked in the direction the killer was running and then looked back at James. His voice begged me to stop, but at that moment, I only wanted retribution for those he killed in cold blood. I wouldn’t be the reason anyone else died, so I turned away from them and ran faster than ever after the killer - if I didn’t make it out alive today, then neither would he.

“No, Ava!” He cried after me.

I rushed into the tree line and saw him running ahead of me. I jumped over logs and weaved in and out of trees. My heart pounded, and my lungs felt like they were about to burst, but I kept running. I shot at him, bullets ricocheting off trees near him. I was a terrible shot, but I hoped I got lucky and hit him. He disappeared into a wall of foliage, and I blindly followed in pursuit. I crashed through the underbrush into a clearing at the edge of a cliff.

He was standing at the edge of a cliff. I could hear water rushing from the river below. I kept my gun pointed at him, panting to catch my breath. I stepped forward and aimed my gun at him, my hands shaking violently from the strain of my run.

He turned around and smiled wickedly at me.

I was done hiding.

“Finally, some alone time,” he hissed, smiling like the Cheshire cat.

His white shirt was covered in sweat and dirt, and his jeans were tucked into brown hiking boots. His greasy hair was pulled back into a bun, with several stray strands hanging down.

My heart raced with adrenaline and fear. I knew how stupid it was that I ran after him by myself. But it was the only thing I could think of to do after seeing the absolute devastation he caused back at the mill. I didn't know what to do when I caught up with him but seeing him feet away made my skin crawl. My legs hurt, and my lungs burned, but I would make him pay for what he did.

“This ends now.”

“Look around; there's no one here to protect you anymore.” His voice was low and menacing. “And you, little *lamb*, just walked into my den.”

“I'm done listening to you.” I pressed the trigger, but no bullet came out.

I clicked it a couple of times, but the magazine was empty.

“Fuck.”

He pulled a knife from a sheath on his waistband and walked towards me. I stumbled backward and looked around for anything I could use against him. I threw the pistol at him, and he dodged it effortlessly. Fear crawled up my spine as I scrambled for something to defend myself with. He lunged at me with the knife, but I blocked him with the branch. I pushed him back by swinging the branch back and forth. His eyes burned with hatred, but he made no move to retaliate as if relishing in the moment.

There was nowhere to run.

If I turned around, he would catch me and probably stab me. He slowly advanced on me, a sneer on his lips. I backed away, tightening my fists around the wooden branch in my hands, sweating profusely in sheer panic.

I had to find a way out of this.

“Ava?” James yelled, breaking through the brush with his weapon drawn.

James fired at the killer. One of the bullets pierced through his shoulder, and he stumbled back and fell. The cliff edge was behind him, and the last thing I saw was a rush of white and blue clothes falling over it. We both rushed to the edge and looked down, but he disappeared into the water below.

James stood there, rage and fear contorting his features. His hands balled up into fists as he shouted into the radio, “I need air support and a team to comb the river for his body. Bring the dogs. If he survived the fall, I want him found today.” He ordered.

He turned towards me, his eyes blazing with fury. He grabbed my arms and inspected my body for injuries, gritting out each word.

“I’m ok, James. I’m not hurt.”

“What the hell were you thinking going after him? He could have killed you. He would have if I had gotten here any later than I did. Damn it, Ava! What the fuck?” He yelled angrily.

My heart raced in fear at his reaction, and I stammered an apology.

He shook his head, his anger fading away, and pulled me close.

“I was so scared when I saw you go after him,” he whispered brokenly into my hair. “The thought of losing you...I can’t bear it.” His voice cracked with emotion.

Wrapping his strong arms around me tightly, he kissed my forehead and held me up. My legs felt like jello, and I clung to him, trembling violently while he murmured apologies and soothing words.

“Let’s get you home.”

He led me through the woods. Multiple cops and agents were combing through the woods with dogs passing us.

We made it to the car, and he drove me home. His grip on my hand never loosened, and I welcomed the warmth that came with his touch; somehow, it was calming after all the chaos that had unfolded. There was so much chatter and movement, and I felt tired. He told me that Sarah and Everett were ok but that several officers had sustained life-threatening injuries and had not survived. James tried to tell me it wasn't my fault, but I could feel the guilt slowly suffocating me. Every step away from the car felt like a walk towards death - all those people died because of me.

*How many more would follow suit in this endless game of hide-and-seek?*

*How many more people had to die protecting me?*

*Because of me?*

As I exited the car, I didn't wait for him to follow. I walked through the front door and up to my room, pulled off my sweaty, blood-splattered clothes, and took a cold shower. I crawled into bed, closed my eyes, and let exhaustion consume me.

Several more days passed, and to be honest, I spent most of my time drinking and reading.

Not because I couldn't leave but because I didn't want to.

I was sick and tired.

Tired of games.

The waiting.

The moments passed too slowly.

The guilt I was riddled with.

The only way I could get out of my own head was through a bottle of whiskey or wine. Or whatever else I could get my hands on.

I could tell James disapproved of my methods but didn't say anything. He filled my liquor cabinet when my supplies dwindled.



Sarah was ok but on light duty after the gunshot wound to her leg. Thankfully, the bullet pierced right through and missed any bones or arteries. She insisted on staying on the case but was strictly on house duty, or what I like to call babysitter duty. She reported directly to James if I left the house. And because I felt guilty about what had happened, I didn't push my luck and stayed inside unless James was around, which was not very often. He would go to bed late and wake up early. I longed for the intimacy we once shared, and when I tried to get a spark of that back, he shut me out coldly with excuses of exhaustion. His rejection sunk like a stone in my stomach, and as each second passed, it felt like I was discarded piece by piece. Every ounce of self-respect disappeared as I drifted further away into a stupor of alcohol. I no longer felt anything but the murky haze surrounding me; not even the judgmental glares from other agents mattered to me anymore. All I wanted was for all the thoughts clattering in my mind to disappear.

# THIRTY-THREE

JAMES

I had been running around like a chicken with his head cut off. What happened at the mill was a big deal. There were multiple fatalities and injuries.

When I heard gunshots outside the mill, my only thought was to get to her. I had to protect her. It was pure chaos when Everett and I emerged, gunfire blazing, bodies littering the ground, yelling and screaming. It was like being in Afghanistan again.

I was not scared for myself. I was terrified because I knew Ava was out there in the middle of the scene.

I couldn't see her.

Every time we inched forward, more bullets ricocheted by our heads. We covered and ducked and moved between cars and pulled the injured deputies out of the crossfire. It seemed like there were multiple gunmen at first. However, I realized that the noises I heard were from a semi-automatic assault rifle and the service weapons of the deputies.

My heart skipped a beat as Ava stood up and fearlessly fired at the gunman, her aim steady and unshaken. The explosion that followed nearly knocked me off my feet, but I climbed to my feet and raced after her, not daring to take my eyes off her for even a second. I stumbled over rocks and careened into tree branches as I sprinted through the field, desperately searching for a sign of where she had gone.

My chest tightened as I heard a male's voice in the distance. I had to reach Ava before he did. I pushed myself even faster until I finally burst through the trees into a clearing. Standing in front of me was the man who had been tormenting the woman I loved. His long, brown hair was thrown back in a bun, disheveled from his exertion. His skin was sweaty and red with rage. Yet despite his rage-filled black

eyes and twisted grin, there was something strangely average about him that made him all the more terrifying. Without hesitation, I threw myself forward between Ava and this monster, ready to do whatever it took to protect her.

I could see Ava standing to my right. She held a branch, ready to swing at him.

When the killer met my eyes, they widened in surprise, or fear, at my arrival. I fired my weapon without hesitation. I didn't expect him to survive when he disappeared over the cliff. The fall alone should have killed him. If not, the water's rapid current should.

But it didn't.

*How could I tell Ava that we found no body in the water but instead found footprints leading out over two miles down the river, disappearing into the thick woods?*

The dogs had tracked him to a road, where I assumed he hitched a ride because his trail ended there. This demented fuck was still alive. He was given another chance to come after her. And we had fucked up again.

Even though we were ambushed that day, it wouldn't matter to the superiors. They would hold him accountable for it. For bringing her to an active crime scene and allowing the killer to escape.

*Again.*

My inability to catch him put me on the radar of suits. A place I had never ended up in...*until now*. A place that meant I was about to get my ass chewed. Or worse, taken off the case immediately. I had to make sure that didn't happen. I couldn't leave Ava here alone or with some staunch ass-kisser that wouldn't protect her the way I would. Or anyone else on my team, for that matter.

# THIRTY-FOUR

AVA

Javier Martinez was James' boss. I heard that name spoken many times over the next few hours, mostly with disdain spilling out of the mouths that spoke about him. After several cops were killed and Sarah was injured, he decided to step down from his throne to come out to Harborview and reassess the situation personally.

I knew from the tension around the house that this *reassessment* would not be pleasant, least of all for James. But he wouldn't talk to me. Not the way he used to.

He was quiet. Observing me. He thought I wouldn't notice. I pretended to be asleep when he came in at night. I knew he was waiting for me to fall asleep, avoiding me.

I lay there, my mind reeling. I wanted to say many words to him but stayed silent.

He wrapped his arm around me, and his breathing steadied. While he slept, I cried. I hid my puffy eyes from him, composing myself before going downstairs. If he noticed, he didn't say anything. So, I continued to drink my weight in alcohol and watched everyone silently.

I was sitting in my kitchen at my breakfast bar, looking out the window at the lake as the sun rose. James came in and stood silently next to me.

"Hey," he said.

His voice was a sucker punch to my heart, and tears stung my eyes as I turned to face him.

"Hey," I responded without looking at him. My curt response dripped with hatred, the hurt from all his avoidance bubbling up inside me.

"Can we talk?"

I snorted in ridicule. “Oh, now you want to talk. You’ve avoided being with me for days, and now you want to talk? Like nothing happened?” I spat out.

He stepped closer, but I backed away from him.

“Ava.” He sighed and ran his hands over his face before slowly sinking down to sit across from me, trying to grab my hand, but I ripped it away from him.

“You want to talk, so talk,” I demanded through gritted teeth.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” he replied softly.

I felt angry at him. He avoided me for days and then asked if I was okay, so nonchalant. Like the past two months meant nothing to him.

“I can’t do this right now.” I gritted my teeth and stormed out of the kitchen.

Enraged even further at his insensitivity, I stormed out of the kitchen and stumbled out into the cold morning air without direction until my feet led me to my boathouse. I yanked the cover off with one swift tug and threw it on the dock.

“Ava.” James followed.

James grabbed my arm, pulling me around so that we were face-to-face. He held me in place as he pleaded softly, “Please don’t shut me out?”

“Shut you out? Me? Shut you out? Where the fuck have you been, James? Ever since the mill, you’ve avoided me. You avoid talking to me. Avoid looking at me. Avoid touching me. I have waited up every night for you. But when you come in, I pretend to be asleep because I know that’s the only way, you’ll share a bed with me. The only way I get to feel you is to pretend to be asleep so that you’ll wrap your arms around me. How fucking pathetic, right?”

I jerked my arm out of his grip, fury, and agony coursing through my veins. He was still trying to wrap me in

his arms, but I pushed him away with a primal roar. “But now you want to talk? Fuck you, James. I am not a fucking plaything for you to discard. I am a fucking human being. I deserve better than this.”

He gazed at me, eyes wide. His face twisted with anguish, and tears pooled in his eyes.

“You’re right,” he whispered brokenly.

“You’re right? That’s all you have to say?”

I searched his eyes for anything to make the crushing pain in my heart disappear. His gaze held mine with a tenderness that only increased the anguish rippling through me. He tenderly rubbed the back of his neck before closing his eyes tightly and sighing heavily. When he opened them again, they were full of grief as he looked at me sadly.

“I’ve been pulled from your case,” he said gravely, his voice trembling with emotion.

“Effective immediately, I am ordered to return to New York. The whole team is pulled from the case. After the mill, my boss said the agency couldn’t afford to lose anyone else for —.”

He stopped his sentence abruptly, looking at me forlornly.

I knew what he meant. So many victims were left in my wake. People died defending me. I poison everyone around me. I couldn’t blame his boss for worrying about further losses.

“For me,” I said quietly, understanding all too well what had happened. He slowly nodded before turning away from me, and his shoulders slumped in defeat.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air as I glanced away in shame; I was poison to everyone around me.

“Then why are you still here?” My voice trembled as I spoke these words and brushed away the tear sliding down my cheek. “You’ve said what you needed to say. Just leave me alone.”

He stepped toward me and paused for a moment. He looked deep into my eyes.

“I can’t.” He said, his voice soft. “That’s the thing. I can’t leave you alone, Ava. From the moment I kissed your lips, you held me captive. Whenever I am inside you, I feel like we are the only two people in the universe. You are the moon in my darkness. When I am not near you, I am empty.”

He wrapped his hand around my neck and pulled my face to his. Our foreheads touched, and he continued, his voice gentle.

“I am so sorry for making you feel like you didn’t matter to me. Quite the opposite, actually. You mean more to me than anyone else in this world. I almost lost you twice, Ava. Every second of every day, I am terrified I will lose you. I can’t lose you. I won’t survive it. I need you now and forever.”

I stared into his eyes, my heart aching with love. Tears fell out of my eyes. This time, I didn’t wipe them away. I placed my hands on either side of his face and kissed him softly.

“I am *yours*.” I breathed out between kisses.

He brushed away my tears and claimed my lips in a desperate kiss that threatened to consume us both.

He was mine, and I was his.

We were the only two people that existed at this moment. His eyes burned with a passionate fire as he kissed me, claiming my lips in an urgent desire that threatened to consume us both.

He stared intensely at me, and I could feel my heartbeat quicken under his gaze. His hands melted into my sides, sending an electric shock through my veins with every touch. He pressed his body against mine, and I felt as if my skin was on fire from the heat radiating off of him. He crashed his lips hungrily against mine as he lifted me off my feet, wrapping my legs around his waist before laying me down onto the boat’s soft cushions.

His hands traveled up and down my body as he gently kissed my neck, sending shivers of pleasure washing over me. He explored my body as he moved his lips slowly down my neck and chest. I felt my body melt into his, becoming one, and I gasped as his hands moved lower, sliding my pants down with ease.

His fingers swiftly entered me, and I moaned in delight as he moved in and out of me with increasing momentum. My inner walls quivered around his fingers as I soared to the peak of pleasure. My body quivered beneath him as an irresistible wave of ecstasy pulsed through me. He continued pushing me further and further until he suddenly stopped, pulling his fingers out of me.

With urgency, he quickly pulled off his pants and entered me deeply. I moaned as he filled me, clinging onto his back and pushing him deeper inside me. My legs wrapped tightly around his waist as I clung to him for dear life. His thrusts became more frantic now, each movement harder than the one before it. His mouth devoured mine as the wild rocking of the boat moved us together. My breath came out in shallow gasps as our bodies moved together.

I trembled. "James, oh my God. I can't hold it."

I begged him not to stop.

"Wait for me, baby." He whispered against my mouth.

I dug my nails into his back, warmth burning in my abdomen. He slammed into me faster and faster.

"Come with me, Ava." He growled.

He groaned, and his grip tightened on me as he came. I came undone, my body shaking as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me. I screamed his name as I shuddered in his arms. This was the most intense orgasm I ever had. His hot seed poured into me until he collapsed, exhausted. He stayed inside me until I felt him soften.

"Holy shit." He panted. "That was fucking amazing."

I laughed, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. "Yes, it was," I murmured.



After my breathing slowed, I turned to face him, resting my head on my hand. His eyes held mine for a few moments, a hint of a smile on his lips. He brushed a few strands of hair away from my face, his touch warm against my skin.

He leaned in and kissed me again, this time a little longer. “What happens to me now?”

He smiled, his lips curving into a mischievous smirk. “That’s up to you,” he said.

His hand moved to cup my cheek, and I closed my eyes, leaning into the warmth of his touch.

“I’m serious, James. If everyone was recalled back to New York, then what, I stay here and wait for the killer to get to me?”

His lips moved lightly against my forehead as he pulled me closer to him. “It means you’re stuck with me. And I am not sure you are prepared for that,” he murmured, pulling back so he could catch my eye with a mischievous glimmer in his own.

“Wait, what? But I thought your boss pulled you from my case?”

“He did. But I told him I was staying.”

“You did. And he was okay with that?”

“Hell no. He told me that if I stayed, I would do so as a civilian. I had to hand over my badge and service weapon.”

“James.” I gasped in shock. “No, you can’t give up your career for me?”

“I would give up my life for you. The job and badge mean nothing if you’re not alive to share this life with me.”

He took my hands in his and kissed them softly. Tears glistened in my eyes, and I hugged him tightly, my heart overflowing with emotions. He held me close and whispered, “I won’t let anything happen to you. I will keep you safe.” He paused. “Oh, and I am not the only one.”

“What?” I asked him, puzzled.

“Everett and Sarah stayed behind too. Seems like they think you are worth giving up their careers for too. We will catch this asshole if it’s the last thing we do.”

I felt my heart swell with pride, thinking about how I finally felt like I wasn’t alone in the world. My friends’ loyalty and willingness to stand by me deeply touched me. To put their lives on the line for me, time and time again, made me feel like everything that had happened led up to this.

It was odd heading back to the property and seeing all evidence of the FBI gone—the cameras, the brain center, and the agents doing perimeter checks. It felt strange to have my house back. The agents gave me a sorrowful look as they packed up their equipment and left. Many hugged me and wished me well. I understood why they couldn’t put their careers on the line. I didn’t blame them. Many were new and couldn’t afford the disciplinary punishment if they chose to stay. I was relieved to move around freely again without worrying about being watched. There was nowhere I could walk without someone following me or standing guard. It would be nice to have some privacy back.

With Everett, Sarah, and James around, it felt more like having roommates than babysitters. They took turns making dinner, and we spent time outside having a drink each night and talking about their lives, and I sat back and listened, thankful for some semblance of normalcy.

It was another one of those nights when we sat on the back porch with a fire burning. The fire burned brightly, with orange and yellow flames dancing in the night sky. Sparks flew as the fire crackled, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere. The fire illuminated my friends’ faces, and the smell of burning wood filled the air. It was a peaceful and calming moment, where I enjoyed taking a break from the intensity of the past few months. I laughed so hard; my stomach muscles were sore. I smiled so much my cheeks hurt.

Everett loved telling jokes and stories about awkward dates or sexual encounters he had.

And there were *many*.

Sarah talked about the sexism at the academy and how she had to work harder than her male peers. It is an unfortunate reality that women still face discrimination in society, especially in male-dominated fields. But Sarah overcame it and used it as motivation to work harder. I admired her tenacity. She was focused on improving each day and never let anyone's opinions keep her from giving her all. My eyes glistened as I felt grateful for them. She and Everett stayed behind to keep me safe, giving up their careers for me.

James was silent, but his smile and laughter shone brighter than the stars in the night sky. Every time I turned my head, I could not help but notice his intense gaze upon me. When I would catch him watching me, he would grasp my hand tightly or plant a burning kiss on my cheek.

The full moon was high in the sky, and Everett yawned, "Well, I think I am going to hit the hay."

"Me too." Sarah echoed before turning her attention back to her phone.

"Want us to lock up, boss?" Everett asked, glancing between James and me.

"I already told you, Everett. I am not your boss anymore," James responded with a sorrowful expression.

"Okay, boss. We will check the windows and doors and see you two lovebirds in the morning." Everett winked.

James sighed and nodded in acknowledgment.

I smiled and wished them both goodnight, and watched them walk inside. I looked up at the stars, took a deep breath of the cool night air, closed my eyes, and wished for their happiness, Everett, Sarah, James, and mine.

"What are you thinking about, beautiful?" James broke into my thoughts.

I smiled at him and whispered, "Nothing much,"

He caressed my cheek and gave me a gentle kiss.

“When you’re deep in thought, this cute little nose of yours scrunches up.”

I looked up at him and frowned. “It doesn’t scrunch that much.”

He smiled back and said, “It’s one of the things I love about you.”

“Oh really?” I placed my hand on his wrist and drew soft circles with my pointer finger around the inside of his wrist. “What else do you love about me?”

His gaze is intense and full of emotion as he says, “Your kindness, intelligence, and sense of humor.”

I can feel myself blushing and slowly stand from my chair before straddling him. Gently curling one arm around his neck, I look straight into his eyes. He wrapped his blanket around me and pulled me close. The stars shone brightly above us, the crickets chirped in the grass, and how he looked at me was intoxicating.

“I was just thinking about how lucky I am to have you.”

I kissed him softly, and when I pulled back, his eyes darkened. He took my face in his hands and pressed his lips back against mine. His kiss is full of emotion and love. He growled in pleasure when I pushed my tongue further into his mouth. Our tongues intertwined, and the need to feel him inside me, his hands touching my skin, was overwhelming. I felt his growing need in how he bruised my lips, deepening our kiss.

His hands roamed my body, his touch sending sparks of pleasure through me. I could feel his desire—his need to be closer. I moaned as he deepened the kiss and felt his hard length pressing against me. I ground my hips, rubbing his erection, my desire soaking my panties.

“I want you,” I whispered, nipping his earlobe and biting his neck. He pulls back slightly to meet my gaze before crushing his lips roughly against mine again.

I pulled away and looked into his eyes. His lips were swollen, and his breathing was heavy. He stood up, my legs wrapped around his waist, and carried me through the back door. He held me up with one hand while locking the door, closing the curtains, and turning the alarm on.

I giggled as he carried me up the stairs and kicked my door shut loudly.

“Shh!” I teased. “You’re going to wake Everett and Sarah up!”

“I hope so,” he smiled mischievously. “I want them to hear you screaming my name.” He put me on the bed and locked the door.

I knew his locking the door was less about worrying about Everett and Sarah bursting in and more about protecting me from *him*. Even in the moments when desire overtook us both, he always protected me.

He ran his hands up my legs, slowly pulling my skirt down my legs. I was wearing black see-through lace panties, and he groaned when he saw them.

“God, you are perfection.” He whispered, pressing soft kisses up my calf, sucking on the inside of my thigh. He knew what he did to me, and I hungrily watched him as he moved his mouth higher.

“Taste me.” I moaned.

He looked up at me with a smirk, and desire pooled between my legs. He pressed his mouth against the lace of my underwear, running his tongue over the top of my slit. He ran his fingers up my thighs and underneath my panties, pulling them down my legs, dropping them to the floor.

In the darkness of my room, I can see him hovering above my hips, the top of his head—his tousled brown hair, the curve of his shoulders, as he kissed my stomach and moved downward, running his hands up and down my body. He pressed his mouth against my throbbing core, sending shivers through me. He flicked his tongue back and forth on my clit, teasing me. It was pure torment, my need for him. He

gently parted my folds with his thumbs and ran his tongue up and down my slick skin. He flicked his tongue back and forth on my clit, teasing me. I was dripping wet as he pushed his fingers inside me, twirling rhythmically. I moaned and writhed beneath him, my body trembling.

I grabbed his hair, yanking him closer and arching my hips to meet his mouth. He drove his tongue inside me, thrusting it in and out as he sucked on my clit. A whimper was building in my throat, begging to be released. I sucked in a breath as a wave of pleasure washed over me. I cried his name as I came, my body trembling in release. He pulled his fingers out and moved his body to mine, pressing his hard erection against me. He moved up my body and kissed me passionately. He lingered for a moment, then pulled away. His eyes were full of desire. He whispered in my ear, "You taste like heaven."

"My turn." I exhaled and pushed him off me. He kneeled on the bed as I moved my hands down his chest and lifted his shirt over his head. I would never tire of gazing at his toned body, twirling the dark hair on his chest. My fingers traced the outline of his muscles, feeling the heat of his skin. I kissed his chest, trailing kisses along the bright-colored phoenix tattoo adorning his right side. I unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down his legs, freeing his hard flesh. I took him in my hands, tracing my fingers along the veins and running my thumb over the tip. I licked my lips and lowered my mouth over him, my tongue swirling around his length. His breathing was ragged as I increased the tempo, my hands caressing his shaft as I bobbed my head up and down. I felt him grow even harder. The skin on his flesh was taut, threatening to burst, and shiny and slick from my saliva. As I sucked on the head, he tilted his head back, and his deep moan filled the room.

"Fuck, baby. Don't stop." A white droplet of his precum dribbled out. I lapped it up, swallowing the salty liquid. I ran my tongue along the underside, and he grabbed my hair, pushing himself deeper into my mouth. I took him as deep as I could, my throat vibrating around him. I relaxed my jaw to open up more to fit all of him, gently quelling my gag

reflex, and took him further into my mouth. As I moved my mouth up and down, I felt his body tense. He let out a shuddering gasp as I felt his hot release spill into my mouth. I swirled my tongue around him, savoring his taste before I pulled away. He looked down at me with a satisfied smirk, and I smiled up at him.

“That’s my girl,” he growled. I looked up into his eyes, which were full of pride. I could spend a thousand years being looked at like that.

The heat beneath his hooded eyes. He stared at me like I was the most beautiful thing in the world. I had known I loved him for a while, but in this moment, I realized I was unequivocally in love with him.

I never imagined feeling so deep for someone. After the trauma I experienced. The constant fear. The mental anguish. None of that mattered when he was with me. He held me together when my world was crashing down. When I fell, he caught me. When I couldn’t breathe, he breathed for me. When I couldn’t stand, he carried me. When the tears wouldn’t stop falling, he held me transferring his strength to me. When I ran, he followed.

I trusted him with my *body*. My *heart*. My *soul*. When he touched me, it felt like stars were dancing across my skin. During these moments when the rest of the world was asleep, when it was just him and I, our naked skin touching, the moon casting a soft glow in the darkness, I knew I didn’t want to live without him. If he died, I died. I wanted to be with him forever. I wanted to feel his strength and his love for the rest of my life. I wanted to be his and for him to be mine. I wanted to be the only one who touched him, who held him, who kissed him. I wanted to be the one to love him from now until the end of time.

I was preparing to go to sleep curled up next to him, content and happy. When I moved back into the bed to get under the covers, he gently grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head, pressing his body against mine. I could feel his erection pushing against my stomach, and I looked up at him in surprise. He smiled down at me and stared into my

eyes. I looked at him with a mix of confusion and pleasure, the heat of desire radiating from my body.

“Did I not satisfy you?” I asked. How was he still hard after coming? I wondered.

He leaned down and kissed me passionately.

“God, yes. Baby, yes. But you are like a drug to me, and I crave more. I *need* more of you. I want to bury myself inside you, Ava. I want to feel you come on me. I want to be the only taste in your mouth. I want to touch your soul.”

I stared into his eyes and saw it. Everything I felt for him, he felt for me. The unspoken words crashed into me, and my eyes glistened with tears.

“I want you to be mine, Ava.” He whispered into my mouth.

“I’ve always been yours.”

His lips slammed into mine. His desire was unbridled. He firmly kissed my lips with wild abandon, and my body warmed in response. His tongue explored my mouth, and I opened my legs and clung to him as he entered me. His thrusts were frantic and urgent. I moaned as he filled me, burying his face in my neck. We both needed one another, and that need was soaking my thighs and dripping off him with every thrust. I arched my body into him, biting into his shoulder as I begged him not to stop. I clung to him as all the air left my lungs, and shuddered uncontrollably beneath him. He came deep within me, shaking with the force of his orgasm before collapsing onto my chest. We lay intertwined in a sweaty embrace, our breathing slowing as our bodies twitched in the aftermath of the greatest orgasm I had ever had. He pushed away the hair that had clung to my sweaty forehead, and my soul was raw and bared open to him.



# THIRTY-FIVE

JAMES

I lay there listening to Ava sleep. I inhale the sweet smell of her skin, a mix of vanilla and brown sugar, and her sweat.

I worshipped every inch of her skin with my hands and mouth.

I needed her.

I know she thought her need for me was greater, that she couldn't survive without me. But she didn't realize that she was my rock, my strength, and the love of my life.

She was everything to me. Before her, I was nothing. There was no me before her. There was only me after her. My accomplishments meant nothing without her in my life.

I was complete with her in my life. She's the one that made me whole.

She imprinted on my heart.

I gave her my soul.

I would die for her.

I would give her every ounce of me.

I would stay by her side until she didn't need me, and then even still, I would follow her to the ends of the Earth to keep her safe.

To feel her touch.

To taste her lips.

To love her every second of every day. And to feel her pure, unconditional love back.

For the first time, I finally knew what it was like to love someone more than yourself.

And I knew I would do anything to make her happy and show her how much she meant to me.

I would always be devoted to her.

I kissed her neck gently, careful not to wake her.

Letting my mouth linger by her ear, I whisper, “I love you, Ava. You have my heart. My body. And my soul until the day I die. And when Lucifer drags me down to Hell, I’ll love you still.”

I closed my eyes and drifted off to the calming sounds of her breathing.

# THIRTY-SIX

AVA

A loud explosion abruptly woke me from a peaceful sleep. I thought I was dreaming at first. I opened my eyes to see James looking panicked and shaking me. My vision was hazy, and I felt like I was in a fog. His mouth was moving, but my mind took a few seconds to comprehend what he was saying.

“Ava! Get up!”

I jumped out of bed, not sure why I was getting up. However, the urgency in his voice and the panic on his face told me something bad had happened. I pulled my robe on. The hardwood floor was cold beneath my feet. The sleepy stupor I was in vanished at the sound of another explosion. This one rattled the windows and sent picture frames from the walls crashing to the floor. James told me to hurry. My heart was racing, a rapid staccato in my chest. The blue light of my alarm clock read 3:43 a.m. An odd orange light shone through my blinds and a thick smokey haze, casting shadows across the grey walls. I jumped out of bed, the floor cold on my bare feet. I choked on the smoke seeping underneath my door.

“Is the house on fire?” I coughed.

“I don’t know. I can’t feel any heat coming through the door. There was an explosion outside. Everett and Sarah aren’t answering their cell phones. I need to check on them and determine what we are dealing with. I’ve already called the local authorities. They are on their way, but it could be a half hour before they arrive. Stay here. Lock the door behind me, and do not open it for anyone but me. Do you understand?” he asked as he put on his jeans and T-shirt.

Pulling his gun out, he kissed my lips. “Stay away from the window. I’ll come back for you.”

I shook my head vigorously and tightly tied the sash from my robe around my waist. “No. I am going with you.”

“Baby, no. I have no idea what happened and if he’s in the house. It’s too dangerous.”

“If he is here, I am safer with you. I am done hiding, James.”

I could tell he was conflicted. He rubbed his neck and met my eyes. I could see indecision etched across his face. Both of us knew this day would come. The day he came to us. With the rest of his agency returning to their home office in New York, it was just us. That is precisely what the killer wanted. It had been two weeks since his boss Javier pulled them out. Although it had taken him longer to come than I expected, the devil reared his ugly head, and there was no use hiding anymore.

There was no way out. We had to finish this once and for all.

He stepped towards me and sighed.

“Ok. But you do what I tell you when I tell you. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to hide, you hide. Do you understand me?”

“I understand.”

Another boom. Yelling. Gunshots. Then silence.

He handed me a towel and motioned for me to press it against my face.

“Stay behind me. Stay low. And stay quiet.” He instructed me.

He opened the door slowly, keeping one arm behind him to keep me flushed against the wall. He leaned out, remaining covered, ensuring the hallway was safe before we ventured out.

He then grabbed my hand and pulled me through the door with him.

I watched as he moved across the hall and checked each room, keeping me close and shielding me with his body.

Everett and Sarah were nowhere to be found. Their beds were in disarray as if they, too, were woken up abruptly. There was no blood or sign of a struggle, so it reassured me that they made it out of their rooms unscathed.

A plume of smoke danced through the air toward the stairs. We cautiously stepped onto the stairwell, only to find the first floor covered in thick smoke.

I coughed in panic and retreated up the stairs. I couldn't see. James could see my fear and pulled me into his body.

"It's okay. I will get you out of here." He kissed my forehead.

I nodded frantically, fear coursing through my veins. He grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me down the stairs and into the entryway. The front door was a shattered mess, shards of glass sparkling like diamonds on the dark wood flooring. The smell of smoke was overpowering; I could feel it lodged in my throat like bile. Panic paralyzed me as he dragged me closer to the front door. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw his suburban engulfed in raging flames, fire licking at every inch of it with unbridled ferocity. Roaring flames littered the outside, billowing clouds of smoke obscuring our escape route. James pulled me forward, and we both watched in stunned silence as the car slowly melted away to nothing.

James snarled and whirled towards me, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Fuck," he spat.

"James!" Everett materialized from the kitchen, his face pale and drawn. "Are you guys, okay?"

"Everett, thank God. Yes, we are fine. Where's Sarah?"

He shook his head, tears glistening in his eyes. "He killed her."

My legs went weak, and I stumbled backward into the door. It was like a punch to the gut - all the air rushed out of my lungs, and I couldn't breathe. James turned to me; pain etched into his features.

"Oh my God, no." I cried. "Where is she?"

"There's nothing we can do for her now," Everett replied grimly.

"Everett, where is she?" I demanded angrily. My eyes pricked with tears. I felt light-headed and dizzy between the smoke burning my eyes and Sarah's death.

"On the porch. He ambushed us. We came out here to figure out what happened before he got inside, and he was waiting for us."

He paused and gulped.

"It was quick," He promised me. "I got a couple of shots off, but he ran around the back of the house."

"Where is he?" James whispered back.

"I don't know. He blocked both the back door and the garage door. We have no choice but to go out the front. I have the keys to the other car we hid."

"You're a genius, brother." James clapped him on his back. "We have to make it quick. We shield Ava and make a run for the car. Ava, you hold onto the keys. If anything happens, you don't look back. You run for the car and get the hell out of here."

Everett handed me the keys, and I clutched them tightly between my fingers.

I nodded and steeled myself for what was to come. We all had a plan, and we knew what we needed to do.

"No matter what, keep moving." James reiterated. His voice was calm, but his eyes were unsure.

I took a deep breath and moved forward and out onto the porch. Flames engulfed the grass around the burning suburban. The smoke was thick and difficult to see through.

“Close your eyes, and don’t look down until we get down the stairs,” James said.

*Too late.*

Sarah lay on her back, a bullet hole between her eyes. Blood pooled around her head, staining her golden locks crimson. Her once bright blue eyes stared lifelessly at us. My legs shook beneath me as I fell to my knees beside her, tears streaming down my face. I reached out to Sarah, but my hand shook as I touched her cold, still body.

“Ava, we have to go,” James whispered.

“We can’t leave her.” I hissed through gritted teeth.

“We don’t have time,” he said. “We have to move now.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet as another explosion rocked the ground beneath us. The blast knocked us off our feet, sending shards of glass and debris raining down around us. My body hit the ground hard, pain radiating through every nerve ending as if lightning struck me down. My vision blurred into darkness as I gasped for air that wouldn’t come. Panic seized me as I struggled to make out any sound from my shredded eardrums.

A voice drew nearer, and I frantically tried to stand up, only for the world around me to spin, and my eyes darted over the body lying a few feet away from me.

*Was it James? Everett?*

I couldn’t tell.

*Fuck.*

“Finally.” *His* voice growled as he knelt down next to me. His muffled voice was unmistakable, and an icy chill ran down my spine as his face appeared.

I scrambled to get away from him, but he grabbed hold of my leg and yanked me back to him, flipping me over so that I could see his twisted grin. He straddled me, trapping my body beneath his as the firelight glinted off his face.

“I have waited so many years to get you back.”

He trailed his tongue up my face and inhaled the scent of my hair before continuing.

“Just as sweet as I remember it,” he said with a sneer. “But something else now. Something I gave you – something dark that consumes you and holds you prisoner. You are twisted inside. Darkness consumes you, and you are powerless against it.”

He snickered again and stroked my hair while pressing his erection against my stomach to remind me I was his plaything. My fear boiled over, fueling an adrenaline rush that gave me just enough strength to try and free myself from his grip. But he had the advantage; his expert hands wrapped around my throat and tightened until I could feel the air leaving my lungs, and the edges of my vision started to darken. Desperate for oxygen, every gasp came out choked as I tried to speak and failed miserably. The sound of his voice began to fade in and out of consciousness as I felt myself going limp beneath him, feeling helpless as the darkness consumed me completely.

When I felt like I couldn't stay awake any longer, his grip released, and air flooded into my lungs. He was ripped off me and thrown to the ground. I coughed and grabbed my throat. Breathing heavily, I forced myself to roll over to see who saved me.

It was *James*.

*Thank fucking God he was alive.*

He punched the killer repeatedly. His fists kept making contact with the killer's face. I could see blood spraying from his nose. I saw the killer's hand unsheathe a knife from his belt. My throat tightened as I tried to scream a warning to James, but nothing came out besides a weak squeak. The blade slipped easily through his skin, sinking deep into his flesh with a nauseating squish. An inhuman roar erupted from James' lungs as he stumbled backward, desperately trying to keep the knife away from his throat while clutching his wound. James



roared in pain as he stumbled back and collapsed to the ground, clutching his wound.

The killer recovered, and with a nasty smile, blood pouring out of his nose, he slithered over to James and hovered over him. He yanked the knife out of his side and positioned himself over James with the knife pressed firmly against his neck. James was pushing back and fighting to keep the knife out of his throat. But he was losing strength quickly.

Blood poured out of his wound, soaking the ground below him.

“Let him go.” I croaked.

I grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it at him. It smacked his back, but he laughed and looked up at me.

The distraction allowed James to push the killer off.

The knife flew across the ground. The killer stumbled and quickly regained his footing. I struggled to my feet and grabbed the knife, the hilt cool in my hand.

I rushed towards him, prepared to sink the knife into his neck before he realized what was happening. Before I could reach him, he had James in a chokehold with a gun to his head.

I stopped dead in my tracks and stared at James helplessly. My stomach sank, and I froze in fear. I could see the terror in James’ eyes as he struggled to break free.

The killer grinned. He knew he had the only thing that mattered to me in his control.

“Don’t even think about it.” He snarled. His blue eyes were black.

“Ava. Remember what we talked about. Get the fuck out of here.”

“I can’t. Please don’t shoot him.” I begged, turning my attention back to the killer.

The killer didn’t say anything. He stared at me. I knew he enjoyed watching me beg.

“Ava, get the fuck out of here,” James demanded.

“No. I won’t leave you.” I sobbed.

“Well, this is quite the predicament we find ourselves in. Tell me why I shouldn’t blow his brains out and make you get on your knees and eat them? Or perhaps I should just slit his throat and let you watch as his blood soaks the ground and then use his blood as a lubricant while I fuck you?” he laughed at me manically.

The tears rolling down my face increased. I would do anything—give anything if he would spare the love of my life.

“I am the one you want. This is between you and me. Please let him go.” I pleaded.

He looked at me with a cruel smirk and cocked the gun.

“No! Please. Kill me instead. I am the one that got away. I am the one you have been chasing after. It’s me. You want me. Let him go, and I will be with you. You can have me. I won’t fight. I won’t run. You can do whatever you want to me, and I will do what you tell me. I won’t fight you.”

He seemed to contemplate my words for a brief moment. “How about I kill him, and then no one stands in my way of getting you? No one will come looking for you then.”

I was losing hope. I couldn’t lose James. I couldn’t watch someone else become a casualty of my fucked-up life. If I didn’t stop him, I would watch James die before me, and the thought put a sour taste in my mouth. I did the *only* thing I could think of to get his attention. Not wanting to admit defeat, I pressed it into my wrist with force, ignoring the ripping pain of flesh being opened up as hot blood spilled onto the ground beneath me.

“Ava, no!” James begged me to stop.

I looked up at James with tears in my eyes. He pleaded with unspoken words to run.

The fear was paralyzing; every decision weighed heavily on my soul as if it were a life or death-predicament -

because it was. If I failed to convince him otherwise, then there wasn't any doubt that it would be James' corpse lying lifelessly on the ground before me when all was said and done - something I had already made myself aware that I wouldn't survive.

I knew I had no choice – James was my only chance at living completely and loving without fear. The gun was still pressed against his temple, so I switched the blade to my other wrist and held it there. His eyes revealed a hint of turmoil, but he stayed put and remained silent.

“If you kill him, I will cut the other one, and then you'll never have me again.” I threatened him. “You better make a decision quick, or I'll bleed out before you have your chance to take revenge for me escaping you so many times. You know I am the one you want. The one you killed all those girls for. I know you've watched me. I know you've wanted to touch me. Now is your chance. Let him go, and I'll go with you. You can finally have me.”

He didn't say anything. No words. No indication that sacrificing myself for James worked.

He wasn't taking the bait, and I was running out of time.

*Had I read all the signs wrong? Did I think I was more significant to him than I really was? Did I make an egregious error, gambling with my life and James' life?*

My heart thuds under my rib cage as I think about the consequences if I am wrong. I took a deep breath and decided to trust my instincts. If this didn't work, we were both dead anyway. My skin was pale, and my veins were prominent as I gripped the knife tightly with a determined purpose. With quiet resolve, I slid the knife into the flesh of my other wrist and watched the blade open my skin. I gritted my teeth against the pain and watched my blood drip from the blade.

My blood spilled onto the grass, forming a dark pool around my feet. Staring at the flickering flame in the smooth liquid reflection, I fell deep into silence before the sounds around me flooded back in.

The killer howled, his eyes wide with shock. He immediately forgot about James, and I now had his full attention.

*Thank God.*

He shoved James to the ground and ran towards me. I closed my eyes and braced for the impact. I could feel my warm blood dripping down my cold fingers. My fingers felt numb and cold to the touch as blood slowly dripped down them. The killer reached me and looked at my wrists like he was trying to decide what to do. He wrapped his hands around one of my wrists to slow the bleeding. I didn't hesitate and stabbed the knife into his neck with all my strength. He looked at me confused and gripped the sheath. There was sadness in his eyes, or maybe I imagined it. He pulled the knife out, which produced a loud squelch, removing the plug from the wound I had caused. His blood poured out, staining his white shirt. He held the knife over his head, and I was prepared to let it pierce my flesh.

I closed my eyes and *waited*.

Seven loud pops rang behind him, followed by three blood spots appearing on his chest, merging together into one large circle of deathly crimson. He looked at me in disbelief and dropped the knife. His body crumpled to the ground before me, and he frantically pressed his hands over his wounds in an attempt to stifle the blood gushing out.

A thick river of my own crimson blood ran down my arms, and the ground around us was flooded in a pool of deathly red. My fingers felt numb and cold, and my heart raced out of control as I fought for consciousness. My weakened legs gave out, and I stumbled back, trying desperately to stay on my feet. The dizziness threatened to blindsides me—my vision blurring and swimming.

My body was overcome with heat and cold at once, my insides churning with an unexplainable sensation that felt like butterflies fluttering wildly around my stomach. Every single throb in my wrists was magnified by the mesmerizing streams of blood dripping down my hands until, finally, it all merged

into one slow heartbeat, until, eventually, it stopped altogether. With each passing moment, life drained away from me as I struggled to keep my eyes open. I looked up at James as he holstered his weapon and rushed towards me. It took everything I had to stand, but it was time to rest. My legs buckled, and James caught me before I hit the ground. My eyes felt so heavy.

*Maybe I should close them and rest for a minute.*

# THIRTY-SEVEN

JAMES

Rage consumed me as I emptied his clip into the killer's back with ruthless accuracy. No hesitation.

When I saw Ava cut her wrists and the killer released me to get to her, I was determined to end his life.

She cut her wrists for me.

Sacrificed herself for me.

Saved me.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was the one that was supposed to save her.

The fucker fell to the ground and didn't move. But I wasn't focusing on him. Her legs wobbled, and she met my stare when she stumbled back and collapsed. I barely reached her before her tiny body hit the cold ground. I slid down to my knees and cradled her in my arms. Her flawless skin was pale and cold. Crimson blood streamed out of her wrists; the grass soaked in blood. She shivered as I held her close. I could feel her heartbeat pounding against my chest.

"Ava. Stay with me!" I pleaded desperately.

I held her tightly, trying to keep her warm. Tears filled my eyes as I begged her to keep her eyes open. I pulled my flannel shirt off, ripping the sleeves and tying them securely to her wrists to slow the bleeding.

Ava didn't move.

Her arms fell limp on the ground. I reached into her pocket and found the keys we had given her to the hidden car.

"It's okay, baby. I will get you help. Everything will be fine. Keep your eyes open for me."

Her beautiful grey eyes stared up at me. She blinked a few times, but her stare was distant. Lifting her, I ran towards

the car. “Stay with me, Ava. I know you’re tired, but I need you. You don’t get to leave me yet.”

Everett stumbled to me, a wound on his head dripping blood down his cheek. He held the radio in one hand while he clutched his side with the other.

“The ambulance is coming,” he croaked out.

I was relieved that he was not dead after the blast, but I couldn’t think about anything but getting her to a hospital.

“She won’t make it.” I snapped, my voice hoarse with emotion. “Here, take the keys. You can run faster than me to the car.”

Everett took off running, and within a minute, the bright headlights of the suburban blinded me. He ran around and opened the door for me, and I jumped into the passenger side.

“Radio the ambulance and tell them we will meet them on the way.” I turned the heat on full blast and rubbed her body with my hands, desperately trying to warm her.

Everett stepped on the gas, and we sped off toward the hospital. The sky erupted in lightning, thunder cracked, and rain enveloped us. The sky was dark and ominous as lightning lit up the night. Thunder shook the ground with a deep rumble, and the wind howled. Heavy rain pelted the car, creating a roar of sound. Trees swayed violently, and branches snapped off, crashing to the ground. The storm was so powerful that it seemed like the heavens were mourning with me. It was like the earth knew my heart was shattering, as it mimicked the storm inside me.

I felt nauseated watching the light fade from her eyes. The eyes I had grown accustomed to wrapping myself inside of for the past six months. Looking into her eyes, I see only her and our future.

This couldn’t be the end of our story. It was just beginning, and that fucker wasn’t going to take the only thing in my life that made sense.

“I can’t lose her, Everett.” I moved her hair out of her face. “

“James?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“What were you thinking? I told you to run.” My eyes pricked with tears. My throat was tight, and I fought to hide my fear from her.

“I saved you.” She smiled, but the emotion barely reached her eyes. I could tell that each word she spoke exhausted her further.

I nodded. My throat was too dry to speak.

“James, I am so cold.”

“I know, baby. I know. We are almost there.”

Her eyes fluttered closed. “Is he dead?”

“Yes. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Or you.”

Then she was quiet again. I pushed my fingers against her neck to feel her pulse. It was barely there.

A thready thrum against my fingertips. “Fuck, Ava. Wake up!”

Sirens pierced the air as they broke through the trees. Everett slammed on the brakes, meeting the ambulance. I jumped out of the car with her, met the paramedics at the back of the ambulance, and laid her on a stretcher.

“What happened?” A young female paramedic with blonde hair approached us while her male counterparts strapped Ava in and loaded her into the back of the ambulance.

“She has cuts to both wrists. I tied my shirt around her wrists to slow the bleeding, but she had already lost a significant amount of blood.”

“Self-inflicted?”

“Yes, but she’s not suicidal.”

The blonde furrowed her brows. “How long ago did this happen?”



“I don’t know, twenty minutes ago. I think. We were trying to escape a killer. She cut her wrists to get him away from me. Look, it’s fucking complicated. I am an FBI agent, and she is a high priority. Can you please stop asking so many goddamn questions and get her to the hospital?” I snapped angrily.

“I understand. We are just trying to get a picture of what happened so the hospital can prepare. We’ve got her, Sir. You can follow us to the hospital.”

“I’m not leaving her.” I pushed past her and jumped into the back of the ambulance.

“What’s your relationship with the patient?” She asked.

“She’s my girlfriend.” I snapped, not in the mood for the seventh degree.

“Ok, but make sure you stay out of the way.” The blonde paramedic instructed and closed the doors.

“Mercy Hospital, this is ambulance 81. We have a female patient in her late 20s with self-inflicted wounds to both her wrists. The injuries occurred approximately twenty minutes ago. The patient is unconscious and unresponsive to stimuli. Vitals are BP 90/40. HR 102. O2 92%. Bilateral approximated wounds on the wrists, and it looks like the radial vein was cut. 18 gauge IV in peripheral veins in the antecubital fossa. 2 liters of lactated ringers are infusing now. ETA is 10 minutes from now. Requesting extra medical staff and blood and cross typing on arrival.”

The paramedics radioed the hospital to inform them of the situation and requested extra medical staff in preparation for Ava’s arrival.

When we got to the hospital, the nurses pulled Ava away from me and into a trauma room. The medical staff scurried around the room, yelling instructions at one another and setting up IV bags. I watched through the window, trying to understand what was happening.

Another nurse yelled and began CPR. Time stood still as I watched the nurses frantically work to save Ava’s life.

I felt helpless. I was afraid of losing her. If I could go in there and be with her, maybe she would come back to me.

“Sir, you can’t be back here. She led me away from her. “Do you need medical attention?” she asked.

“What?”

“Are you in need of medical attention? It looks like you are actively bleeding on your side.” She led him into a patient room and lifted up his shirt. “That’s a significant stab wound. Here, sit down. I will get some help.”

“Wait, no. I need to be there when she wakes up.” I protested.

“I’m sorry, Sir, but I promise we are doing everything for her. But if you don’t get this checked out, you won’t be there when she wakes up. Stay here, and I’ll be right back.”

She left me and returned with a doctor. His nametag read: *Vance Cloverfield, MD. Resident*. He didn’t look older than 25, but I didn’t care at this point. He could put a Band-Aid on me and then fuck off so I could get back to Ava.

“It’s not that bad.” I winced as he assessed my wound. “Just hurry up so I can get back to Ava.”

“Who?” Doctor Cloverfield asked.

“I am a federal agent. My girlfriend just came in a few minutes ago.”

“Ok, sir. Judging by this wound, you’ll need more than stitches.”

“I need to stay awake for when she comes out.” I protested.

“If you don’t go to the operating room right now, you won’t be alive when she wakes up. Miranda, call OR 2 and tell them we have a stab victim on the way.”

“Yes, sir.” The older nurse nodded, pulled out her phone, and started arranging to transfer me.

My side was killing me, and I felt woozy, and I couldn’t focus on anything but Ava. I needed to get back to

her.

As they wheeled me down the hallway to the operating room, Everett ran down the hall to meet me. “Everett, stay with Ava. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

My vision faded to black.

I woke up alone in a hospital room with an IV in my arm. My body felt like it had been hit by a train. My muscles ached, and my head felt like it might burst. My throat was dry and sore. I pulled the IV out of my arm and tossed it aside. I gently touched it and could feel the rigid outline of staples holding it together.

Gingerly, I sat up and slid off the bed. Every movement threatened to rip my stitches. Wincing, I peeled off the EKG pads, setting the alarm off on the monitor. I gripped my side and slowly walked towards the nurse’s station. I was met by several alarmed nurses who blocked my path and protested against me being out of bed.

“Sir, you need to return to your bed. You just got out of surgery.” Miranda, the older nurse from earlier, said.

“Where is she?” Where is Ava?” I ignored her.

“I am sorry, but I can’t release patient information to anyone but family.”

“What? I brought her in.” I yelled, instantly regretting the severe pain I had caused, and hunched back over.

“I understand, sir, but—”

“James?” Everett called my name. I looked and saw him hurrying towards me.

“Is she ok?” I hobbled over to him.

He had a bandage around his head, and his face was pale. His eyes were filled with worry.

*Not his usual expression.*

“Tell me.”

“She’s alive. But she never woke up after surgery. They don’t know if she will.”

“Where is she?”

“Room 11.”

At this point, a group of nurses had gathered in the hallway as they attempted to guide me back into my room. I ripped my arm away from one of them. “I’m going to her. You’re not going to stop me.”

“Do we need to call security, Mr. Buchanan?”

“Call them. I’ll be in room 11 when they get up here.” I knew Everett was interfering on my behalf. I heard him use the agent card and flash his badge. It gave me enough time to disappear into her room. My breath caught when I saw her. She was hooked up to machines and had cords flowing to the two monitors behind her bed.

She looked peaceful, reminding me of Sleeping Beauty. Her skin was paler than normal. Her cheeks were soft pink, and her lips were plump and full. I wouldn’t think anything was wrong with her if I hadn’t known what she had done to save me.

Frozen in time.

She is just as beautiful as ever.

Several bags of fluid and blood ran through, and her wrists were bandaged. The steady and slow beeping of the monitor was the only noise in the room. I moved to the left side of her bed and gripped her hand in mine. I had hoped she would open her grey eyes, look at me, and smirk as she made unspoken promises.

She saved my life.

The moment I stepped into her life; she marked my soul—a mark that changed me for the better. And I didn’t want to be without her.

Not for a second.

All I saw was her.

All I needed was her.

Everett entered the room cautiously and took a deep breath. I know it was difficult for him to see her like this. Ava and he had become friends, and he protected her when he didn't have to. Sarah had given her life to protect Ava, and they all would, without hesitation. Ava wouldn't see it that way. She would be heartbroken. She would carry guilt even if I told her it wasn't her burden.

“What did they say?” I asked, not looking away from Ava.

Everett cleared his throat. “I will try to get the doctor. It would be better if you talked to him.”

I nodded.

He returned a few minutes later with another doctor who looked in his forties and was bald.

“Are you the patient's family?” the bald doctor asked.

“Her boyfriend, yes,” I replied curtly. I was tired of being asked if I was family. Ava is my family now. I was hers.

“Very well.” The patient —”

“Ava.” I snapped.

The doctor looked apologetic. “Ava suffered devastating blood loss. When she came in, her heart stopped. We administered CPR and resuscitated her. We repaired the knife damage and gave her multiple blood transfusions. However, with her heart-stopping and blood loss, her heart experienced some strain. We placed her in a medical coma to give her body time to heal and reduce the strain on her heart. This will hopefully prevent another cardiac event.”

“Will she wake up?”

“We don't know. It is really up to her at this point.”

“There is nothing else you can do?”

“The best thing we can do for her now is keep her comfortable, pushing nutrients and fluids into her. We can also cross our fingers that she wakes up on her own when fully healed. Although we don’t know if her injuries will have long-term effects, the fetus’ heart rate remains strong. If Ava does not wake up, we will need to discuss delivering the baby when it is viable and safe to do so.”

“The baby?” My stomach dropped. *Fetus?* I averted my eyes away from her and directed them at the doctor.

“Uhm. Yes. She is around four weeks pregnant. I am sorry. I thought you knew.” He looked at me quizzically.

I was speechless, so he continued. “We are monitoring the baby 24/7 and will let you know if anything changes. I am very sorry. I wish I had better news for you. If you have any further questions, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

The doctor nodded and silently excused himself.

Everett followed the doctor out and shut the door quietly, giving me time alone with her.

I laid my hand on Ava’s stomach and closed my eyes.

She was *pregnant*.

Pregnant with my baby.

*Did she know?* She couldn’t have.

She wouldn’t have risked the baby by sacrificing herself for me. I had so many questions. Not only was the woman I loved in a coma, but our baby, that she did not know about might not survive.

At this moment, all I wanted was for her to wake up. I just wanted to kiss her lips and thank her for saving me. To tell her how much she means to me. To tell her that I was madly in love with her. I no longer held back my tears but let them roll down my cheeks. I was not one to display my emotions, but right now, I feel my heart breaking. The pain was unbearable. Seeing her this way made me feel like my soul was torn in two.

I never left her side for the next three and a half weeks. The nurses got tired of fighting me, and I think they felt sorry for the situation. They set up a pullout couch after a week of me sleeping in the chair.

Another group of agents dealt with the killer's body. He was identified as Benjamin Callahan, a 38-year-old morgue technician to a medical examiner. They located his apartment and found hundreds of photos of Ava and over 30 victims. They were working on locating the identity of the other victims, which took a lot of time and resources to do so. Ava was the only one that survived him for years. There was a chance she would not wake up, which tore me apart.

My boss, Javier Martinez, came into her hospital room and told me they had pulled out to use Ava as bait. He said it was for the greater good and that sacrifices needed to be made to get the killer to make a move. This was so they could catch him, he chided. Except they weren't there when she bled out. And he didn't show up until almost two weeks later, giving some half-ass apology for not telling him the plan, but that he needed it to look real.

I exploded.

I would have beaten him to a pulp if Everett hadn't pulled me off him. I would have killed him. That prick intentionally put her in danger, knowing there was a chance she wouldn't survive so that he could chase another medal. I hadn't felt a rage like this in a long time. I swore I would make sure he paid for what he did. I would end his career. He just smirked and collected another victory to display on his desk. He told all his rich friends at dinner parties how he single-handedly brought the elusive and sinister Skinner to justice. He told me he would forget my brief indiscretion due to the emotional turmoil I was dealing with. However, he expected me to return promptly to New York headquarters and spend some time with the agency shrink before being allowed back in the field.

I did not attend Sarah's funeral. I didn't intend on leaving Ava's side. The families were understanding and sympathetic, but I don't think I could have stomached seeing

another person I cared about dead. I watched Sarah's funeral via live stream and was pleased to see she was given the full police honors she deserved. She was a remarkable agent. I promised that when Ava woke up, I would go to her grave and make peace with her death.

Too many people died from this fucker. This piece of shit scum of the earth wreaked havoc on lives. It would be a long time, if ever, before healing was possible.

*I could not imagine a life without Ava. A life without our baby. Jesus. When did I begin to desire a baby? I never thought of myself as father material. After being with Ava, I wanted this. I wanted to watch her belly grow big with the child we created. I wanted to hold a mini version of her with dark hair and almond-shaped eyes. I longed to come home to her and make love to her. I wanted to watch her become a mother and sing our child to sleep each night. I dreamed of having a family with her, and only with her. I was deeply in love with this woman. She stole my heart the first day I saw her, standing in her house doorway expecting us. I would give anything to feel her touch and hear her voice. Anything to tell her that we had created a life together, more precious than anything else either of us had ever done.*



# THIRTY-EIGHT

JAMES

Another couple of days passed, and the first snow of winter had blanketed the town overnight. As I opened the curtains, thick snowflakes continued to fall steadily, covering the ground in a fresh layer of white. I couldn't help but admire the beauty of it. Christmas was approaching in a few weeks, and the snowy landscape felt festive and comforting.

As I approached Ava's hospital bed, my heart felt heavy. Though her physical body still lingered here, her mind remained entrapped in a coma. I said a silent prayer to God, though I had never believed before, wishing with everything I had for Him to bring her back to me.

Every night since her accident, I would whisper stories to her and our unborn child while holding her hand close to me. That night was no different. As I fell asleep next to her frail body, my head resting on her thigh, closer than I could ever get to our baby inside her...I made one last wish.

# THIRTY-NINE

AVA

I awoke slowly, my eyelids heavy and my thoughts fuzzy. The room was quiet except for the constant beeping of machines. My body ached as I tried to move, my muscles stiff and weak from disuse. Memories flashed through my mind—explosions, the killer, the knife, and nothing until now.

I opened my eyes, blinking against the harsh fluorescent light above my bed. I was in a hospital room again, this one more appealing than the first, with a fresh coat of baby pink paint and a large window with snowflakes landing softly against the dark window. I tried to speak, but my voice came out in a hoarse croak. My throat was dry and scratchy, and it hurt with each attempt.

I felt a foreign weight on my leg and looked down to see James fast asleep, using my legs as a pillow. A smile spread across my face at seeing him resting so peacefully. I watched him sleep for a moment, his chest rising and falling with each breath. He was so beautiful. His dark brown hair was wavy from sleep, and his dark lashes kissed his cheeks. His strong jawline and well-defined cheekbones gave him a handsome, chiseled look. I craved his smile. A smile that drew me in, warm and contagious, lighting up his whole face whenever he flashed it my way.

I gently stroked the top of his head, savoring the way his hair felt beneath my fingers. My hand moved slowly, smoothing down a rogue chunk of hair. I felt him stir beneath my hand, and he gradually tilted his head up to look at me.

His eyes, usually so intense and focused, now softened as they met mine. A smile spread across his face, and his eyes welled up with tears. He carefully crawled into the bed with me and pulled me close.

“Oh, thank God.” He pulled away and held my face in his hands. He planted a firm kiss on my lips and then planted

kisses all over my face and neck. “I thought I’d never get this moment with you again.” His voice was full of emotion. He kissed me again, and I let him deepen the kiss this time. It was full of desperation and relief. He murmured thanks to God in between kisses, thanking the higher power for bringing me back to him.

“How long?” I managed to get out. I could see the snow outside, and I knew some time had passed since I was last awake.

“One month.” He responded with guilt in his eyes.

“One month?” I couldn’t believe how much time had passed. “Is *he* dead?”

“Yes. You are safe and alive. He will never be able to hurt you again.”

I closed my eyes as the weight of his words sent relief surging through my body. Tears fell from my eyes before I even understood the emotion that racked my body. The nightmare that had tormented me for a decade was finally over. He was gone. I was alive, and the man I loved was here with me, by my side.

James pulled me into his arms and held me while sobs racked my body. When I felt like I was controlling my emotions, his eyes searched my face, but no words came out of his mouth.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I asked. I could tell he was stressed, like something weighed heavy on his mind.

“James, tell me.” I pushed.

“There’s something else I need to tell you.” He paused as he searched my face for approval to continue.

“Just tell me.” I pleaded. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“No, you’re healthy considering everything that happened. When they took blood, they found something in your lab work.”

“For fuck’s sake, James, just spit it out.”

I watched him reach into the pocket of his flannel shirt and pull out a small piece of paper. He unfolded it and stared at it briefly before handing it to me. I took it hesitantly, and my hands trembled. There was a black-and-white image with a white circular outline. Inside the black part was a small, white blob shaped like a shrimp. I shook my head, confused, trying to understand what I was looking at. “What am I—” I started; my words stopped abruptly as I questioned if I was seeing what I thought I was.

It was an ultrasound.

*Ava Monroe, 29 years old. 8 weeks 3 days GA.*

I looked up at James in disbelief. Tears returned to his eyes, and he smiled.

“That’s our baby. This was taken a month ago, but we are having a baby.”

“I’m pregnant?” I asked breathlessly, returning my eyes to the ultrasound. I touched the tiny circle and inhaled sharply. “Our baby?” I repeated the words. I do the math in my head and realize I am twelve weeks pregnant and in shock.

“Are you okay?” He asked, concerned.

“I am. I didn’t think I could get pregnant after everything *he* did to me...*internally*. I never imagined I would be twelve weeks pregnant.” My eyes pricked, my stomach tightened, and I waited to see if he was upset. But he wasn’t. His face was filled with nothing but pure happiness. This precious gift in front of me made me happier than I had ever been in my life.

“Wait, are you okay with this?” I asked in a panic.

He grabbed my hands, kissed my fingers, and then placed his hand on my stomach gently. Pressing his lips to mine, he whispered against my lips. “I never thought I would be a dad. I didn’t think anything like this would happen to me. But then I met you. You completely changed my world for the better, Ava. Not only am I in love with the most beautiful, wild, strong girl in the whole world, but you are giving me the greatest gift I have ever received. I will spend the rest of my

life loving you and our baby Ava. I will protect both of you with my life. I am so in love with you.”

I closed my eyes and let his words wash over me, taking root in my soul. The darkness that had infected my soul for so many years was now being driven away by the light of the love he gave me. And the love I had for the tiny soul growing inside me. I never thought I would ever find someone to see the darkness that infected me and choose to love me anyway. He was patient, kind, and compassionate, and he protected my body and soul.

I held the photo of our baby while nurses and doctors came in to do their assessments. It didn't feel real. When the doctor offered to do an ultrasound, I couldn't contain my excitement. The doctor squeezes the cold gel on my exposed belly as I lay on the ultrasound table. She moves the wand around, pressing it firmly against my tiny swollen abdomen. I watched as the ultrasound picture came to life. She pointed out my uterus and the amniotic sac inside with a now gummy bear-shaped baby. James held my hand, letting his fingers softly calm my nerves. The soft thump of the baby's heart rate made my heart race. The image on the screen is blurry at first, but then it comes into focus. And there, in black and white, I see my baby. Our baby. My eyes well up with tears as I make out the little head, the curve of the spine, and the tiny fluttering heartbeat. This is a miracle that I never imagined I would dream about. My worry melts away as I think about this precious life I am carrying and that I already love so much.

The doctor points out the tiny hand with little fingers outstretched. She shows me the forming nose and lips, and I am filled with utter joy at the thought of kissing that perfect little face someday soon. This little being, no bigger than a plum right now, will be in my arms in just a few short months, relying on me for everything. This profound moment is powerful, and I am so full of love and happiness that I can feel it bursting out of me.

I tear my eyes away from the screen to look at James, grasping his hand tightly and meeting his gaze. He looks at me with pure admiration and love like I have never seen. The love

I see on his face mirrors the love I feel swelling within me. I turn back to the screen, memorizing every detail of this first glimpse of our baby.

“It looks like the baby’s heart rate is 150 beats and is strong. The amniotic sac is intact, and your baby is meeting the gestational age in growth. You are twelve weeks and three days currently.”

A smile covered my face as I listened to the steady cadence of her heartbeat and watched her jolt around, making small movements in my uterus. James kissed my forehead and held my hand as I let the doctor’s words sink in.

“Alright, Ava. I want to talk to you about caring for yourself when you get home. Your body has been through significant trauma, and it will take some time to heal. During pregnancy, your body shunts a lot of blood and nutrients to your growing baby, so I want to ensure that you take it easy when you get home. I would like for you to take it slow. Do not rush back into doing everything on your own. Let your husband take care of you.”

*Husband.*

My face burned in embarrassment. James squeezed my hand, and I could feel his eyes on me. I couldn’t look at him for fear of becoming a mortified mess in the hospital bed.

“Make sure you drink plenty of water, and if you feel any sudden or severe cramping or bleeding, head to the emergency department immediately.” The doctor continued. “I will have the nurses give you a list of obstetrical offices in the area. I would suggest getting in for an appointment as soon as you can. They will be able to monitor the baby and you closer.” She carefully pulled out the ultrasound probe and handed me a paper towel to clean up the extra lube. I took her hand and sat on the bed, covering my legs with the sheet.

“Thank you, Doctor. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course. If you’d like, I can start the discharge paperwork and get you home.”

“I would love to go home.”

She nodded and gave me a warm smile. “Congratulations to both of you.” She handed me a strip of new photos she had taken of the baby and left the room. I let out the breath I was holding with an exaggerated huff. I was filled with a sense of purpose again. At this moment, I promised our baby that I would do everything in my power to protect them. Nothing mattered as much to me as this baby and its daddy.

# FORTY

AVA

A few hours later, I was discharged and wheeled to the car. Everything looked different on the drive home. It was almost Halloween when I was last awake, and the leaves had just turned colors. Now, snow was on the ground, and stillness had settled in the air. James and I made small talk, and he told me how he had been forced to take some *administrative* time off from the FBI after finding out that his boss set me up as bait, and he all but murdered him. He told me about the funeral Sarah's family had for her in New York and talked about visiting her grave together and saying goodbye. He hadn't left my side once while I was in the hospital, and my heart swelled with appreciation, but I was sad that Sarah had died. Everett had stayed behind to be there for James for a few weeks but had to return to New York for a new case.

I listened as James described the man who had tormented me. His name was Benjamin Callahan, and he was a 38-year-old morgue technician. He bounced from place to place illegally, moving from location to location like a ghost. His malignant past of foster homes and abuse followed him like a black cloud, leading up to the day he murdered a prostitute on his eighteenth birthday. After serving four years in the Army Rangers, he was discharged for psychological issues that had remained undiscovered until now. The FBI pieced together a profile of his actions when they tied him back to over twenty murders which earned him the monicker, *The Skinner*.

The Skinner's latest dungeon of torture: a house no more than a mile from mine, was where he'd stalked me for months, collecting pictures of me and tracking my every move like a lion stalking its prey. Investigators found evidence that he meticulously planned each abduction, stalking victims for weeks and learning their routines before pouncing without being seen or leaving any evidence behind.



The FBI's investigation revealed Benjamin's motives as a cold-blooded hatred for women and a thirst for power and control. James guessed he was terrorizing me before he made the final move, his goal was to drive me into paranoia, and when I was teetering on the edge, he'd swoop in like a hawk to take his prey.

His words painted a petrifying image of Benjamin's decade-long mayhem fueled by his demented fixation on me. In his desperation for any link to me, he had broken into classified databases. He even pretended to be in love with the FBI case manager assigned to my protective custody file, searching for clues that would lead him to me. He seemed to have planned every abduction meticulously - watching his victims for weeks, learning their movements and routines - until the perfect opportunity arose to kidnap them without leaving any trace behind.

The FBI's negligence and incompetence caused a wave of destruction that cost many poor, unsuspecting women their lives. My file, which contained the clues to lead Benjamin right to me, had been mishandled and recklessly leaked due to internal mismanagement. James told me there had been an investigation, but all it did was rearrange furniture.

No real change came.

And no matter what I did, the memories lingered painfully like burning ashes on my tongue.

# FORTY-ONE

AVA

James pulled into my lane, and I quietly exited the car to gaze upon my house. I watched the snow falling silently in the forest, gently blanketing the trees and ground in a layer of pristine white. Snowflakes drifted lazily from the gray sky, twisting and turning as they fell to the ground. The tall evergreens stood like sentinels, their branches heavy with snow. No sounds disturbed the stillness except for the occasional *thump* as a clump of snow slid from a branch to the ground below.

I breathe in the crisp winter air and take in the freedom I feel for the first time in my life. The forest was transformed, the familiar greens and browns replaced by the monochromatic winter landscape. The trails through the trees and to my greenhouse were no longer visible, covered by a smooth carpet of snow. Animal tracks littered the ground—small indentations on the otherwise untouched surface. A light breeze shook the branches, dislodging more snow to float like feathers to the ground.

My breath left small mist clouds in the air, the only sound in the hushed silence of the land. I turn my head toward the sound of an owl hooting softly from a nearby tree and wait until it falls quiet once more. The sun is hidden behind the clouds, casting a pearly glow through the skeletal branches. This tranquil, timeless scene gives me great peace I didn't realize I needed. The forest rested, patient and waiting for me to return as the snow descended from the quiet sky above. The destruction of my house and my land is no more. The snow covers the burnt ground, and the broken windows that night have been replaced.

James moved behind me silently, and I was startled when he wrapped his arms around me, seeking my permission through his actions. I tense at first, caught off guard by the sudden contact. I was so engrossed in the fresh air and the pure

scenery around me that I didn't even hear him move. I relaxed into his embrace, inhaling his woodsy scent. Leaning back further, I savored the warmth of his body and the feel of his chest against my body. His arms were comforting to me. From the first time he held me, I found comfort and security in his touch.

I always appreciated how thoughtful he was. He always sought my consent first and was patient as I adjusted to his closeness. His simple gestures went further than he could ever realize. He gave affection so freely, and I craved him every second of every day.

I turned my body towards him and nestled my head against his chest, wrapping my arms around him. An overwhelming wave of emotion washed over me—mostly happiness, but also deep gratitude for this man who had come into my life when I least expected it and calmed the storm raging within. He accepted me for every dark mark on my soul, loving me for it all the same. He had uncovered parts of myself that I never knew existed, and I found in him a love I never believed was real, one I memorized like the words to my favorite song. Every word. Every breath. Every kiss. Every touch. The truth was, he had touched my soul long before his hands ever knew me, and he was now a part of me that I never wished to be without again.

I let out a sigh that sounded more like a moan when his hands stroked up and down my back, stirring a familiar ache between my legs. The growl he released in response to the moan I hadn't meant to make was intoxicating. I could feel his body responding to my touch, but like the gentleman he was, he would wait for me to give him permission. After waking up and knowing that the killer was finally dead and he couldn't touch me anymore, I felt the weight I had carried all these years disappear. I was no longer afraid of intimacy, not with James. I felt safe with him, and he respected my boundaries. And as grateful as I was for that, right now, I could only think about how badly I wanted him to touch me, kiss me, and love me. I needed him like I needed the air in my lungs.

I pulled my head away from his chest and stared up into his deep blue eyes. I could drown in those cerulean blue irises that darkened with his lust. The way he looks at me with pure wanton need. The same way I feel towards him. I stand on my tiptoes, run my hands up his neck, and grip his hair in my fingertips. My heart races wildly, and my blood thunders in my veins. He brushes my hair back away from my face, letting his fingertips linger on my skin, then trails them down and wraps his hand around my neck.

He looks at me, hunger in his eyes, and my resolve crumbles inside me. “What do you want, baby?”

Heat reaches my cheeks, not embarrassment this time, but something more.

Different.

Exciting.

I smile at him and pull away, walking toward the house. Daring him to follow. I barely reach the door before he unlocks it for me and pulls me inside. He slams the door shut, locking it swiftly before I am in his arms, my lips smashing against his. Before I know it, he has me laid down on the dark gray rug in my living room. I watch him throw some wood in the fireplace, stoking the fire, and then return with a blanket for me.

Always so thoughtful.

Always so protective of me.

I lay back on my elbows and watched him unbutton his flannel shirt, exposing his beautiful chest. I watched every muscle move, the light dusting of dark hair on his chest, and that *V*. I knew what it led to, and my stomach tightened as the familiar need centered between my thighs. I got on my knees, yanked his belt off, and unzipped his pants. He watched me pull his jeans down, letting them pool to the ground. His cock flung out, hard and ready for me. I wrapped my hand around his length, and he moaned as his eyes fluttered closed. I wrapped my lips around him and sucked him into my mouth, twisting my tongue around his tip and up and down. I tasted

the salty precum and moved up and down, using my saliva to run my hands up and down. His hands wove through my long locks, and his moans built the more I took him in my mouth.

“Ava, that feels so good.” He growled.

I wanted him to feel how much I needed him. This was how I could show him I was his and he was mine. There was no one else but us. I felt him pull me away, and when I looked up at him confused, he kneeled in front of me and cupped my face in his hands.

“I was so afraid I was going to lose you, Ava. I thought I would never get these moments with you again.” His thumb trailed softly against my lip. “I wouldn’t have survived.” His voice broke, full of emotion, and his eyes filled with tears.

I pushed my chest forward, breaking the distance between us, and I pressed my lips to his. “I am here, James. Because of you, I am still here. You saved me.”

“I would fight all the angels in heaven and all the demons in hell for you, baby. For our baby.” He touched my tiny swollen belly and pressed his forehead against mine, closing his eyes.

He undressed me and let his eyes roam down my naked body.

“You are so fucking beautiful, Ava. Seeing you carry my baby inside you makes me so fucking happy. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to be a man that is worthy of you and a father that our baby deserves. I love you and will spend the rest of my life protecting you and our child.”

“I love you, and we are both so lucky to have you.” I put his hand gently on my stomach. “Now, tell me you love me while you are inside me,” I whisper, need pooling between my legs. “Please.”

“Every fucking day, baby.”

He lays me down, and I spread my thighs apart. He ran his fingers up and down my slit, and I shivered in anticipation. His cock teased my entrance, sliding in and out as he spread

my moisture all over his tip. Just when I thought I would burst, he pushed himself inside me, and the explosion of pleasure as he stretched me was almost too much. I gasped as he pushed deeper, filling me to the brim. He paused and looked at me with concern.

“Am I hurting you or the baby?”

“No, James. The baby and I are fine. It just feels so good. Please don’t stop.”

And he didn’t.

He thrust himself inside, and I could feel my pleasure building. Something about being pregnant intensified the sensations, and I knew I wouldn’t last long. I dug my fingers into his ass and pulled him to me. His lips moved up and down my neck, and he sucked my nipples into his mouth. My breasts were fuller than normal, and my nipples had become a darker shade of pink.

Another pregnancy side effect.

“I could never get enough of you.” He whispered in my ear.

“I’m going to come, James. I can’t hold it.”

“Wait for me, baby.” He moaned, his movements becoming faster.

I feel his grip tightening around me. Intense pleasure washed over me as I came with him, feeling his own release filling me. James let out a moan, and his body stilled. He collapsed beside me, his chest rising and falling as he regained his breath. He drew me close to him, and I rested my head on his chest, relaxing to the soothing rhythm of his breathing.

Everything I survived was meant to break me; some days, it did.

But all the pain led me to this moment.

This is a pure moment of happiness.

Sometimes, I thought the only thing I wanted to do was disappear, but now I realize that all I wanted was to be found.

My past may never leave my bones, like the salt in the sea, they are a part of me, but with James, I know now I will never have to carry them alone.

As he covered my naked body with a blanket, I drifted into a peaceful sleep.

For the first time in years, my dreams were filled with visions of a beautiful future.

The chains that bound me had broken.

*I am finally free.*

# EPILOGUE

## AVA

*New York: One Month Later*

I stood at the window, mesmerized by the sea of lights illuminating the cityscape below. All of Manhattan glowed like a beacon from 20 stories up. I was utterly transfixed by its beauty. James and I had spent almost two weeks with each other, with no distractions, naked and having a lot of sex, before he was called back to New York.

When James asked me to go with him, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief, knowing I would get to be with him during my pregnancy. I knew Sherrie would keep my house and greenhouse safe while I was away, but what moved me more than anything else was the chance to start a new life without the oppressive darkness that had been cast over me by Skinner for so long. My tiny baby bump flourished, and I'd soon be five months pregnant. This little miracle grew stronger each day, and I was thankful for every second I carried him or her. James had been the ever-doting partner, making sure I took my multivitamin each day and holding my hair back as nausea had me hunched over the toilet, spewing my guts out.

James was working late, a consequence of his insubordination and his assault on his boss, Javier Martinez. I hated that he wasn't home until late, but I supported his hard work.

The TV blares, the harshness of its sudden volume ringing in my ears. I flinch as a breaking news announcement cuts through the air. The newscaster's voice takes on an urgent tone. "Breaking news out of Virginia. A decade-long manhunt for Benjamin Callahan has come to a head after FBI agents found and shot him dead. He was responsible for murdering at least twenty women during his violent killing spree. Our



sources say he was stalking one of his victims, Ava Thompson, now Monroe, who had escaped and been placed in protective custody. Ava testified against David Commons, who was convicted of these murders and sent to prison. Commons has been exonerated of the murders and was released a month ago. We have reached out to him and look forward to hearing his story. One thing is for sure, the FBI and Ava Monroe made a serious error, costing Commons ten years of his life.”

My heart pounded as I heard her speak. I was so lost in the conversation that I didn’t hear James come in. I was startled when he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my stomach, and kissed my neck.

“Hey, baby,” he whispered into my ear.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you come in,” I returned in breathless surprise.

“I thought you heard me calling your name. What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, I was watching the news,” I sighed heavily. “Commons was released, and they officially named me, letting everyone know I was still alive.” I couldn’t keep the anguish out of my voice.

“How did they figure that out?” His tone hardened slightly.

“They claimed a source told them,” I spat with contempt.

“Ah, of course. I’m sorry, baby.”

“I just don’t think I can handle the world knowing about me since I testified against Commons and exposed him as my kidnapper and torturer.”

James nodded abruptly and pulled me closer to him until every inch of my body melted into his. “It wasn’t your fault, baby. The FBI used you, and you are just as much of a victim as Commons is. Don’t waste any more time worrying about it; it isn’t good for you or *our* baby.”

The thunderous beat of my heart began to slow as his words comforted me and brought peace back into my soul. He lovingly ran his hands through my hair before tenderly pressing his lips against mine. I exhaled deeply before leaning against him and pressing my forehead against his chest with closed eyes.

“You’re right.”

He chuckled softly before teasingly saying, “Wait, did I just hear you tell me I am right? Is it my birthday or something?”

“Ha. Ha. Smart ass.” I chuckled. “But, yes, I did.” I turned and wrapped my arms around him, pressing my lips against his.

“I missed you today,” he breathed in between kisses.

“You did?” I asked teasingly before melting into his embrace once more.

“Mmhm.” He smiled against my skin, sending fresh shivers down my spine.

“Well then, how about you show me how much you’ve missed me?” I suggested when we were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell ringing incessantly.

“Ignore it,” James growled lustfully against my earlobe, causing me to shiver in anticipation.

The bell rang again, making me sigh softly before telling him,

“Ugh, if we don’t answer, they will keep ringing the doorbell,” I told him and pulled away, heading towards the door. When I opened it, a UPS delivery guy was waiting with a small package.

“Good evening. Are you Ava Monroe?” He asked me.

“Yes, I am.”

“Good. Could you please sign right here?”

“Yes.” I took the device he offered me and signed the tiny screen.

He took it back and handed me the box. “All set. You have a great night, ma’am.”

“You too.”

I closed the door and returned inside, where James stood by the kitchen counter, pouring himself a glass of water.

“Someone sent me something,” I said, placing the mysterious package on the table.

James raised an eyebrow while I examined the label; there was only my name and address but no sender information. Taking a deep breath, I slowly opened it, and my heart stopped as soon as I saw what was inside – a picture of me walking down the street, cradling my tiny baby bump.

On the back of the picture were the menacing words: “*A life for a life.*”

*To be continued...*

# Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I am thankful for my Heavenly Father for this life he has blessed me with, and this restless, gypsy soul he created inside me.

I want to thank my husband, Tim for supporting me during school, and having my back through all my crazy ideas, and following me as I pursue my dreams—even when they change every month! I never knew that my fairy tale would be a dark-haired, military man that teaches people to survive in the wild. There is a little bit of you in every man I write. You've captured my heart since the day I first saw you, and I'll never tire of your random survival facts—how else would I know how many calories a dandelion has? Our life together has been full of trials and trauma, but it sure has given us a good sense of humor!

*Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same. -Emily Bronte*

I love you endlessly, babe.

To my children, being your mother has been the single-most beautiful thing I have ever done. There will never be the right words to describe the depth of my love for you all. You have been my strength when I haven't felt very strong, and my comfort during the storms. No matter what life has thrown me, you make life worth living. You are what keeps me going, and I will never stop fighting to create the life that you deserve. I will burn the world to keep you safe. I will love you in this world and the next. Thank you for choosing me as your mama.

To my parents, thank you for supporting me when I left home at eighteen with the dream of saving the world. I am sorry for the sleepless nights, and the fear you felt when I was in Afghanistan. Mom, thank you for not getting mad when I

snuck your romance books as a kid and read them under my blankets with a flashlight. And thank you for not embarrassing me over it. It is because of you, I fell in love with books, and now look at me, I wrote a book! Thank you for listening to me while I told you about the trauma I survived, and loving me while I was trying to heal and wasn't very loveable. Dad, my entire life I have looked up to you. You have always been my example of what a man should be. Thank you for passing along your OCD, without it, I probably wouldn't be where I am. Also, you might not want to skip right to the acknowledgements, because I am not sure you are ready to take a peek into your daughter's dark and twisted imagination. Keep picturing me as the cute, tom-boy whose favorite color is pink, and loves wearing your work boots. I love you both, more than I could ever show.

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Hang on tight, my friends. There is so much more I want to show you.

## About The Author

### **E. L. Emkey**

E. L. Emkey is a hopeless romantic and a caffeine addict. and a lover of 6' 4" walking red flags that make a good girl bad.

She was born and raised in Illinois but has a restless soul and joined the United States Air Force to travel the world and serve her country. She met her handsome MMC, and they lived happily ever after with six children, two dogs, multiple rescue cats, and ten chickens in Idaho.

Erika has always been an avid reader since she was little. She was barely out of diapers when she used books to travel to other worlds, and then she decided to create her own. By using her experiences and trauma, she creates stories about survivors. She does not promise sunshine and roses in her books, but you will watch the transformation of her characters, and you will fall in love with their resilience and courage.

When she is not writing, she is doing her best to save lives as a nurse and continuing her education to become a midwife and a nurse practitioner.

Want to get updates about her new releases and works in progress? Follow her on Facebook at Author E.L. Emkey VIP Reader Group. You can also find her on TikTok and Instagram at Author E.L. Emkey.