

BROOKLYN CROSS

BAD GIRL
SMILE

UNHAPPY
KATIE

BUCHANAN BROTHERS NEXT GENERATION BOOK 1

BROOKLYN CROSS



**UNHINDED
KALLIE**

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UNHINGED RALLIE





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UNHINGED KALLIE

Buchanan Brothers Next Generation

Written by: Brooklyn Cross

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Humility

The Brothers of Shadow and Death Series

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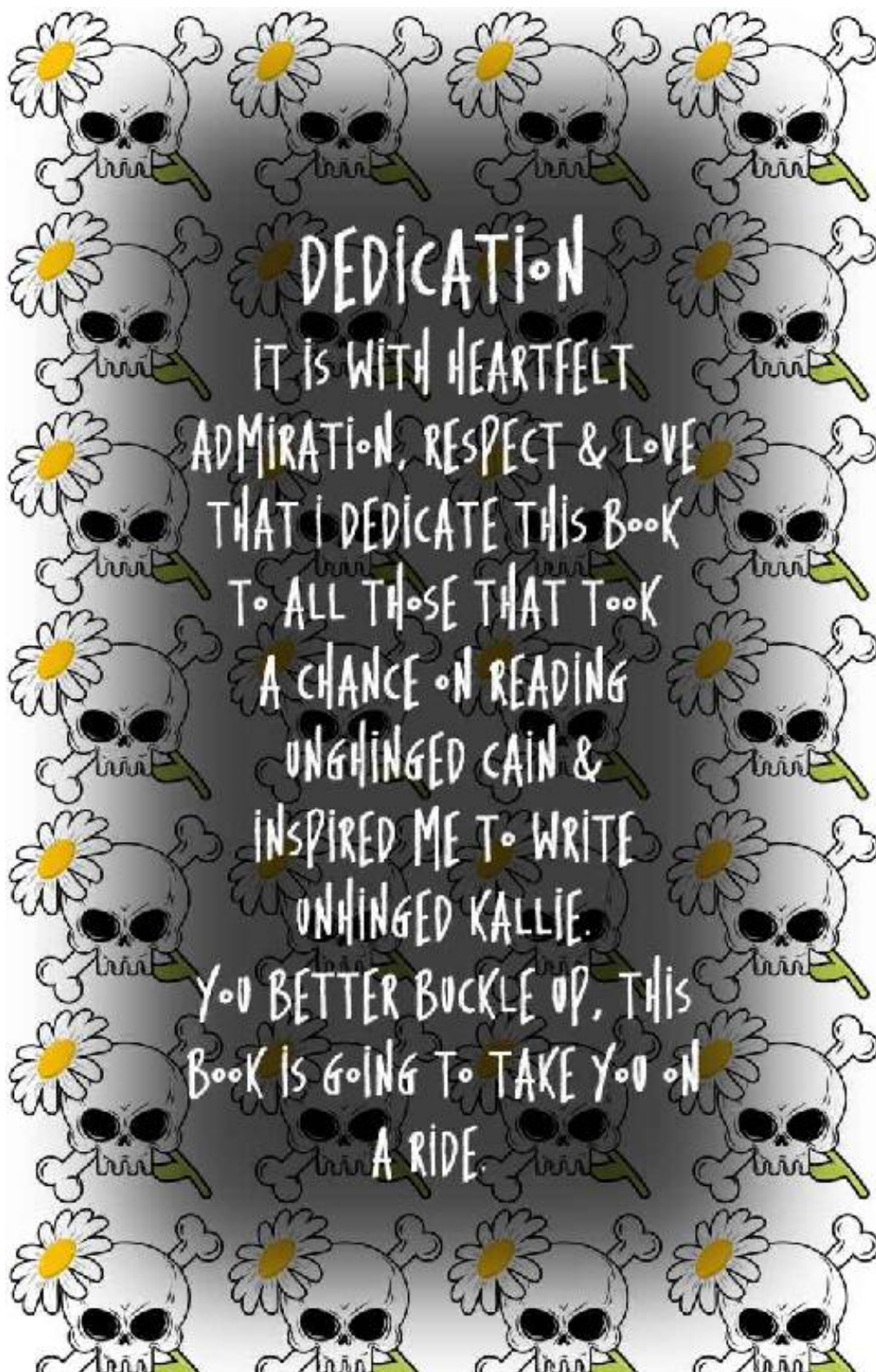
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PLAYLIST

SUPERHERO - AIM VISION
HIGHWAY TO HELL - AC/DC
THANK YOU - CHLOE KOTANSKI
LET SOMEBODY GO - ROLDFPLAY X SELENA GOMEZ
ALL I REALLY WANT - ALANIS MORISSETTE
TAKE ON ME - A-MA
DO I WANNA KNOW? - ARTI MONKEYS
THE GREY - BAD OMENS
HELLTIRE - BARNY SCURTNEY
DOLLS - BELLA POARCH
BAD GUY - BILLIE EILISH
IRONIC - ALANIS MORISSETTE
JUST THE WAY YOU ARE - BRUNO MARS
ANGEL - SARAH MCLACHLAN
GOLDEN HOUR - JAYE

PLAYLIST

POISON - BEL DIV DEVOE
CHEMICAL - POST MALONE
SOMEBODY'S WATCHING ME - ROCKWELL
AN UNHEALTHY OBSESSION - THE BLAKE ROBINSON
SYNTHETIC
NEVER GONNA LET YOU GO - ESTEREO
CREEP - DANIELA ANDRADE
MISSED ME - THE DRESDEN DOLLS
CAN'T GET YOU OUT OF MY HEAD - SYLIE WIMMOGUE
YOU'RE IN LOVE WITH A PSYCHO - SASARTAN
GET JINXED - LEAGUE OF LEGENDS & DJERY
THE DISMEMBERMENT SONG - BLUE PTD
LOSE CONTROL - TEDDY SWIMS
ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST - QUEEN
YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE - CRISTINA FERRI



DEDICATION

IT IS WITH HEARTFELT
ADMIRATION, RESPECT & LOVE
THAT I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO ALL THOSE THAT TOOK
A CHANCE ON READING
UNHINGED CAIN &
INSPIRED ME TO WRITE
UNHINGED KALLIE.
YOU BETTER BUCKLE UP, THIS
BOOK IS GOING TO TAKE YOU ON
A RIDE.

Chapter One

“**Y**ou’re a stubborn one, aren’t you?”

Travis was still trying to fight through the reality that he had a knife piercing the back of his throat.

His eyes were wide with shock as his brain tried to rationalize that he was going to die. “You really are quite a bore, Travis, and here I thought you were a complicated, unique character.” I stood up straight and sighed. “You’re actually a depressing husk of useless blubbering flesh with a little worm for a dick. Uninspiring.”

A gurgle bubbled up from his chest, and blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. I felt the anger at the insult shift the energy in the room despite him being unable to move. There he was, the rapist who hid under the sweet, sexy exterior he portrayed to the world. It was the smile that had gotten him off of all charges multiple times. It was also the smile that wooed his victims as effectively as a South American jungle cat mimicking the cries of a baby monkey to lure in its victims. He had a classic sexy look that women swooned over, add in the charismatic charm and millions in his bank account and he was downright irresistible. At least he was until he flipped the switch and became, The East Side Rapist.

“You know what I think would look nice on you? A picture carved into your cheek. You have the perfect muscular jaw for it, and I don’t normally take the time when I’m this busy, so you should be flattered.” His blue eyes found mine. “I see the darkness in you. You know the thing trying to get out? The thing that is right now fantasizing about killing me with the same knife lodged in the back of your throat.”

Picking up my favorite tool, I leaned over Travis again. His eyes had dulled a little more, and his will to fight was leaving as steadily as the blood draining from the small cuts. It was highly disappointing that Travis didn't have any last confessions. The delicious tales of other's kills had become just as enticing and soothing to my soul as my colorful eye collection.

All kills fell into one of three categories. The first were those that screamed, cried, and begged in epic proportions that any pastor would yell 'Amen' over. They promised ridiculous things, from their wealth to sexual favors, just for the chance at living one more day. They did stay true to their selfish natures and were the first to turn on someone else in their final moments. At the end of the day, I enjoyed their screams, but they were useless sacs of air, and society was better off without them.

The second were those that felt they needed to repent their sins. I smiled as they tried to cleanse their souls of the evil they had done by praying to a mythical place called heaven with an invisible, mystical force. The assholes, cheaters, thieves, and frauds of the world used going to church as their *Get Out of Jail Free* card. They were the neighbor that smiled to your face but talked shit about you behind your back. I loved to call this group my version of Karens of the world. They always used their final gasp of breath to share their deepest truths. They were the biggest fools of the three, and I chuckled, watching them squirm under my blade.

The third and final category wore a similar mask to mine. They were the ones that stalked their prey, tasted blood, and understood the meaning of true power. The ones that relished in the things they did. This group enjoyed the depraved parts of their personality, and when pressured, they spilled their sins. Unlike group two, they only shared to gloat. A final callout to the world about how great they were at what they did. The masks they wore to cover who they truly were would lift, and you got a glimpse of the horror that lived underneath just before they died.

This final group was my favorite. They were a challenge, and I had changed my tactics to hunt the hunters. So far, I was still at the top of the fucking food chain.

I documented every little detail and kept it in a journal that had become incredibly helpful to Kirby in solving missing-person cases. What an entirely strange turn of events that led me to this moment, yet there wasn't anything I'd change. Kirby was mine the moment I saw her, and she molded into the perfect partner, the perfect balance I'd been craving. If anyone ever hurt her, hell itself would open to drag them down. There was nothing and no one in this world that would stop me from slitting their throat and dancing in their blood. No one hurt what was mine.

I put the final touches on Travis's cheek, confident it was one of the best I'd ever done. I had chosen the All-Seeing Eye, and it was magnificent.

"Have you changed your mind about your final words? Maybe a confession or two? I mean, you must have raped more than twelve girls. That's child's play." His eyes found mine, and he managed to glare, showing the true Travis. He was definitely in group three but wanted to keep his secrets. Very interesting. Sometimes you had to concede that there may not be any more names to give.

"I guess some predators are better than others." I smiled at him, stepping back to see the carving from a distance.

"Stunning."

Cleaning off the blade, I laid it down and picked up my camera to photograph the masterpiece. Travis's body twitched, and he pulled against the restraints.

"Oh, did you want to see?"

I held up the camera for him to see the artwork on the side of his face that just so happened to show the massive knife handle sticking out of his mouth. In the quiet room, I could just make out the distinct sound of his heart thumping faster.

"Don't hold back, Travis. Tell me what you think."

"Yuk u. U iko."

“Such a foul mouth you have, Travis. Maybe I’ll keep your tongue as well as your eyes.”

I took my time cleaning the rest of my tools and glanced over my shoulder at the still-breathing Travis. He was really starting to annoy me now.

“Are you going to die soon, Travis? I have a schedule to keep, and at the moment, you’re threatening my evening plans.”

“Yuk u,” Travis gurgled and then choked on the blood pooling in the back of his throat.

“Fine, I’ll concede you’re right. This is my fault.” Turning around, I watched the blood slowly drain out of Travis leaving long rivers of red in the collector drains. I wanted to play with him a little longer, but I still needed to cook dinner for Kirby. There was a pot roast in the oven, and I planned on making fingerling potatoes, baby carrots, crunchy kale salad, and of course, my signature gravy.

Leaning over Travis, I could tell he didn’t have long. “Travis, do me a favor. If there is actually a hell, which I doubt but if there is, save me a seat.” Grabbing the knife, I pushed the handle through his neck so it pierced his spinal cord. The tip hit the metal table with a ting, and with a quick twist of my wrist, the cord snapped, along with the light in his eyes.

Travis convulsed once but then went perfectly still. It was a very pleasant way to die. He couldn’t complain. I’d done far worse to others. I didn’t even cut off body parts other than his cock, but that was nothing. Literally. Damn it, I should’ve made him choke on his cock. Now that would’ve been entertaining. I wrote the idea down and slipped the knife from Travis’s mouth.

The door to my work area opened, and Kirby walked in like a summer breeze. Her fresh scent filled my nose, and her smile brightened any room.

“Hello, Sunshine.”

“Hi, Sexy,” she answered and met me in the middle of the room. She always greeted me the same way. Wrapping her

arms around my neck, we kissed as if I was her entire world. At least, I better be. “Is that Travis Larue?”

Slipping Kirby’s hand in mine, I walked over to her latest present. “It is. He was much easier to find and capture than I originally thought. His camera system was sad and he thought he was untouchable which made him stupid.”

“Did he mention anyone else?”

I shook my head and released her hand to undo the shackles that held Travis’s body to the table. “No, I was quite disappointed.”

“I can see that,” she said teasingly, and I smirked, knowing she was staring at all the wounds made by an assortment of weapons. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Not since this morning.” I licked my lips as I pictured how she looked on her knees, gagging herself on my cock. “Why are you home early? Is everything okay?”

“I think so,” she said, and I cocked my brow at her. She nibbled on her lip, her amazing violet eyes bouncing around the room nervously.

Her hands played with the bottom of her suit jacket as I stepped toward her. Slipping my arms around her, I tried to judge what she was nervous about telling me.

“What is it?”

She kept looking down, and my temper flared. My hand snaked into her hair, and I pulled her head back, forcing her to look at me.

“What did I tell you about not looking me in the eyes?” Her pulse jumped, but she didn’t fight my hold. “Did someone touch you?”

“No.”

“Did they hit on you?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

Kirby moaned as I leaned down and bit the side of her neck. “Tell me, Kirby, or I’m going to assume the worst, and

that may not end well for whomever I suspect.” She always smelled so fucking good, and my cock thickened in my jeans with just one inhale.

“I...” She licked her lips. “I’m, oh wow, this is hard.”

“You’re what?” I could feel her trembling in my grasp, the thread of fear making me hard, and I was tempted to lay her over Travis and fuck the answer out of her. I was not exactly a patient person.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered so softly I wasn’t sure I heard her right.

“What?” I released her hair, and she took a deep breath locking eyes with me.

“I’m pregnant.”

All the blood storming around my system, ready to go on a rampage, froze as the words bounced around my brain. “Pregnant? As in...our baby?”

I chuckled as she cocked her brow like I would, the look saying, ‘Yes, stupid.’ We’d been having unprotected sex for over a year without any luck, so I’d focused on other things rather than obsessing every time Kirby bought a test.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes,” she said softly. I grabbed her face and slammed my lips to hers. So few things interested me, but having a child of my own had been at the top of my list ever since I laid eyes on my violet-eyed beauty. Her mouth was hot, and she opened wide for me to consume every corner.

Smiling, I broke the kiss. “I’m going to fuck you now.”

Kirby looked at Travis’s body. “But...he’s still on the table.”

With a hard push, Travis fell with a thud to the floor. “Now it’s clear.”

Kirby laughed as she undid the buttons on her navy jacket and kicked off the matching heels of the standard FBI uniform.

“You’re going to need a new blouse,” I said, gripping the front of her shirt and ripping it open. Kirby gasped as little white buttons flew in all directions and pinged off the metal counters and floors. I took a moment and stared at the artwork carved into her stomach, my latest masterpiece, and placed my hand on her belly.

“No one will ever touch what is mine. I meant that when I said it to you, and I mean it now for our baby. Do you believe me?”

“I do,” she said, tears trickling down her cheeks.

“That’s my Sunshine.”

Chapter Two

There were very few moments over the course of my life when I wished I could feel the full range of human emotion. Most of the time, they were useless and got in the way of what people really wanted to say or do, but today was one of those rare days.

I'd been patiently waiting for this moment. The spark of excitement that flooded my body when Kirby said she was pregnant was a rush, and if I'd felt that, then how did she feel?

I watched her face closely. The wide smile, flush to her cheeks, and the rapidly beating pulse in her neck all told me she was excited. Maybe a little nervous, but ultimately she was happy.

Touching that jumping pulse in her neck, I felt the blood under my fingertips.

“What is it like?”

“The excitement?”

She always knew what I wanted to know. It was something else that I loved about her. She'd found a way to read my needs and moods as easily as I could read hers. I nodded, and she bit her lip the way I loved as she thought.

“You know that rush you get when you're closing in on a mark, especially one that has taken you a long time to find?”

“Yes.”

Wiggling her hips, she slipped out of her skirt and tossed it against the wall where she had once been chained. I knew exactly how many days it had been since I released her

shackles, yet it felt like yesterday. The ripped blouse was next to go as it slid down her arms and dropped to the floor. She turned around, and I unclipped the bra but held her shoulders, keeping her in place.

My finger traced her spine and the tattoo that said *Sunshine*. Goosebumps rose on her skin, and it was invigorating to know that I still affected her with the lightest of touches.

“You can move now,” I breathed against the side of her neck and smirked as she swayed on her feet. She let the bra fall to the ground, and with a flick of her toes, the blouse and bra joined her skirt.

“You know the thrill you get when you create a piece of artwork that is so perfect and beautiful you hate to tear your eyes away?” I followed her hands as she caressed and then pinched her nipples.

“Yes.”

Taking out her clip and running her fingers through her hair, it fell like a waterfall over her shoulders as she shook her head. I couldn't wait to wrap my hand in those long strands and make her scream my name. From the moment I saw her, she affected me in ways I'd never felt before. That I thought I would never feel. Every move she made held me in a trance.

My already hard cock throbbed in my jeans, and I took a steadying breath. Kirby rose up on her delicate toes, the purple polish that matched her eyes bright next to the dark floor as she stepped toward me like a mythical creature.

My heart rarely pounded hard, but it was beating out of my chest as she snaked her arms around my neck and brushed her lips against mine.

“You know when you take that final killing blow, and the satisfaction and power flood your system?” Kirby whispered.

“Yes.”

“Take all that, combine it, and times it by an infinite number. That's how I feel about being pregnant and carrying our child.”

“I wish I could feel all of that.” The truth of who and what I was, weighed on me in this moment between us.

“You do, in your own way.” Kirby laid her hand over my heart and smiled. “Your heart only beats this fast for me, and I know you’ll feel the same for our child. I also know that you would protect us at all costs.”

Her stunning eyes filled with tears, but she still smiled as she slid her hand up my chest to grip the back of my neck. “There is no greater act of love than how you will protect us. You will do what others’ ethics and morals would never allow, and I feel sorry for all other women. I’m the lucky one to have you.”

Gripping Kirby’s waist, I lifted her, and she laughed as she looked down at me. The ends of her hair tickled my face, and I smiled up at my Sunshine. “You are the sun in my life.”

Kirby knew what I was feeling with a single look and always knew what to say or do to calm the parts of me that were volatile and unpredictable.

She squealed as I sat her on the cold metal table. Attacking her mouth, I swallowed the squeak she made down like a fucking dessert, but I needed to hear her scream. I pulled her to the edge and stepped between her legs. The passive girl, denying her dark desires, was gone, and in her wake was the woman I knew she was meant to be. I grabbed the edge of the table, muscles straining as I held back. She needed to beg first.

“I want to paint you red,” I said, laying my thumbs and part of my palm down into the drain with Travis’s blood.

The curl that graced her lips could rival any demon. I groaned as she sucked my bottom lip into her mouth. “I’m yours. Do what you want.”

“Fuck, you drive me insane, Sunshine. If I believed in God, I’d say you were sent from heaven.”

“Maybe I was sent, but it wasn’t God that sent me.” She smirked, and my already racing heart pounded harder.

Red droplets dripped onto the metal table as I lifted my hands, sprinkling down on her like a rain shower hitting her

skin. The red looked exquisite against the pale color of her flesh, sliding down like a piece of abstract art. There was nothing more beautiful than my Sunshine covered in blood. The slickness of it between our bodies as I fucked her was addicting on every level. The metallic taste of her blood on my tongue was better than any meal.

My hands created art on her skin with the blood as I nibbled her neck, making my Sunshine moan. Drawing wet lines with my tongue from her collarbone to her ear, she wiggled closer, silently begging me to fuck her. The table was the perfect height for me to feel the heat of her pussy, and my well-crafted control slipped a little.

“Get undressed and fuck me,” Kirby growled. Grabbing my wrist, she put my hand between her legs, my thumb traveling up the small piece of fabric she claimed was underwear. I hated that she wore such desirable undergarments for any reason other than for me, but it was all she had, and she refused to buy something else. Between the triangle piece of lace or nothing, I chose lace and to kill any man that looked at her in a way I didn’t like. My first choice of locking her in the house had earned me a glare which I fucked off of her face but conceded to her wish.

The pretty, purple fabric was soaking wet, and Sunshine moaned loudly, pressing harder into my hand as my thumb rubbed in circles. “Yes, oh Cain, yes.”

“Beg for me, Sunshine.”

“Please fuck me, Cain,” she said, her voice seductive and feathery. “Please, I’m begging you, I have to have you.” Kirby pouted, her eyes locking with mine while she wiggled around on the table.

My body was hot, and the blood coursing through my veins made it difficult to think about anything other than my Sunshine and the feel of her heat gripping me as I pushed my cock into her. She was made for me. The needy look on her face and continuous whimpers as if she were in pain made me shiver.

My aching cock pressed against the fly of my jeans, demanding to be set free. She was the only thing in this world that affected me this way. All my other passions paled in comparison to my Sunshine.

“Please, Cain, I need you.”

“Then undo my jeans,” I said, watching her shaking hands reach for my belt. The moment my zipper came down, I groaned like an animal as her hand slipped inside and wrapped around my aching shaft. Kirby’s grip tightened like she was my personal cock ring, and the throbbing desire got worse until my cock head felt like it was going to explode.

I liked to see how long I could withstand it before I had to have her, and with each passing second, my ability to be gentle slipped a fraction more. My body shook with the delicious pain.

“Fuck me, Cain,” Kirby purred against my neck. “Please, I can’t take it anymore. I need you now.” She kissed my neck, and I could feel the soft scraping of her teeth.

“You’re being a bad girl, Sunshine,” I said, shivering.

“Am I,” she said in a sweet singsong manner.

“You know what you’re doing to me.” Gripping her face, I squeezed her cheeks, but she didn’t try to escape. I sucked in a sharp breath, my body throbbing. I could feel it in my fingers and toes. I could feel it in my throat, and even my heart pounded in time to the aching need between my legs. “Fuck.”

“Fuck me. I need you.”

I stepped away from the table until Kirby’s hand slipped from my jeans and growled as my cock jerked. It was sheer willpower that forced the orgasm back down into my balls, and a pout formed on her perfect lips.

“Take your underwear off.”

Laying back, she lifted her hips, and within seconds the purple thong was off. Before she could toss the underwear, I snatched it from her hand.

Turning them inside out, I stared into Sunshine's eyes as I slowly drew the material down my tongue. I did it again and again until her sweet taste filled my mouth. Then I brought the garment to my nose, breathing in and letting her scent fill me.

"I love it when you do that," Kirby said. "Makes me want to masturbate in the car before I get out and give them to you so I can watch you do that."

"You better fucking not," I growled. Pushing her knees open wide as I dove between her legs, making her cry out. "All your orgasms are mine. You never have one without me, do you understand?"

Kirby wailed as my tongue swirled around her clit and dove deep into her folds. My nose pressed tight against her wet pussy, and if I could, I would bottle that fucking scent.

"Yes," she yelled, her orgasm closing in.

"Do you touch yourself at work?"

Her head rocked back and forth. "No."

"But you want to?"

"Sometimes, when I think of you."

"But you never touch yourself?" She shook her head again. "You've never lifted your skirt and sat at your desk with two fingers shoved inside your cunt?"

"No, I swear. Ah, fuck. Cain, please don't stop. I'm so close," she said, so I lifted my head and watched her thrash on the metal table as she forced herself on to complete the climax. Her hips pumped in the open air as if she would magically find my cock hanging over her.

"Slide up the table and lay down with your arms above your head."

Kirby did as I asked without hesitation and let her legs fall open again. I loved that even without using words, she was begging me for what she wanted, and what she wanted was me.

I tapped the metal shackle that would hold her arms firm. There was no give to these and no soft fur or leather to keep from rubbing the skin raw. These were meant for one thing, to keep my victims from moving, yet Kirby laid her wrists down and let me snap them shut with a click that was loud in the quiet room.

Ripping off the rest of my clothes, I threw them to join the pile by the wall but kept her underwear wrapped around my hand. A prize I didn't intend to give up. When I tapped a button on my phone, the room filled with drums and an electric guitar as rock music blared through the speakers.

Walking to the end of the table, I looked down the length of her body at how vulnerable she allowed herself to be with me. At any time, I could slit her throat open, and even though she knew it was a possibility I would kill her someday, she stayed. Grabbing the sides of the table, I lifted myself up. Kirby's eyes never left my hard muscles flexing with every inch I crawled closer to my prey.

"Do you trust me?" I knew the answer but loved to hear her say the words.

"Yes, always."

Hovering, I stared down at the red lines that looked like giant claw marks had ravaged her body and shivered with the dark desires that filled me. Slipping the head of my cock inside of her, I groaned but held perfectly still. Right on cue, Kirby's hips wiggled back and forth, then humped up to force me inside her, but I followed her movements, loving the wild, frustrated noises she made.

"Cain, please," she begged.

Smiling, I slammed into her, and she screamed my name.

"Such a good girl, Sunshine."

Kirby panted, "Yes."

"Are you going to squirt for me? We're not leaving this room until you coat my cock and make a mess of this table." She licked her lips and nodded slowly. "You don't seem

certain, but I don't care if the corpse on the floor begins to stink. We will not leave here until then, but I'll help you out."

Kirby was not naturally a squirter. I'd made her do it a handful of times, and each one felt like a victory, and I wanted one today.

Laying my hand with the panties wrapped around my palm over her mouth, I smirked.

"Bite the material, and don't you dare open your mouth again until I tell you to." As soon as she clamped down on the lace, I gripped her face harder, my fingers indenting the soft skin.

"Take a deep breath." I waited until her lungs filled, pressing her breasts up into my chest before pinching her nose tight.

Moving my hips, I rocked into her a few times gently before picking up the pace. Kirby's walls clamped around cock, making me growl with carnal desire. I never took my eyes off hers and knew the exact moment the lack of air burned her chest. It was the moment that, for most, panic would set in.

For me, it was a signal to pick up my pace as I quickly raced toward my own climax. I wanted to come at the same time and loved feeling her body quiver under me as she found the ultimate release.

"Are you sure you trust me," I whispered into her ear. She nodded as much as my hands would allow. "I could kill you right now." She nodded again. "And you'd let me." She nodded a third time. "Fuck Sunshine, you drive me insane."

Her purple eyes found mine as I raised myself up enough to watch her closely. There was a thread of fear under the passion. She fed off the fear just as much as I did.

My thrusts were hard, and the sound of slapping skin filled the air. Kirby swallowed and shuddered as she forced herself not to fight me and denied the breath her body was craving. This was the real test. As her eyes fluttered and began to gloss over, I felt her muscles tightening. Her pussy gripped my cock

hard, and as soon as she started to come, I released her nose and mouth.

“Ah!” Kirby screamed and arched off the table as her orgasm hit. The first pulse of her climax hit my cock, bathing it in her wet heat. But the second one—a squirt so powerful it tried to push me out of her body—sent me over the edge.

“Fuck.” I gritted my teeth together as I came. The pleasure was so great that it hurt, yet I would crave to do it again before the night was out.

Thrusting into her with vigor, I captured the next scream and drank it down like a cure for all that ailed me. I knew that there would never be anyone else that could complete me like this. Nothing else would ever compare.

Kirby collapsed, her body going still except for the panting and her leaping pulse. Sliding out of her, I looked down and smiled at the mess we’d created. Some would say it was disgusting, but to me, there was no greater compliment. I did that. I made her feel that way. I did something no one else could do, and she trusted me to make sure she was safe at her most vulnerable.

Jumping off the table, I stepped over Travis’s lifeless body and unclasped the shackles. As if reading my mind, Kirby moved until her head hung off the slab, her hands gripping the sides. I smirked as she opened her mouth for my cock.

“You really are a good girl, Sunshine,” I said, sighing as I put my semi-hard cock into her mouth to be cleaned. She licked me off like candy, and as soon as she finished, I cupped her face and licked her lips, loving the taste of us.

“I love you,” Kirby whispered.

“I love you too.”

Scooping my Sunshine off the table, I glanced at the body on the floor. He could wait. It wasn’t like he had somewhere to go. I made my way over to the bathroom and the shower, where I planned on fucking her again.

Kirby was my priority.

Chapter Three

CAIN

FOUR MONTHS LATER

“H mm.” Kirby tapped her chin. She was deep in thought as she stared at the cribs. Why were there so many options? It was as if we were standing in a zoo with small cages around us. Kirby didn’t like me calling them that, but that was what they reminded me of.

While Kirby caressed the bed frames, I watched her. She wasn’t showing yet other than the tiniest of bumps, but she always laid a hand over her stomach protectively, and I made sure no one got close to her.

I could see the saleswoman walking over. She was one of those people that smiled, but it never reached her eyes. She either hated her job or didn’t like us. I didn’t care if she hated me or hated her work. Her issues were not my problem or my concern, but if she upset my Sunshine, she would find her wailing ass on my table.

“Have you made your decision?”

Most wouldn’t pick up on the annoyed undertone of her question, but I did. I stepped a little closer to Kirby, catching the woman’s eye. She swallowed hard as I stared at her. I didn’t need to glare. She knew I was thinking about killing her.

Like most humans, she instinctively knew I was a threat, even if she didn’t understand why. It was a throwback to the earlier animal version of ourselves when threats like saber-tooth tigers meant you might die every time you stepped outside. Our instincts kept us alive, but now...now society, for all its fancy tech, was weak and pathetic.

“I’m struggling between these three. They’re all so nice,” Kirby said as her eyes bounced between the selections. She didn’t notice the woman’s expression, or if she did, she didn’t bother to show it because, at her core, my Sunshine still had a conscience.

“You can’t go wrong with any of them, so it’s just whatever you prefer,” the woman said. I peeked at her name

tag. Natalie.

“Actually, it does matter,” I said.

Natalie jumped like I’d reached out and smacked her.

“Which one do you like, Sweetie,” Kirby asked, her eyes flicking up to mine.

I wandered over to the furthest one and pointed.

“This one is way overpriced for the shoddy craftsmanship. I wouldn’t put a pet, let alone a child, in it.” Natalie gasped, her hand clutching her non-existent pearls. I pointed to the second choice. “This one is crafted better, but...” I leaned down and sniffed the wood. “The paint was made with lead, a banned substance for children. I’m not sure how you can sell this.”

Natalie’s face turned a bright shade of red as others shopping in the store were now paying close attention. She looked around like she was trying to find a way to salvage sales rather than be horrified over the crap she was selling.

“This one is the best of the three, but the height is all wrong for how tall you are. This will make it awkward for you, and the legs don’t adjust in height.” I grabbed the sides, shaking the crib, and it squeaked and groaned. “Ultimately, they’ve all been made to look pretty, not for safety or efficiency. I could make one far better, so that’s what I’ll do. I’ll make it to spec for you and the room in whatever color you desire.”

Kirby’s mouth fell open, but her eyes were full of love. “You’d do that?”

“For you, I’d do anything. You should know that by now.”

Kirby looked around while the women in the store grumbled and crossed their arms as they glared at their men. If these women expected the men they were with to say the same thing, they would be waiting forever. With a single glance, I knew these men were all poor choices of mates. Most would be divorced or separated by the time the baby was born, and the rest would be in custody battles before the child was five. Another glance told me half of them were habitual cheaters.

Even with their partner pregnant, they were checking out other women.

There really were too many come shots walking around that should've been blowjobs.

“Does that mean you're not interested in purchasing anything,” Natalie asked, her lips pinched together.

Kirby laid her hand on my arm and smiled at Natalie. “We'll come back later. This is our first store.”

“Well...good luck.” She turned and marched away.

“No, you cannot kill her,” Kirby whispered. My eyebrow cocked, and suddenly all I could picture was laying her down on the pillow display and fucking her. “And we're not doing whatever has that look in your eyes,” she said, laughing.

“How do you know it was something naughty?”

“With you, it's always naughty.” Slipping her fingers into my hand, she tugged me to leave. I gave Natalie one last glance and resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't kill her.

This new version of my life was still unusual for me. I never had restrictions or conditions and never allowed any. I definitely didn't give a fuck what anyone thought other than the police and FBI. Now...my obsessions remained, but the desires had shifted, and so had my focus on what was important.

“We should find Aspen and Abel. It makes me nervous to think of him wandering around a mall,” Kirby said, and I chuckled.

“No truer words have been spoken. At least he decided to come disguised.”

Kirby rolled her eyes up at me. “You really call what he's wearing a disguise?”

“Well, it's nothing I'd wear.” The words no sooner left my mouth when we spotted my brother and Aspen coming down the escalator. He looked ridiculous, and Aspen seemed horrified. I couldn't blame her. I owed her a debt for taking Abel—and ninety percent of his antics—off my hands.

He was wearing a red Washington Nationals baseball hat and a banana yellow shirt with flowers all over it. If you looked closely, you could see that the petals were dicks. He wore jeans that would've suited him if he were a fourteen-year-old skater and Vans sneakers like he was trying to be cool. Of course, he finished the look with a wig that gave him scraggly hair past his shoulders, a beard that looked like a beaver's asshole, and glasses I would've sworn he stole from Ozzy Osborne.

To complete this fucking marvelous outfit he was bent over in front of Aspen, wiggling his ass like that would impress her. I shook my head.

"That really is a hideous look," Kirby said, making me smile. "Do you think he knows how terrible it is?"

"Not a chance. He would say he has style, and the rest of us are boring."

They reached the bottom of the escalator, and Aspen screamed, drawing everyone's attention as Abel scooped her up off her feet and carried her the rest of the way. She looked horrified but smiled at my brother the way Kirby smiled at me. I was happy for him. I never thought in a million years he'd find a woman that could put up with the shit storm that was Abel. Aspen did, and at least I knew that if something ever happened to me, he would have Kirby and Aspen to keep him in line. It brought me a strange sense of relief to know that.

"My woman doesn't walk when I'm around," Abel said, setting Aspen on her feet.

"Did you have any luck," Kirby asked Aspen.

"No, only this." She held up a small bag and pulled out a dog plushie. "Abel said we had to have it."

"You can never have too many dogs," Abel said, then punched me in the arm. I glared at the spot he hit me. Some shit would never change.

"Well, I'm famished. This baby is always hungry," Kirby said, rubbing her small bump.

“Same. I could really go for pizza or maybe a burger with extra pickles. No, how about fish tacos with a side of fries and ice cream,” Aspen said.

“Damn, Buttercup, you’re making me hungry,” Abel said, rubbing his stomach as well.

Kirby laughed just as her phone rang. Her brow furrowed as she stared at the screen.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

She shrugged, “I don’t know.” Hitting talk, Kirby put the phone to her ear. “Kirby Buchanan speaking.” I would never grow tired of hearing her use my last name.

The three of us waited for Kirby to finish her call, and even though Abel was talking to me, I didn’t hear a word. The only thing that registered was the small gasp Kirby made. I was by her side in seconds, and she leaned into me, her hand covering her mouth as tears trickled down her cheeks. I hated not knowing what was happening, and seeing her face twisted in pain made me murderous.

I could choose any random asshole walking by and happily take out my frustration on them if it would stop that look of pain.

“Yes, yes, I understand. I’ll be there,” Kirby said and hung up the phone.

She slowly turned her face up to mine, and I cupped it, willing her to tell me what was making her cry.

“It’s...it’s my...,” she started and stopped.

“Tell me, Sunshine, before I lose it on someone in here.”

Her body was shaking, and I was barely holding it together. I couldn’t explain this strange reaction to seeing her upset, but I’d been like this since Abel almost killed her. I didn’t think someone like me could suffer from PTSD, but for once, maybe I was wrong.

“It’s my dad. He and his wife were killed in a car crash, and...Cain, I’m Carter’s legal guardian. They are flying him

with a Child Services rep here tomorrow. I need to meet them at the airport.”

Kirby buried her face into my chest, and I hugged her tight as she clung to me. This was terrible news. I felt nothing about her father’s death, but I hated that she was sad. What worried me was the almost three-year-old boy coming to live with us.

I didn’t do well with change...this would be a challenge.

Chapter Four

Reaching over the center console, I grabbed Kirby's hand. She had been crying and fretting all night. She was up and pacing so much that I finally forced her to drink chamomile tea and sit. This stress was not good for her or our baby.

She already refused to take time off work for another three months, which would put me in an early grave.

"You need to try and relax," I said, squeezing her hand.

Her knee was still bouncing, but she did take a few deep breaths. "I need to be honest with you," she said.

I glanced over as I backed into a parking spot at the airport. My Sunshine rarely worried about talking to me, and usually, it was because of something Abel said or an issue at work. The last time was when she told me she was pregnant.

I put the car in park. "About?"

"Cain, you know I love you with my whole heart, right?"

"Why do I feel a *but* coming?"

"No, there will never be a *but* about that specifically, but... we have lived in our own little bubble for sixteen months." She stopped and chewed on her bottom lip. "And, now we are adding someone else, and I'm worried about how that will play out."

She looked exceptionally beautiful with the sun shining in the window, making a golden halo around her head and hitting her eyes just right so that I could see the flecks of red that were part of the condition. Kirby didn't really have purple

eyes. She had ocular albinism, which is the complete lack of pigmentation in what would've been blue eyes. Due to this, the blood running through her eyes gave the purple effect, but when the sun hit just right, I could see the blood.

She was truly a masterpiece.

“Cain?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you looking at my eyes?”

Taking off my sunglasses, I smirked, and my Sunshine blushed. “I plead the fifth.”

“I bet you do. I’m serious. I need you to listen.”

“You have my full and undivided attention.”

She sighed and looked down at her hands. “You can’t kill him, Cain.”

“Who?”

“Carter, and don’t you even dare give me that look. I know you, and you hate the idea of him stepping on the property, let alone living in our home. But he’s a little boy, and he just lost his parents.” Sighing, I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel, never thinking I’d hate that Kirby could read me so well.

“I may have had a thought or two, more so if he becomes a problem.”

“He’s two and a half. I’m sure he’s going to be a problem at some point.” Reaching out, she grabbed my hand and held it to her chest. “Please, I wouldn’t ask this if it didn’t mean so much to me, but we need to find a way to have Carter fit in. He’s my brother, and we are his only family.”

“You realize he’s not actually your brother, right? Just because you called his father Dad all these years doesn’t make him your blood.” She rolled her eyes at me as if I was the one being thick. “Tell me this, what if he finds out what I do and wants to go to the police?”

“I’ll think about that and come up with a plan, but Cain... at this point, he’s a terrified child, and we are the only family he has. Please, for me.”

“He already means that much to you? Does he mean as much as our baby?”

“It’s different and yet the same. I can’t explain it any better than that, but it doesn’t mean I’m suddenly not going to want or love our baby.” I stared out the front windshield at the people fighting over spots while others heaved heavy suitcases out of cars. “You wanted me to relax more. I will take leave from work early like you wanted, and knowing that you’ve made this promise will lift a lot of stress from my chest.” She was negotiating. I loved it when she did this. I lifted my brow at her, and she licked her lips. “And I will use the stress schedule you made.”

“Including the sleep schedule?”

“Yes, including the sleep schedule.”

“Fine, I will concede to not killing the child, but...if he grows into a man and does become a problem, I will slit his throat, and I don’t care who he is. Nothing and no one threatens me or my family,” I said, my voice soft, but goosebumps rose on Kirby’s skin.

“I will make sure that never happens.”

“Very well, I guess we have a....”

“Son?”

“Hmm, yes, I guess that’s what you call it,” I mumbled, getting out of the car.

Taking Kirby’s hand, we walked into the airport like a normal couple. I could feel her nervousness as if it were my own, and I rubbed the back of her hand with my thumb.

“Is the makeup holding,” I asked when we reached the arrival area.

Kirby looked at the side of my neck where I had my Joker tattoo and nodded. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Is it working?”

“Maybe a little. Thank you.” As we waited for the doors to open and hundreds of people to come stampeding out, I took the time to assess my surroundings. I’d never been in an airport before. When we traveled to see her dad over a year ago, we took a ship. Today I wore a baseball cap, my darkest sunglasses, makeup to hide my visible tattoos, and a few extras in the cosmetics department to ensure my face was slightly different.

We also agreed that I wouldn’t touch anything in here. I still counted all the guards and took in what they did and didn’t have for weapons. I spotted cameras, and of course, I evaluated every person standing around waiting.

The PA squawked moments before the doors opened to announce the plane’s arrival. Kirby held up the sign she’d made for the woman bringing the boy, and as soon as she came through the doors, Kirby walked over to greet them.

She smiled, but there was sadness as she squatted down. I understood the situation on an intellectual level, but emotionally I couldn’t grasp it. The blond boy let go of the woman’s hand he was holding, and he started to bawl, like just seeing Kirby made him cry.

But this was where my Sunshine was different from me. Instead of being confused, she cried and held open her arms for the boy to hug her. His chubby face turned up, and his green eyes found mine. I wanted to growl at him, but as Kirby stood and turned toward me, I knew that couldn’t happen. Her eyes were as wild as any animal. Like a lioness protecting a cub, I knew that she would tear my throat out. If I hurt this boy, Carter, we would be over, or we would be dead. In a blink, he’d stolen her from me, and panic seized my chest.

My heart pounded like a drum and filled my ears with the sound as Kirby marched toward me. I couldn’t lose her. She was the reason I saw the world in color.

As if sensing the turmoil spinning in my mind, Kirby slid her arm around my waist and squeezed.

“Carter, this is your uncle, Cain.”
What had we just agreed to?



TWO WEEKS LATER

“So, how’s it going,” Abel asked as he danced onto the porch and handed me a beer. Some shit never changed.

“I never cried that much.”

I took a swig of beer as Abel flopped down beside me. I didn’t know how every chair in his home wasn’t broken. It was like he was constantly testing to see if he’d smash through it or not.

“We didn’t cry unless it could get us something or to pretend that shit actually upset us.”

I looked at my brother’s profile, and it was rare that he would spit out something logical, but he was making sense now. “So what you’re saying is I need to figure out what the kid wants, and that will shut him up and give me my wife back?”

Abel paused with the beer touching his lips. “I guess so.”

“That’s brilliant. Now I just need to figure out what he wants?”

“Did you just call me brilliant? Can I record you saying that?” I ignored him as I thought.

“What could a kid want?”

“Shot in the dark here, but his dead parents and maybe some hot titty milk. Fuck I can’t wait until Aspen starts spurting milk. I’m going to lap that shit up like a fucking kitten.” He sucked on his beer bottle, and I shook my head at him. “Shit, now I’m horny, and Aspen is asleep.”

“When did that ever stop you before?”

“That’s a good point.” He shot to his feet and jogged down the porch stairs but stopped when he reached the bottom and smirked up at me.

“I knew you were jealous that I had better swimmers and knocked Aspen up with twins, but you didn’t have to bring

another man's kid into your home.”

“Fuck off.”

I watched him wander along the driveway until the darkness swallowed him. My brother had one thing right. The majority of kids were simple, now to find out what he wanted, fill the hole and take back my wife because I was done sleeping in the spare room while the kid clung to her. It was time he manned up.

Chapter Five

CAIN

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Ah!” My Sunshine screamed at the top of her lungs as she squeezed my hand. I didn’t realize just how strong she was, but it felt like she was going to break my fingers.

“Breathe, remember what the instructor said,” I said calmly, and the devil himself stared at me from her eyes.

“Fuck the instructor, and fuck you for doing this to me, you asshole.” One of the nurses snickered, and she immediately went on my kill list.

“You’re doing great,” the doctor said.

“It doesn’t feel great,” she snarled at the woman. At least it wasn’t just me she was pissed off with.

Kirby screamed again, her back arching off the bed. I knew that the Doctor was helping, but after six hours of this, even I wanted to push her aside and take over. I loved to hear my Sunshine scream, but not like this.

“You’re almost there,” the doctor said, and a moment later, a small cry filled the room. Kirby slumped, her whole body shaking from the effort, and yet she let go of my hand and held out her arms eagerly as the baby was given to her.

“We’ll give you a few moments before we take her and clean her up,” the doctor said, and then everyone left the room. I stood back, unsure what to do. Just when I thought I couldn’t find myself any more out of my element, my daughter was born.

Kirby held out her hand, “Cain, come here. What do you think of the name Kallie? It means beautiful.”

My eyes took in the small bundle that looked so much tinier now that she was outside of Kirby. Reaching out, I touched her little fingers. All five together wouldn’t even be as large as my pinky. She suddenly gripped my finger and wouldn’t let go.

“My Angel,” I said, unsure where it came from when I didn’t believe in them.

I never thought I’d feel more than I did for my Sunshine, but a tear slid down my cheek as my heart swelled with pride. I knew that if anyone ever touched my little girl...not even the bowels of hell would be far enough to run. They would pay with their life, and they would die painfully.



Today was Carter’s birthday. He turned three, and every day he was here, I couldn’t help thinking he was one day closer to the day I’d need to kill him. He wasn’t like me. When I stared into his eyes, there was sadness and innocence.

Kirby was sound asleep, she still tired quickly, but the doctor insisted it was normal. Carter laughed and pointed at the television. He’d wanted to watch Transformers. I put on the good version, the new shit they were showing kids was cringe-worthy.

Grabbing my fork, I pierced my slice of cake and ate it while I watched the back of his blond head bounce. I’d gotten him to stop sleeping in bed with us, but turning him into someone comfortable with killing was a different issue. Kirby was easy. I knew it was in her, I felt it, and she had chosen me. Carter was my greatest challenge yet.

Kallie made a noise, and I glanced down at the tiny angel I held to my chest. I could feel her little heartbeat and the soft puff of breath as she breathed. Besides my Sunshine and creating art on my victims, nothing was as calming as holding my little girl.



THREE YEARS LATER

“I can’t believe you’d do this, Cain,” Kirby growled under her breath.

“I warned you that if he became a problem, I’d handle it.” We didn’t have lies between us. I could’ve said I took Carter for a walk, and he went in to see the pigs on his own, but I never lied to my Sunshine.

She stomped across the kitchen floor, rage etched into every single feature. “You made me a promise.”

“If he wasn’t a problem,” I countered.

“He’s six, Cain. Six. It’s a little difficult for him to be a real problem, and the fact that you would even...”

“Do what,” I asked, pushing myself to my feet and walking across the room. “Did you think you were changing me, Sunshine?” She backed away from me, but I followed, and when her ass hit the counter, I gripped it on either side of her. “Is that what you thought? I’d somehow grown a conscience?”

“No, of course not, but I thought...” She looked down, and I tilted her head back up using my finger so she had to look at me. The anger was still there, but her heart was pounding harder.

“Don’t look away from me, Sunshine. You knew what I was, what I could do, and what I would do to anyone, if needed, the day you chose to stay. I gave you one more opportunity to leave, but you chose to marry me. I’ve told you time and again that I will do what I must to protect what is mine. You and Kallie are mine.”

“Cain, I know that.” Kirby sighed and rubbed her face. “I didn’t expect you to change. I don’t want you to change. I love you for who you are.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“The issue is that I hoped after some time passed, you’d see him how you see Kallie and me, that...that things like

walks to the pigs and threats wouldn't happen. You'd find a way to accept him as part of our unit." She cupped my face, her eyes searching mine. "What would've happened if I hadn't come home early?"

"Sunshine, you're confusing emotion and logic. I have very little of the first, so I rely on the latter, and logic dictated he needed to be spoken to. He broke into my room. He saw my work area, and he saw the pictures on the walls of all those I've hunted and am hunting. Logic dictated that if you wanted him to remain part of this unit, I needed to make sure he understood the consequences of his actions."

This only made sense to me. I did what Kirby wanted. I made sure that Carter didn't have to die. I was struggling to understand why she didn't see that. Why was I the bad guy? Carter's age didn't matter. What mattered was the safety of everyone living on this property and under this roof.

"So you weren't planning on..." Kirby licked her lips. "You know."

"Aunt Kirby? Uncle Cain?" Carter's voice was low as he stepped into the kitchen.

I glanced over at him, and although I could feel Kirby's energy shift, I didn't release her from the cage of my arms so she could run to him. She needed to get over this. If the kid was a threat, she needed to see that. No one had ever broken into my work area before. Even Kirby hadn't figured it out when I changed the system to the most advanced one you could get, other than a retina scanner.

"You were told to go to your room," Kirby said, putting on her 'mom' voice. She said she didn't have one, but she did.

"I know." He clasped his hands in front of him. "Please don't fight. I didn't mean to make you two fight."

"We're not fighting. We're having a discussion," I said, standing straight. "Adults need to have discussions sometimes, but we are not fighting."

"But, you are mad, I can tell," he said, his eyes lifting to meet mine.

I expected Kirby to rush to Carter, pick him up, and escort him out of the room away from me, but she stayed by my side.

“What you did was wrong, and we will talk about it again. But right now, Kirby and I need to talk about what you did and decide what to do about your actions.”

Instead of running out of the room, he walked closer until he was a couple of feet away. I could see the intelligence swimming behind his green eyes. He may not have the same urges I had at that age, but he was highly intelligent.

“I know what you do,” he said, and Kirby grabbed my arm even though I hadn’t moved. I cocked a brow at her. Did she really think I would grab him and snap his neck in front of her? I mean, I could, but I wouldn’t. I would at least wait until she didn’t have to see me do it.

“What do you think Uncle Cain does,” Kirby asked. Carter twisted his shirt around his hands, his eyes going back and forth between us. “It’s okay. You can tell us.”

“He’s a superhero,” he whispered, looking around like he was making sure no one could hear. “I saw the pictures of the bad men. You put an X when you catch the bad guy.” I didn’t think anyone other than this kid would call me a superhero. “You’re like Batman, The Punisher, and Wolverine. You catch bad men and punish them.” He smiled wide. “I won’t tell anyone your secret, and I’m sorry I snooped. I wanted to see what was in the locked room. I won’t tell anyone.”

Kirby and I looked at one another, and she seemed just as baffled by the workings of a six-year-old’s mind as I was.

“Do you have a cape?” He asked, his eyes bright with excitement.

“No, I want to blend in. A cape would make me stand out,” I said, going with the spin on my work. “Tell me, Carter, how did you get through the door?”

He gave a little shrug, and I decided to play on his fantasy. “If you tell me how you did it, I might be able to make you a secret member of my team.” His eyes lit up.

“Reawee.”

“Really,” I corrected. He struggled with certain letters, and even though the school insisted it was normal, I chose not to ignore it and made him correct his speech. I also worked on full sentence structure, math, science, computer skills, or whatever other topic the school was pathetically trying to teach him. When he got home from school, he had chores and studied with me for an hour. Then he could watch television or play his games.

His face contorted as he tried again. “Really.”

“Much better. Continue.”

He ran from the room like a spooked deer but came racing back a second later and held out his game controller.

“I used this,” he said. I frowned at Carter. “I made this into a remote.”

“You made this into a remote for my workspace door?”

He nodded and smiled.

“So you hacked into the system,” I asked, suddenly very impressed.

“What is hacked?”

“You wrote new code inside the game to use?”

“I read the numbers and letters and knew what it said. I just changed them.” Carter shrugged again. “Do I get to be on the team? Do you have a superhero name?”

I rubbed my chin and stared at him. He had created my new persona—solving that issue—and had become a larger problem. If he did that with a controller, what would stop him from hacking government agencies or homeland security once he got his hands on a computer? What would prevent him from turning over all the information I had on my kills to the authorities with a click of a button?

But, for now, he was team Super Cain, and if it meant Kirby and I were no longer at odds about the situation, I would take the win. Kirby slid her hand into mine, and I looked at her. She was silently pleading with me, and taking a breath, I nodded.

“My name is Vindicator, and yes, you can be on my team.”

He cheered and jumped in the air. “I need a new name. I need a cool sidekick name.”

Carter ran out of the room before we could finish the conversation.

Kirby stepped in front of me and wrapped her arms around my neck. “Thank you. I love you, never doubt that, but I love our children too, and I need to protect them the same way I protect you.” Rising up on her toes, she kissed my cheek. “As soon as they’re asleep, I plan on doing some very naughty things to my superhero.”

“I could get into roleplaying, but I think I make a better villain.”



ONE YEAR LATER

“Yes, I understand. I will speak to her. Violence is never the appropriate option,” I said but rolled my eyes. It was absolutely the appropriate option when someone touched you after you asked them to stop. The principal was very close to learning what real inappropriate touching was. No one put their hands on my daughter and told me she should allow it.

I glanced over at my Angel sitting at the kitchen table, smiling and coloring with Carter. She was pointing out that he'd used the wrong color shade for whatever image they were working on. One thing I appreciated about Carter was that he never lost his temper or yelled at Kallie.

Growing up with Abel, I was well aware of what one's sibling could be like when they had an explosive personality. But Carter was steady, and even when Kallie lost her cool, he found a way to calm her down. I was quickly learning that he was a good influence in that way.

I tuned out the principal as he once more went over what happened and how they would suspend her for the remaining two days of the week like a hardened criminal, but she could return on Monday.

Was it possible to hate the school system any more than I already did? I hadn't thought so during my time there, but I was wrong. Being at school was tough on Kallie. She didn't socialize like other children. Only Troy and Carter understood her and let her be who she was. It always amazed me when I learned something new, and despite my reservations about him living here, he was proving to be an asset, at least for now.

“As I said, I will speak to her. I do hope you plan on speaking to the student who was inappropriately touching and bullying my daughter. I'd hate to see the school's name on social media tarnished by condoning bullying,” I said, clenching my teeth together as I pictured laying the man out on my table. He was lucky I had different goals now, but if he pushed it too much, I would make an exception.

Hanging up the phone before the windbag could spew more worthless information and waste my time, I walked over to the table and sat down.

Kallie looked up at me, and her big blue eyes were sad. “I’m sorry I disappointed you, Daddy,” she said.

Carter wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and before I could correct her, he did it for me. “Your dad’s not upset with you. He’s mad at the school. You did the right thing. If I’d been there, I would’ve done it too,” he said, and my eyebrow went up at that.

Very interesting indeed.

Reaching out, I laid my hand over her much smaller one. “Carter is right, Angel, but if it ever happens again...”

“I know, just let him,” she said, and I shook my head.

“No, Angel, you stab him when no one can see you.” I smiled and patted her hand. “Who wants hog dogs for dinner?”



SIX MONTHS LATER

How was it possible that two humans so small could create such a mess? Kirby laughed at me as I followed behind Kallie and Carter like a human mop. What had come of my life? I used to have order and cleanliness. The house was quiet, but now it was always noisy with thumping feet, music, or whatever other child noises Kallie, Carter, Troy, and Talon made. It felt like I was managing a zoo with feral cats that had taken a dose of speed while sniffing cocaine.

“Uncle Cain!” Talon’s shrill voice screamed outside, and a shiver raced down my spine. The scream was followed by bawling, and I was on the run, bursting through the screen door and leaping over the banister to land on the driveway, running toward the sound.

“Let go of me!” Kallie screamed.

“Let go of her!” Carter yelled.

“Get off of me, you fucking brat,” an unknown male voice growled.

My feet raced faster down the driveway toward the yelling and Talon’s hysterical crying. Looking over my shoulder, Abel was coming behind me. What were they doing this far down the driveway? They knew the rules. It was forbidden. And where was Aspen? She was supposed to be looking out for them.

I wasn’t prepared for the rage that consumed my body as the scene at the end of the driveway opened before me.

Talon was on the side of the road screaming and crying while their dog Brunhilda—who was very obviously dead—was laid across her lap while the car that struck her was at the end of the driveway.

It wasn’t the car or the dog that had me seeing red. It was the man standing outside it with the back door open, holding Kallie in the air while both Carter and Troy hung onto his legs.

He didn't see me, but I sure as fuck saw him smack Carter across the face. Carter yelled but hung on tighter, and to his credit, he bit the man's leg. Apparently, biting was a popular thing to do on this property.

"Ah," he screamed.

"Out of the way," I yelled, and as soon as Carter and Troy saw me, they jumped to their feet and backed away. It was at that moment, as the man looked up and we locked eyes that he realized his error.

"Oh shit," he said, dropping Kallie, but it was too late. I wasn't stopping, and before he could jump back into the driver's seat, I dropped my shoulder and ran into him at full speed. The momentum cracked his head off the door frame, and he fell to the ground out cold. I stood there seething, staring down at the man who had just sealed his fate.

I was shaking with the adrenaline and knowledge that this man almost took my child. I hunted men like him now, and one of them had nearly taken my Angel. No one touched her, and he would die slowly and painfully for as long as I could keep his sorry ass alive.

"No, not Brunhilda," Abel said, dropping to the ground, holding his daughter, who was still bawling.

Something touched my hand, and I looked down to see Kallie with her eyes full of tears and a scrape on her cheek like she'd been struck.

"Keep it together, brother," Abel said, and it was the first time in my life that I was the one on the edge of insanity and needed to be pulled back.

"Where was Aspen?" I growled.

"She went inside to take the pie out of the oven. That was it," he said.

"That better be the only reason. If I find out, you kept her in the house longer...." Bending down, I picked up Kallie, who wrapped her arms around my neck. "You will be finding somewhere else to live if you want to remain breathing, brother."

“I swear, I didn’t.” The look in his eyes was one I didn’t see often, but when I did, I knew he was telling me the truth, and I nodded.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Angel?”

“The bad man killed Brunhilda and then hurt Carter.” She pointed to Carter, who was holding the side of his face. “The bad man needs to be punished.”

“He will, Angel. He most certainly will be punished,” I said and kissed her forehead.

Chapter Six

KALLIE

SIX YEARS OLD

This was so boring. I poked the dirt with my stick and moved the little stones around to block the ant. Over and over again, I moved my line of stones to see what the insect would do. Watching them was usually interesting enough for me to stay outside all day, but not today.

Carter was at a friend's house, and I was stuck playing with Talon and her friend. I glared over at Talon as she giggled with her Becca, who was over for a playdate. They had dolls and were pretending to drink fancy drinks like Mommy and Daddy, the hot stuff I didn't like. There was a plastic cake in the middle of the table, and they would make *mmm* noises as they pretended to eat it. Why they thought this was fun, I didn't know. I played for a little bit, but when they pulled out the crowns with gems, I couldn't play anymore.

"What are you doing," Troy asked, and I squinted as I stared up at him in the bright sun.

"Just playing with my ant."

"What ant?" When I looked down, I couldn't find it. I stood up and turned in a circle, but it was gone. It had made its escape while I was distracted. Great, now I needed to find another one.

"Why don't you play with them," Troy asked, and I shrugged.

"It's stupid."

Troy smiled wide. "Want to have some real fun?"

I wiped my hands on my jeans. "Okay."

"Talon, Becca, do you want to see something cool," Troy asked. His smile was friendly, but I got the feeling that it wasn't real. He didn't say anything mean, but my gut told me he was going to do something that wasn't nice. My daddy always told me to listen to my gut, that it talked really loud if we were quiet and listened.

My tummy talked a lot, but I didn't think the growling noises were what he meant. I think this was what he was talking about.

"I don't know. We were having fun. Do you want to play tea party," Talon asked Troy.

"I know a game that is a lot more fun than a dumb tea party. Don't be a loser, Talon."

Oh, he called Talon a name. My mommy told me not to call people names, but I wouldn't tell. Talon never wanted to do anything fun. Maybe this would force her to play.

"Okay," Becca said and jumped up from her seat.

"Becca, you were playing with me, and I don't want to go." Talon pouted, her lip pushing out as she crossed her arms.

"I didn't say you could come," Troy said. Talon looked away from her brother, and I looked back and forth between them. "Loser, loser, loser. My sister is a loser, a dumb little loser," Troy sang.

"No, I'm not!" Talon jumped to her feet and glared at her brother. "You're the loser. Boys are stupid."

"You saying Dad is stupid," Troy asked, putting his hands on his hips, and I covered my mouth to stop the giggle.

"What? No."

"Dad is a boy. Or are you too duuuuuuuumb to know that?"

"Stop calling me that." I felt a little bit bad as her eyes filled up with tears.

"Then stop acting like it."

"You're mean. I'm telling Mommy on you," Talon cried, running to her house.

"That's it, be a tattletale and a loser," Troy yelled, shaking his head. I wasn't surprised she didn't want to play with us. Talon was different. She didn't like anything that Troy or I liked.

“I’ll still come,” Becca said and smiled at Troy.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Troy took the lead, and I was behind Becca as we walked toward the back of the farm and into the forest. Even with the bright sunny day, the woods were chilly and much darker.

“Where are we going,” Becca asked as she smacked at a mosquito.

Mosquitos were hard to pin, but I finally got one to stay, and my board was almost finished with all the local insects.

“You’ll see when we get there,” Troy said, jumping over a branch that had fallen across the trail. I knew where we were heading, but I didn’t know why Troy wanted to go to the one spot we weren’t allowed to play. Daddy said the stream was dangerous and we shouldn’t play near it.

I heard the water as we got closer, and when we walked out onto the pebbly beach, it was easy to see that it was higher than normal. It had rained a lot the last few weeks, and the fast water looked deep and cold. Troy turned and followed the stream, stopping only to pick up a handful of stones.

“Here, toss one,” he said to Becca, handing over a few smooth rocks. It didn’t look like he was going to share with me. He smiled at Becca, a bunch, and every time she smiled back. I didn’t know what he was doing. Troy never smiled this much.

I scooped up my handful of rocks and tossed them in when they did theirs. And even though mine went the farthest, Troy laughed and pointed, saying that Becca’s stone had. I glared at my cousin’s back. This wasn’t any more fun than the tea party.

The sound of the water got louder and reminded me of something roaring. I had never been this far before. The stream looked like it disappeared when I looked down the beach.

“Look, that’s so cool!” Troy yelled, grabbing Becca’s hand and taking off. I ran behind them, not sure what he was looking at, but annoyed that I came at all. All he wanted to do was hang out with Becca, not me.

She was a stupid girl, with her pretty blonde curls and blue dress that matched her eyes and the ribbons in her hair. I didn't like her. Talon always wanted to play with her, and now Troy wanted to play with her over me. It wasn't fair.

I almost ran into Troy when he stopped and pointed at a group of large rocks that stretched from one side of the water to the other. They were tall enough that they weren't wet, but you would have to jump from one to the other to get to the other side. The ground got very steep on either side, and we all moved slowly to look over the edge. Wow, it was a long drop. I had no idea this cliff was here.

"There are blue flowers over there that match your dress," Troy said to Becca, and I scrunched up my nose, annoyed with my cousin. "I think we should go get them, and you can take them home.

Becca backed away from the edge of the cliff and shook her head. "No, I don't like heights."

"No, we don't go down that way. We go that way." Troy pointed to the stones in the water, very close to the waterfall's edge, which was the reason for the roar.

Becca shook her head again, her eyes wide with fear. Something sparked inside of me as I looked into her blue eyes. I liked that she was scared. I wondered just how scared we could make her before she cried.

"But your dress is so pretty, and we can pick some for your hair. Your mom will be so happy, and Talon will be very jealous that she didn't come." Becca sucked her lip into her mouth, chewing on it. Her eyes darted between the rocks and Troy.

"Come on, Becca, don't be like Talon. You know she's a scaredy cat over nothing," I said, joining the fun. "Troy will go first, and I'll be right behind you. We'll make sure you don't fall."

"You promise you won't let me fall?"

I looked at Troy, and I just knew what he was thinking. I could feel it in every part of my body.

“I promise,” we said together.

She giggled. “You two are funny.”

Troy never let go of her hand, and even though she was still hesitant, he jumped to the first rock not far from shore. It was big enough to hold all three of us, and Becca hopped up behind him as I followed. The next jump over the rushing water was a little bigger, but Troy made it easily. Becca laughed as she followed. This was fun. My stomach was full of butterflies with each jump. The largest rock was in the middle. Troy jumped and held out his hand to help Becca and me across.

“That’s so cool,” Troy said, his mouth dropping open. He was trying too hard to seem impressed, but I had to agree with him. We were looking out over the tops of the trees at the bottom of the waterfall, and it felt like we were floating with the water moving all around.

“It’s okay, I guess,” Becca said, wrapping her arms around herself. Her eyes were scared, and more excitement raced through me as goosebumps rose on her skin. Grabbing her arm, I gave her a tiny shake, and she screamed.

Becca glared at me as she gripped Troy’s arm. “That wasn’t nice. You said you’d make sure I didn’t fall.”

“I didn’t make you fall. You’re standing right here. Lighten up. It was just a joke,” I said.

“Yeah, Kallie, that’s not very nice of you,” Troy said but winked at me over Becca’s head. “You can let go of me now. Kallie is done being mean. Right, Kallie?”

“Yeah, I guess. You two suck.”

Becca let go of Troy’s arm, and he gave me another look. Once again, I knew what he was thinking, and now was the time. Troy pointed at the sky with his left arm.

“Look at the eagle,” he said as we linked hands behind her back.

“Where?”

“Right there,” he said. “Look harder.”

His hand tightened on mine and with a shove Becca flew off the rock. She screamed at the top of her lungs as she sailed over the edge of the waterfall. We leaned over together and watched her fall until she disappeared into the spray at the bottom.

“She did flap her arms like an eagle.” I grinned at Troy as he smirked back.

“We better go make sure she won’t tell anyone.” Troy leaped quickly from one rock to the next, and I followed right on his heels like his shadow. Laughing, we sprinted along the trail that led down to the bottom.

“Over there,” I said, nodding toward the blue material poking out from behind a big log.

We ran over and found Becca with a large gash on her head, and her legs twisted and bent the wrong way. She was crying so hard she hardly made any noise except for the large intakes of air.

“You pushed me,” she wailed over and over again.

“Well, we can’t have her saying that,” Troy said.

“No, that will definitely get us in trouble.”

“I’ll take the dress. You take her head.”

“Her head?” I asked.

“Yeah, you shove her head under the water.”

I looked at Becca’s wide, tear-filled eyes as she cried. “Oh. Okay,” I said nodding. I watched Troy walk along the top of the wide log, dragging Becca away as she screamed, but there wasn’t much fight with her legs broken.

“Ready,” Troy asked, and I nodded as I jumped up to join him.

Grabbing a handful of the blonde curls I hated so much, I made her look at me. Her eyes were red from crying, the blue no longer the prettiest thing about her. For just a moment I was conflicted if I should do this, then I remembered how Talon never wanted to play with me anymore since she came along.

“You never should’ve tried to steal my cousin away from me. I don’t share,” I said.

Troy smiled, and we pushed down together. Her body thrashed in the water, her hand smacking at the log. It took longer than I thought it would, but soon Becca stopped twitching, and I knew she was dead.

With a shove, her body floated out into the water and drifted away. She looked peaceful, like a floating doll.

“Should we have done that?” I asked as we watched her slowly disappear.

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Isn’t killing bad?”

“Did you want her to live?”

“No, she was trying to take Talon from us.”

“Now the problem is solved.” Troy pointed at the spot Becca had disappeared. “Did you like it?” I looked down at my feet not sure if I should admit that I did. “Cause’ I did,” he said.

“Me too,” I said softly, and it felt good to tell someone.

“Oh, oh,” Troy said, cringing as a shadow loomed over us.

Turning around, I looked at my daddy’s face and swallowed hard as his hard stare found me.

“Next time, make sure they don’t have time to scream,” he said.

Chapter Seven

I snuck into Carter's room and stared down at his sleeping face. He looked so innocent, but even though he tried to hide it, he'd been in my room again. That needed to stop.

I spun the large hunting knife in my fingers and leaned down, covering his mouth with my hand. His eyes snapped open, and he let out a muffled scream. He grabbed my arm like he had a chance of pulling it away. I held the knife so he could see it in the night light's soft glow, and his eyes went to the shiny blade. They were wide with terror, his chest heaving with each breath.

"Stop trying to scream," I said, and he halted struggling. "Good." I brought the blade to his throat so he could feel the coolness of the metal against his skin, but not hard enough to leave a mark. I thought he would break down in tears, but he stared up at me and didn't move. Whatever happened next, he'd resigned himself to his fate.

"I'm going to remove my hand, and you'll remain quiet. Understood?" He nodded. "Very good."

I lifted my hand from his mouth and placed it beside his body. I put the knife on the nightstand so he knew he still had nowhere to run.

"Now, I'm going to ask you a question. Were you in my special room again? I will warn you that bad things happen to those that lie to me."

He swallowed so loud I could hear the effort it took. "Yes, Sir."

“Even though you know that room is off-limits?”

“Yes, Sir,” Carter said again, his voice hardly a whisper.

“Why?”

He shrugged and looked away from me. I moved fast and had the tip of the knife under his chin. He yelped in fear and lifted his head as he stared at me but didn't try to escape.

“Do not look away from me. Why did you go in there?”

“I don't know. I think you're cool.”

“Cool?” I cocked my eyebrow at him. I'd been many things over the years, but cool was a new one for me. I removed the blade.

“Yes, Sir. But I didn't see anything I wasn't allowed to. I stepped inside the door and then left.” This I already knew from my private security camera that wasn't linked to the house wifi. I'd learned from my mistake and wanted a backup.

“But you know I do bad things, which puts me in a difficult spot. Kirby doesn't want me to kill you, and that is the only reason you're still breathing. Unlike other people, I don't care how young you are. To me, you are a threat to be eliminated.”

He shook his head. “I'm not a threat, I promise.”

“Just you knowing is a threat,” I said.

“No. I wouldn't say anything. I promise.” He crossed his heart which was ridiculous. What was that supposed to do?

“How come?”

He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth as he thought. “Because you and Aunt Kirby are my home, and I love Kallie and want to protect her.”

“You love her and want to protect her, you say?”

He nodded furiously, his mop of hair flopping as he did. “Yes, uh huh.”

“Okay, I'm going to trust you to hold up your end of the deal to protect Kallie, which means protecting everyone under

this roof, including me. I'll protect you, and you keeping quiet protects me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

I stood up, twirling the blade for show, then put it through my belt. "I want you to remember this conversation. My Sunshine and Angel are the only two things that matter to me. If you ever do anything to hurt either of them, it will be the last thing you ever do." Reaching out, I ruffled his hair like Kirby did. "Goodnight, Carter. Sweet dreams."



"Carter, look. I put sprinkles," Kallie said. "Carter, I said look."

Kallie was as impatient as her uncle. That was worrisome. I saw a little too much of Abel in my Angel, and Abel saw too much of me in his son Troy. Interesting, almost like we were being punished by dealing with one another all over again. Not that I believed that.

"One second, I'm just finishing wrapping the gift," Carter said.

I glanced up from chopping vegetables and watched the two kids from the corner of my eye. Carter smiled as he put the last piece of tape on the terribly wrapped gift. Just looking at it hurt, but I was learning that things were always a little bit different with kids. Who would've guessed that such small humans could create such chaos?

Carter jumped up from the table and looked at the cake. "It's very red," he said.

It did look like blood was dripped all over it with the red frosting and matching sprinkles.

"You hate it," Kallie said, her bottom lip pushing out. She was good at playing him, and sure enough, his face morphed

in horror.

“No, no, it’s not that. I just thought you’d want pink or blue or maybe some purple?”

“Why? Red is pretty.”

“I think it looks sensational, Angel,” I said, saving Carter from dancing around another answer.

Kallie turned on the chair she was standing on to look at me. Red sprinkles coated her face. “Sen-sass-e-al?”

“Sen-sa-tion-al,” I corrected, and her lips pinched together as she glared at me.

“Sen-swashional.”

Carter smacked his forehead. “Without your front tooth, you’ll never say that right.”

“Yes, I will,” Kallie argued.

“No, you won’t.”

Their interaction was curious to me. I wondered if Carter saw Kallie for who she really was and be accepting or if his emotional side would only allow him to see her as the sweet little girl until he decided she was a monster. I hoped it was the first, if it was the second then he would need to be eliminated no matter what Kirby asked. Kallie was sweet, but she was my daughter, and I saw what lurked beneath the surface, even if she didn’t recognize it yet.

Kirby didn’t believe me. She was choosing to be blind to what was right in front of her, but deep down, I knew, she knew. When Kirby caught Kallie catching insects—creating a bug board at four—and pushing the pins into them while they were still alive, she knew. But, I suspected, like Carter, she was ignoring it until she couldn’t ignore it anymore. Kirby didn’t know what had really happened to Talon’s friend Becca. I made sure of that. She simply wasn’t ready to hear it, but she would need to learn soon.

We heard a car pulling up outside, and Kallie squealed. “No. Mommy will see the cake.”

“Carter put the cake in the refrigerator,” I said, wiping off my hands and looking at the time. Kirby was early by an hour.

Walking to the door, I opened it just as two men in navy blue suits stepped onto the top of the deck. They were FBI. I recognized the one on the left as Agent Malone. Their faces didn't openly give anything away, but I knew something was wrong.

“Mr. Buchanan, I don't know if you remember me. I'm Agent Malone. Can you step outside so we can speak?”

I immediately ran through all the places in the house I had weapons and how fast I could get to them. Abel was home, but two agents going missing when they'd most likely reported coming here to arrest me wasn't a great idea.

Dammit. I shouldn't have had the gate open. That would've given me time to get the kids in the truck and sneak off the property.

I tossed the dish towel over my shoulder casually. “Of course. Is everything okay, Agent Malone?”

Stepping outside, I held the door open for Carter and Kallie to follow.

“It might be best to speak without the children,” he said.

No way. If they were taking me in, I needed to make sure I looked as innocent, loving, and fatherly as I could. Without Kirby here, Kallie and Carter were all I had. My mind spun as I wondered if Kirby was already locked in a cell at headquarters. Were they going to divide us and see who broke? I knew my Sunshine, and she wouldn't turn on me even faced with being arrested. That was the power of our connection. The reality of that shook me.

I looked down at Kallie, her face, which looked so much like my own, was peering up at me, and I knew I couldn't let Abel raise her. If it came to it, I would do what I had to do and make sure Kirby came home.

“No, whatever you have to say, you can say in front of them.” Kallie slipped her hand into mine.

The two agents looked at one another, the dark sunglasses hid their eyes, but their jaws were tight. “Are you sure, Mr. Buchanan?”

This was it. At the age of thirty-four, my time was up. Sadly, I didn’t want to leave the life I’d created. My goal for most of my life was to end up arrested and sell my story. I had craved to one day be famous and have others like me strive to be better, but they would always fall short. I squeezed Kallie’s hand a little tighter.

I sucked in a steady breath, “Yes, I’m sure.”

“We regret to inform you that Agent Buchanan was killed in the line of duty today,” Malone said, his voice soft and even.

I blinked, my mind screeching to a halt. Was this some sort of sick joke they were playing?

“I’m sorry?”

He removed his sunglasses, and I wished he hadn’t. His eyes were sad and held the weight of his words. My heart began to beat faster.

Malone cleared his throat, his hands folded neatly in front of him. “We were in the middle of an operation, and although I cannot tell you exact details, I can say that Mrs. Buchanan fought valiantly and saved many lives, but the wounds she suffered were too great. If you are up to it, we want to take you to identify her body.”

My thoughts wouldn’t form. I couldn’t seem to make sense of what Malone was saying. I understood death better than almost anyone else, but Kirby was too young. We were too young with too many plans.

“Hey there, Sexy,” Kirby said as she wandered into the kitchen, her signature scent following her.

“Hello, Sunshine. Did you sleep well?” As was her habit, she raised up on her toes and kissed the side of my cheek until I turned my head and let her kiss me. It was a little game we

liked to play. Her lips were warm and tasted as sweet as she smelled.

“You should stay home from work today.” I nipped at her bottom lip, then flipped the bacon I was cooking over.

“I’d love to. Spending time with you and the kids is my favorite thing in the whole world. I feel like Kallie is growing up so fast. I hate missing so much.”

Turning down the pan, I grabbed Kirby and pulled her into my body, leaning against the counter. “Then quit.”

“What?”

“We have more than enough money put away, and I’m still working on cars. I can pick up towing more regularly if we need, but you don’t have to be part of the FBI.”

She tilted her head and stared at me like a bird inspecting something interesting. “You’re the one that wanted me there.”

I smoothed back the waves of hair that she would pull up into a tight bun before she went in to work.

“Yes, but many things have changed since then. You’ve also brought home over a hundred cases I can work on. Quit. Walk in today, hand in your badge, and come back home.”

“This is very sentimental for you.” She narrowed her eyes. “What is this about? Do you not want to be the main parent home with the kids anymore?”

The corner of my mouth twitched with amusement. “No. I oddly enjoy it. I still wish I wasn’t competing with teachers who persist in teaching so poorly, but my lessons have them excelling. You really would think teachers would be better at their craft.”

Kirby laughed, and my chest warmed. She had an infectious smile that I’d never grow tired of seeing. “I know you want to homeschool them fulltime, but they need to socialize, or they won’t learn how. School provides that opportunity with lots of other kids their own age.”

“So you keep saying.”

“Okay, we will pin that argument for now. If that’s not it, then what’s going on?”

“It’s your birthday, and I want you to stay home. The kids are baking your cake, and Kallie insists on making a rainbow cake. Of course, she would choose a challenging cake to attempt. I’ve been studying all the proper techniques to make the cake perfect for you, and I will let her decorate.” That meant there would be a massive mess to clean up.

“She is your daughter.”

“Yes, we need to talk about that. Kallie is like Abel and needs guidance so she doesn’t end up like him. The thought horrifies me.”

“I know what you mean by guidance, don’t try to pull that with me and we’ve talked about this. We are not teaching our six-year-old how to manipulate, lie, or kill. If she chooses to be like you then I’ll concede, but she’s impressionable right now and...” Kirby sighed. “I don’t want to argue with you about this. We don’t even know for sure if she will have the same urges.”

“We can wait until she shows more signs, but I see her the same way I was able to see you. She is like both of us. She can feel the world like you, but a calculating killer lurks inside her. If she is not guided then she could end up on one of your FBI lists, Abel would have if it wasn’t for me. I don’t want that to happen to our daughter anymore than you do.”

Kirby shivered, and I cupped her face.

“You fell in love with me, and I’m not as bad as you thought.”

“Mmm, that’s debatable considering all you did before me, but yes, I still love you,” she said, her cheeks going red as I smirked. “But it takes someone very special to be okay with this kind of a life.” Kallie rubbed her eyes. “I don’t want her to end up alone because she can’t find someone that will accept her for who she is and what she does.”

“We can’t control that or force her into a box, it will only make it worse. When the time comes, we need to guide her to

be like me now, not me then. If we do nothing, she will find her own way, which could lead to her being caught, hurting the wrong people, not having a life like we do, or worse.”

Kirby cupped my face and placed a soft kiss on my lips. “Okay, let’s make a deal. I’ll go in and work today since we already have the paperwork to execute an arrest warrant, and I really want to get this scum. But as soon as I’m done today, I’ll walk into my boss’s office and hand in my badge. All the possibilities with Kallie and teaching her to be like you can wait until that bridge arises.”

“I guess that’s a deal I can live with, but I’d still prefer you stay home today and quit.”

“Is something wrong, Cain?” Her eyes searched my face, but I couldn’t explain why I felt like this. There was no logical explanation for it.

I shrugged. “Nothing I can put my finger on, just a feeling.”

Kirby chuckled. “You don’t do feelings, remember?”

“Such a comedian. It’s a good thing I love you.”

Her smile slowly slid from her face leaving her eyes serious. “I love you too. Always. You are my tomorrow.”

“And you’re my forever,” I whispered and pulled her into me to kiss her again.

“Mr. Buchanan?” Malone prompted, and my eyes focused on the agent once more. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and my breathing was shallow, making it hard to draw a deep breath. I’d never felt this before, the aching in my chest and the heaviness pressing in on me was crushing.

They may not have been here to arrest me, but they’d unwittingly shoved me in a cage and threw away the key. I could feel the part of me that had come alive with Kirby slipping away. Just like trying to grab a handful of water, the harder I tried to cling to the warm feeling she evoked, the more it fell between the cracks of my fingers.

“Daddy, where’s Mommy,” Kallie asked.

A sob had me looking to my left. Tears were streaming down Carter’s cheeks. His eyes met mine, and in them was the anguish I was trying to understand within myself. He turned and ran inside the house, the door slamming behind him.

“Daddy?”

“Mommy’s not coming home.”

“Oh. When is she going to come home?”

I wiped my face and stared at the wetness on my hand.
“Never, Angel. Mommy’s never coming home again.”

Chapter Eight

I'd never seen my daddy like this. He sometimes looked tired or angry but never sad. Aunt Aspen came over to look after us while the two men in blue took Daddy with them. When he got home, he didn't speak. He sat downstairs, which he never did, in front of the old television that didn't work. Daddy looked like a statue sitting so still.

I'd tried following him and asking why Mommy wasn't coming home, but he didn't answer. Daddy never ignored me. I was his Angel, and I didn't understand why Mommy left.

"What are you doing," Carter whispered from right behind me, and I jumped at the sound of his voice. Twisting around, I looked up the stairs at him.

"Nothing," I said, knowing it was a dumb answer. I never sat on the stairs to the basement, and Carter scowled, not believing me. Walking down to the step I was sitting on, he saw Daddy sitting still.

"Has he been like that since he got home," Carter asked. I nodded and then stared down at our feet. His feet were right beside mine on the stairs, and I hated that his were so much bigger. It felt like he was a giant when I looked up at him. He wasn't even a full three years older, but he acted like I was still a baby.

"I'm hungry," I whispered. "Daddy has never missed dinner."

"Come on. We can make it."

Carter held out his hand, and I gave my daddy one last glance before slipping my hand into his. He helped me to my feet, and once we were in the hallway, he closed the door to the basement.

“Carter, why does Mommy not want to come home? Was it something I did?” My heart sank, thinking that I’d done something wrong.

He stopped walking, and I knew he didn’t want to tell me. He always chewed on his bottom lip when he was upset.

“What did I do?”

He knelt down and gripped my shoulders, getting all serious like Daddy did. “Kallie, you didn’t do anything wrong. None of us did.”

“Then why?” Tears filled my eyes, and my bottom lip shook as I tried to hold back from crying like the little kid he thought I was.

“Because a bad man hurt her. Your Mommy is with the angels now, with my parents,” he said, looking away as his eyes filled with tears too.

“But, I’m their angel.” The sadness hurt my chest, and I stepped into Carter, wrapping my arms around his neck as I cried. “Why would someone hurt her?” I blubbered, no longer caring that I looked childish.

“I don’t know. Some people are just bad people and do bad things.” Carter hugged me until I stopped crying.

“What are we going to do,” I asked, trying to picture what it would be like not having my mommy here anymore.

“I don’t know, but we can make dinner tonight. I think your daddy is really sad and needs us to help,” he said. I wiped away the wetness on my cheeks and nodded.

A soft knock had us looking at the door, and my heart raced in my chest as I pulled away from Carter’s grasp.

“Mommy?”

I whipped open the door, but my Auntie Aspen, Talon, and Troy stood outside.

“Hi there, sweetie. I brought over something for you all to eat, and I thought you could come over after dinner for the night. We can make it a sleepover.”

“But, what if you are all wrong and Mommy comes home? No one will be here,” I said.

Auntie Aspen cleared her throat and looked away, but I knew she was trying to hide her tears.

“Kallie, I told you she’s not coming home,” Carter said softly. I looked up at him and the other sad faces and didn’t want to hear it. So I turned and took off upstairs.

I slammed my door shut, but Carter followed me into the room as I flopped on my bed and cried.

“Leave me alone.” He didn’t leave, and I felt the bed move as he sat down beside me. “I said go away.”

“No, I won’t go.”

Anger ripped through me, and I sat up. I hit Carter, but he grabbed my arms and let me yell and say bad words until I wore myself out. Defeated, I cried harder and stared down at the bed, but Carter pulled me into a hard hug and let me sob.

“I won’t leave you. I’ll never leave you, Kallie.”

“You promise?” I mumbled into his shirt.

“Yeah.”

“You shouldn’t make promises you cannot keep,” Daddy said, and I jumped away from Carter and ran to him. He picked me up just like he always did, and his eyes were calm, yet I felt his sadness. “We will say goodbye to your mother in two days.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye. I don’t understand why a bad man would want to hurt her.”

“Me either, Angel, but I promise you that I’m going to find him, and I’m going to make him pay.”



CAIN

I'd never been into material objects or needed much money. But using a large portion of what I had put away served me now.

My eyes focused on Kirby's lifeless body as I stared down at my worktable. Her pale skin stood out against the shiny metal. I remembered every detail of the last time she had laid on this table. The sound of her laugh and the sparkle in her eye as she teased me and then screamed my name.

'I love you,' she'd pant in my ear while her skin warmed me more than standing directly in the sun's rays on the hottest day. She was my sunshine. Drawn to her even in death, I walked to the side of the table. Cupping her cheek, I ran my thumb across her cold flesh.

"I should've made you stay home," I said, grabbing the hair brush I'd laid on the counter. Fanning her hair out, I started at the ends and eased the knots out of her hair. "I knew something was wrong. I always listen to my instincts, but I didn't, and I won't do that again."

I methodically moved around until it was all brushed out. "I will find him, Sunshine, and make him pay."

I don't care about that.

My head snapped up at the sound of her voice, and I blinked, my eyes trying to make sense of the ghostly figure looking at me from the other side of the table. I didn't believe in ghosts any more than I believed in heaven or hell, which meant my mind was conjuring her, yet I was willing to accept what would normally bother me as a false reality.

"You don't care about who murdered you? Who stole you from us?" I growled and gripped the hairbrush tighter.

Of course, I do, but I care more about you and the kids. I never meant to leave you alone, doing this on your own.

“So what do you want me to do? Because I can’t let this go, I will not let him get away with this.”

Kirby sighed and looked down at her body lying on the table. Her eyes traced over the marks before finding mine.

“What is it like?”

Being dead?

“Yes.”

She shrugged and walked around the table as light as a summer breeze. Reaching up, she touched my face, but all I felt was the cold caressing me.

I feel lost. You, Kallie, and Carter were my island, and now...

“I don’t want you to go,” I said, releasing the small ball of emotion I’d been holding tight. My throat clogged, the pain like a stab wound piercing my heart. How did people live with emotions like this all the time? It hurt to breathe, to think to move.

I love you, Cain. Please look after the kids. Both Kallie and Carter need you. Promise me you’ll look after them first, then go after my murder. That is my dying wish.

“Can you make one of those when you’re already dead?”

The corner of Kirby’s mouth turned up in a smile even as she stepped away from me and disappeared.

Warm tears trickled from my eyes when I opened them, and I realized I was holding her hand to my cheek.

“I promise to look after them, but I won’t stop looking for Darryl Burton. I will not rest until he is strapped to my table. That is my vow to you.”

Laying her hand down, I stepped back and put the brush away. It was time to get to work. Pulling out my camera, I took pictures of every square inch of her body and the marks he inflicted.

I memorized every wound. Defensive injuries were visible on Kirby's arms while bruises lined her neck and torso, but it was the three stab wounds that had taken her from me. The one to her stomach had been first.

I could envision it as she cried out, gripping her stomach just below her bulletproof vest. Stumbling back from her attacker, she hunched over, holding the wound. The angle of the strike to her shoulder confirmed my suspicion of her body position. She turned her face away, and the knife slid in at a forty-five-degree angle piercing the bone.

She fell to the floor on her back.

Getting down on the floor, I mimicked her position and rocked back and forth as she fought the weight of the man kneeling on her chest with his hand around her throat. Her nails broke off as she left long scratches on his arms. Her eyes were filled with fear as he choked off her air supply. I held up my hand, picturing the size of Burton. He was a large man, well over six feet. He knew his way around a blade. He changed the position of the knife in his hand and stabbed under her exposed armpit, severing the brachial artery. She bled out within minutes.

Closing my eyes, I went over the attack repeatedly until the man—I already had a file on— was clear in my mind. Where was your backup? Who else is to blame for this?

“If it's the last thing I do, Sunshine, I will find him and kill him along with anyone else that is at fault. I failed you once, but it won't happen again.”

Chapter Nine

KALLIE

TWO YEARS LATER

My eyes snapped open as the latest dream flooded my mind and danced around like a ballet. The rivers of red were so pretty, and the arms stuck up like reeds. They waved back and forth, asking to be pulled out, but I enjoyed watching them sway far too much. They were enticing and they called to me.

I was different, but the feeling of being alone had grown since my mom's death. My dad tried, he seemed to understand and accept me, but he was quiet, sitting alone downstairs when he wasn't cooking or teaching us.

I could still feel his hand in mine as we stood beside my mom's small grave on the property. The dreams started shortly after and now came to me every night.

Dad pulled Carter and me from school and had been home-schooling us. We hardly ever left the property. Dad said it was too dangerous and that the rules outside our gates were different. We would never be judged as long as we stayed here. I loved my dad, but he was smothering me. I wanted to explore and experience the world.

Sighing, I sat up and grabbed the sketch pad beside my bed, flipping to my last drawing. The man tied to the tree was my latest work, and I loved the terror on his face. He looked a lot like the bully Chester at my school before I was pulled out. Chester liked to bully me on the bus and at school, but I knew he would get what was coming to him one day.

I caressed the paper, smiling. What would his skin feel like if I pet him like this.? Would it feel different from mine? Would he tremble under my touch? Would he scream? I shivered at the thought.

The detail in his wide eyes, as his mouth hung open, was stunning, but the axe piercing his heart was where I'd spent the most time. The fine pencil lines and shadowing gave the

perfect accents to the large wound. I was very proud of this drawing, it was my best one yet.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are,” I softly sang and swung my legs out of bed. “Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky.” Setting the sketch pad on my desk, I picked up my latest bug board. I called it my science experiment. The board was almost full of more dangerous and exotic bugs this time. “Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.”

A few of the insects struggled on the board as they slowly died. I tapped each of the pins holding my collection in place, some had fallen still, but others buzzed and struggled. I wrote the death dates on the back of the board. One deer fly, in particular, was struggling and tugging itself against the pins. I admired its resolve.

Is this what it would be like to capture Chester? I bet I could make him struggle like this. His arms and legs would flail as he screamed and begged to be let go just like Becca had. I didn't with her, I wouldn't with him. Chester would be as trapped as those on my board and I'd never let him get away.

Sitting my project down, I wandered the room, unable to sleep. Falling back to sleep after one of the dreams was nearly impossible. Giving up I cracked open my door and listened for any noise, but the house was silent. I tiptoed out into the hall, counting the steps to a squeaky board, then slowly stepped over it.

I'd asked Dad why he didn't fix the noisy boards, and he told me it was because he wanted to hear if someone had broken in and walked up the stairs. I paid attention and memorized each board and what it sounded like when it did make noise. Now I not only knew how to move around without making a sound, but I would know exactly where the intruder was, based on the sound of the board.

Carter's room was at the end of the hall, and as quietly as I could, I opened his door and poked my head inside. He was sound asleep on his back. His deep, steady breathing gave it

away. Leaving his door open, I slipped inside, walked over to the side of the bed, and watched his chest rise and fall to a steady rhythm.

His room was the complete opposite of mine. I kept everything neat and orderly, nothing out of place, but Carter's room looked like a storm had rolled in and scattered his clothes in all directions. He had an empty plate and a glass of chocolate milk beside the bed, and the books he used to study were open and spread all over his desk. It also smelled like a boy in here. They just had a smell to them, like sweat followed them around.

I was bored and couldn't sleep, so I picked up the clothes and tossed them in his large hamper.

"Yuck," I whispered as I grabbed the pile of smelly, crusty socks. What the hell did he do to these things?

Boys were gross. Turning my attention to the desk, I closed the books and binders, organizing them neatly before placing a handful of pens in a drawer. Once I was sure the room was spotless, I grabbed the dishes and snuck back out, closing the door behind me.

The house was dark, but I liked it that way and walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. Placing the dishes in the sink, I let my mind wander to when I would find my mom in here humming and making pancakes. I loved blueberry ones with lots of syrup and whip cream. She made them all from scratch and would let me crack the eggs and beat the batter together.

"Watch yourself, Sweetie. The pan is hot."

"I know," I said, looking at my mom before turning back to the pancakes. I made sure each one had the same number of blueberries. One of the berries slipped from my fingers and landed on the pan.

I grabbed the berry before it got ruined.

"Ouch," I hissed and put my finger in my mouth. I looked over at my mom, and even though she didn't say it, I knew she was scolding me. "I'll be more careful."

I smiled at the memory, feeling like she was still here. I missed my mom so much. A cloud moved, and the moonlight poured through the window into the kitchen, landing on the large knife left on the counter. It glinted in the moon's rays, and I picked it up without thinking about what I was doing.

What would Chester do if I pulled a knife like this out to use on him? I slowly waved the blade back and forth, like a sword, pretending to cut him up into tiny pieces. He'd never bully anyone ever again. Even though I hadn't seen him for over two years, I could still hear his taunts and the other kid's laughter. Carter would yell at him and tell him to shut up, but then he'd get in trouble, and I hated that Chester got Carter into trouble for protecting me. That wasn't fair. He was the bully, he deserved to be punished.

"If you're going to use that, then you'll learn to use it right," my dad said. I jumped, letting out a scream.

The knife clattered as I tossed it on the counter and whipped around, but he wasn't behind me. My eyes scanned the room, and I found him sitting on a chair in the furthest corner of the kitchen. The clouds shifted again, and his eyes glowed like a cat in the inky darkness before he was hidden once more.

My heartbeat like a drum in my ears. "Dad, you scared me. How long have you been there?" I wrapped my arms around myself, embarrassed that I screamed like a kid. I was eight and hated feeling like I was still little.

"Long enough to know that it's not Carter keeping his room clean." I blushed. "You do know he has two capable hands and can do it himself?"

"I know, but I do it better."

"Hmm."

"Don't be mad at him, please, Dad?" I begged.

"If you want to clean his room like a maid, that's your choice, but you don't need to. Never let anyone make you feel

like you do. Understood?"

I nodded. "I like doing it, especially when I can't sleep. It gives me something to do."

Dad slowly stood from the chair. Everyone was scared of my dad. Even Uncle Abel seemed nervous around him sometimes, but he was just my dad, and he was the coolest.

"It's also time," he said.

Clearing my throat, I asked, "Time for what?"

"Time for your training to begin."

I didn't know what that was supposed to mean. "I don't understand."

Dad slowly walked around the table, and I noticed he stayed in the shadows. I wanted to be like that. To move with the shadows like I was a part of them. To be so calm and yet commanding.

Dad stopped walking as he stepped into the moonlight. I could see him clearly now. It felt like he was staring through me, but his expression remained blank.

"Your mother made me promise not to teach you until you were ready."

"Teach me? You already teach me. My grades are really far ahead." I smiled.

He smirked. "Not normal schoolwork, Angel. Teach you what it means to be a Buchanan. I've seen the look in your eyes. I know you dream of blood and already have a victim picked out." I looked down. My thoughts were evil. I knew they were. I tried to hide them from everyone, but my dad knew.

"Nooo, I...I don't do that."

"Do not lie to me, or I will punish you, Kallie." I swallowed hard. Dad didn't call me by my name unless he was really upset, and he rarely punished me. But when he did, I never forgot.

"Yes, Dad."

“I’ve seen your sketches, the science experiments you try to hide, and let’s not forget Becca’s unfortunate accident. You crave to know the feel of someone dying under your touch in those final moments of their life.”

My dad gripped my chin and forced me to look up at him. “Do not be ashamed of who you are, Angel. Tomorrow morning, your real training begins.”

Dad turned and walked away.

“Training for what?” I called after him.

“You’ll see. I’ve waited long enough, but no daughter of mine is going out into the world unprepared.” He looked over his shoulder as he reached the door. “Now go to bed. You have a big day tomorrow.”

I didn’t know what he meant, but excitement bloomed in my stomach. My dad was my hero, and he’d seemed so sad ever since Mom died that I didn’t think he even saw me anymore. But he did. He’d been watching me the entire time. He wasn’t angry and didn’t hate me for my dark thoughts. I couldn’t help wondering what he would show me. He was the best dad in the whole world.

I ran up the stairs and jumped into bed. Everything was going to change. I could feel it.

Chapter Ten

Bang. I jumped up, my heart pounding hard as I gripped the blankets to my chest.

“Come on, Carter. We have training,” Kallie yelled as she barged into the room.

I glanced at the time, “There is still an hour before we need to get up. What are you doing?” She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, her dark hair flapping like a pair of wings.

“Dad says he’s going to be teaching us something new today. Come on, hurry up and get ready.”

I was going to say again that Cain was not my dad, but it didn’t matter how many times I told her. She never listened or didn’t care. Kallie raced forward and grabbed the blanket, but I held on tight. I swallowed hard as we ended up in a stupid tug-o-war over it.

“Let go. You need to get ready.”

“I will, but get out. I’m not changing with you in here,” I said. She sighed but backed away.

“You’re so weird sometimes.”

“I’m weird? I’m eleven now. I’m not changing in the same room as you. Now get out so I can get ready, Trouble.” I pointed at the door and glared at her.

“Fine.” She stepped out into the hall.

“Close my door,” I barked.

She came back in and stuck her tongue out at me before slamming my door shut. I slumped onto the bed and looked

down at my stupid boner. It started a year ago. Every morning I woke up like this and had to wait for the thing to go away before I could get breakfast. I went online to see if it was normal or if something was wrong with me, and apparently, I was fine, but I hated it. I could've asked Cain, but it just seemed like a horrible conversation to have with anyone.

I learned there would be other stupid issues like getting hard in gym class or some other super inappropriate time. Wet dreams were a thing, and I didn't even want to imagine that. My voice would change soon, and my body already ached from the growth spurt that wouldn't stop until I turned eighteen or something. Just great. The last thing I needed was for Cain to think I was perving over his daughter. I shivered at the thought. Without a doubt, he would slit my throat after torturing me for days until I wished for death.

I wanted to stay in bed all day. I was so sick of being on this property like a prisoner. It might not have been so bad if Troy was cool, but he was cold and focused like Cain. Other than talking sports, we had nothing in common. The last time I got to leave the farm was with Aspen a month ago when she took Talon, Troy, Kallie, and me to the theatre. We watched the latest *Spiderman* movie and pigged out on candy and soda.

Glancing around my room for my jeans, I realized that it was clean. Not just clean but perfectly organized. See, this was why Cain creeped me out. He looked at me like he was going to eat me, and he'd been sneaking into my room and re-organizing without me ever knowing since Aunt Kirby died. I could imagine him standing at the foot of the bed, staring down at me as he debated my death.

"Hurry up!" Kallie yelled from what sounded like the bottom of the stairs.

"Go away!" I jumped up and swore under my breath. Stomping over to my closet, I flung the doors open, grabbing my clothes before walking into my bathroom and locking the door. I didn't trust her not to come in and try to rush me again. Kallie was stubborn and persistent. There was no saying no to her.

“It’s five-thirty in the morning. What training could be so important?” I grumbled to myself.

Yawning, I pulled my hoodie on and finished brushing my teeth. I could almost feel Kallie’s urgency from downstairs. She was trouble, which was why I started calling her that, and I knew one day she would get me into a large pile of it.

I left my room and went down the stairs to find Kallie zipping around the kitchen as she made muffins. Blueberry was her favorite, so there were always fresh berries in the house. She already had the muffin tin out, filling the little papers with batter.

“So what is this all about? We do eight hours of school every day,” I said, leaning against the counter, waiting for my opportunity to steal some of the raw batter. This was normal for us. I tried to steal it, and she hit my hand.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged and filled the last cup before picking up the bowl and handing it to me. I looked at it like she was joking while she put the tray in the oven. “Dad said that it was time. He’d promised Mom he wouldn’t train me until I was ready, and last night I came down to the kitchen, and he said I was ready.”

She handed me the spoon. I stared at her and then at the bowl. Was this a test? Stealing the batter was never this easy.

“Uh-huh,” I said, scooping a spoonful and stuffing it in my mouth. *So good.* “Are you sure you weren’t sleepwalking again?”

She glared at me. “I wasn’t sleepwalking. I was standing right here, and I picked up this knife.” She grabbed a long knife off the counter and held it up to demonstrate. “And he spoke to me. He was sitting in the corner, and I didn’t even see him. It was so cool. I want to learn how to do that.”

The second scoop of batter stalled on its way to my mouth as a lump formed in my throat. “You were holding a knife, and that made him say you were ready?”

She nodded excitedly, and I suddenly wanted to be sick. I knew what Cain was. When I was little, I thought he was a

superhero, and I guess in some ways he still was, but he was more like a vigilante, assassin, serial killer. I'd pieced it all together a couple of years ago when I accidentally saw him disposing of a body at three in the morning. I couldn't sleep and was out for a walk when I saw him dump the guy in with the pigs.

I'd thought about running away, but I couldn't leave Kallie, and she would never agree to leave. I was going to talk to Uncle Abel but brought it up with Aspen instead. She warned me never to speak like I would go to the police or run away again. She looked terrified for me and made sure no one was inside before telling me that I needed to keep quiet and protect the family or I would need to be silenced. My mouth had fallen open, and I couldn't look into her sweet smiling face the same way again.

That was enough to scare me into keeping my mouth shut. If I ran, I had nowhere to go, and he hunted down terrible people and killed them. What chance did I have?

The question became, what kind of training was he doing with Kallie?

"Good morning," Cain said, and I jumped, almost tossing the bowl across the room. His eyebrow raised as his cool stare found me. "Careful, you don't want to ruin Kallie's favorite mixing bowl, do you?"

I shook my head. "No, sir."

Kallie squealed and ran to her dad, her arms wrapping around his waist. It was the only time he looked happy. His lips would curl up, and his eyes brightened.

"Good morning, Dad."

Kallie beamed up at him while I wanted to sit in another room as far away as possible. My instincts told me that if he wanted to, he would grab the knife Kallie just had in her hand and stab me through the heart before sitting down to eat a muffin while my blood spread around his feet. I listened to my instincts and never gave him an excuse to look at me twice. He said jump, and I always asked how high.

“Training will start in thirty minutes, and your cousin Troy will be joining us.”

“Dad, why does he have to join,” Kallie asked, her lip pushing out into a pout.

“Because he lives here.” Cain shrugged like that explained everything.

I stayed frozen by the counter, hoping and praying Cain didn't turn and let me know that today was the day I became the lesson.

“I know, but...” Kallie sighed and stepped away from her dad. “Okay,” she mumbled, giving up the fight.

“Carter, I do expect you to join class,” Cain said like there was another option.

“Yes, sir, of course.”

He turned, leaving without another word, and I slumped against the counter. I really didn't want to know what this new training was. The fact that he called it training and not school already told me I wouldn't like it.

“Aren't you excited?”

“I guess,” I said, shoveling the remaining batter into my mouth.

“I am.”

Putting the bowl into the sink, I decided to clean it. Glancing over my shoulder at Kallie, I asked, “Why?”

“Because he sees me, Carter. He sees me, and he's not angry or disappointed and didn't make me feel bad.”

I scrubbed the bowl. “Feel bad about what?”

“About wanting to kill someone, of course,” she said, her voice so sweet it didn't match the words. I stopped moving as they settled into my head. “I wonder what my mom would think of what I want? I worry that I'd disappoint her.”

“You'd never be a disappointment to your mom,” I said and looked down at her as she teasingly nudged me.

“So you don’t care either?”

“About you wanting to kill someone?”

Kallie bit her bottom lip as she stared at me, and I felt trapped between the wrong answer and a worse one. If I said I thought it was horrible, I was hurting the one person I truly cared about, and if I said no, I was encouraging her to hurt someone.

I decided to go with the middle answer. “I don’t know. I guess it depends on who it is,” I said and finished rinsing off the bowl before laying it on the drying rack.

Luckily, the timer dinged, and Kallie jumped into action to pull her muffins out of the oven. I was positive she’d planned on hounding me more, but I didn’t know what to say.

Pouring two glasses of milk, I waited until Kallie handed me a small plate of muffins before walking over to the table. I couldn’t help wondering what my Aunt Kirby would’ve thought of all this. Was she okay with it? Had she always been okay with what Cain did? I mean, she had worked for the FBI. Was that even possible? Could she be an agent and a vigilante? It was all very confusing.

“Ouch,” I hissed and then blew out, but the hot muffin had already burned the roof of my mouth. That was going to hurt for a few days.

“You should blow on them. They’re hot,” Kallie said.

“Thanks,” I mumbled and rolled my eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, we met Cain in the hallway as the door opened, and Troy walked inside. My fear spiked as Cain opened the door to the basement. The other two didn’t seem to care as we marched down the stairs, and all I could think was that I was never getting out of here. I was going to be locked up from this moment on.

My apprehension shifted into high gear as Cain laid his thumb over the scanner, and the heavy metal door clicked open.

“Be sure not to touch anything, and I want to see impeccable note-taking. Every lesson, no matter how small it may seem, is of the utmost importance.”

The door swung open, and nothing could've prepared me to walk into the room and see a man strapped down on the metal worktable.

Sweat trickled down my back as the door locked into place. It had been a long time since I was in this room, but some of it I still remembered. The distinct chemical smell with a hint of citrus. How every surface sparkled because it was so clean, and of course, the wall of images. None of it had changed. It still had the same smell, was so clean you could eat off the floor, and the wall of faces had only gotten larger. There were definitely a lot more pictures with giant Xs through the image. I swallowed hard.

“Today is your introduction to how to kill, but we will also explore disposing a body, blending in without being seen, choosing your target, and using weapons, chemicals, poisons, and explosives. You will also learn the art of surveillance, how to inflict the most pain without killing your subject, and most importantly—how to stay off the FBI's Most Wanted list. As we move forward, there will be other things, but those are the main topics.” Cain held up a finger. “Do not think that learning these skills will replace your regular studies. You will still be expected to do your homework as normal.”

Kallie put her hand in the air and waited until Cain nodded in her direction. “Yes?”

“Are we going to kill that man?”

“Always wanting to jump ahead. You need to learn patience, Angel.”

“Sorry Dad.” She hung her head.

The man on the table turned his head in our direction. His eyes were wide with terror while a red ball with a leather strap was shoved in his mouth, muffling his cries. I couldn't believe this was happening. It was out of my worst nightmare, yet somehow, I always knew this would happen one day.

“Follow me, but do not touch the subject,” Cain said. “This is Aaron Soares.” Cain held his hand out to the man on the table, naked except for his boxers. “I tell you this because you must always know your opponent. I do not mean you need to meet them personally. In fact, I would avoid your targets being someone you know in your day-to-day interactions.”

Troy put his hand up and waited to be called on. “Does that include those that are mean to us?”

Cain smirked. “Depends on the kind of mean. If you’re talking about a teacher forcing you to do homework, then no. If you’re talking about the bully who makes you their plaything, well...that’s another story, but it would need to be handled in such a way that it does not draw suspicion or leave behind evidence.”

I shivered as goosebumps rose on my arms despite wearing a hoodie when Cain smiled, and Troy and Kallie smiled back like mechanical twins. I knew Kallie was a little different, but I loved her and wanted to protect her regardless. I hadn’t picked up on it from Troy. He was always reserved and not as easy to talk to, but a killer? I hadn’t thought so, but, I saw it now.

“I want you to go to the board and find Mr. Soares. Take down all of his information and study what I found while hunting him, then come back to the table when you’re sure you can answer any question.”

Kallie bumped into me and smiled like we’d entered a candy store, not a torture chamber. “Isn’t this amazing?”

“You really like all this?” I whispered and held my hand out to the wall with dozens of images marked with the deadly X.

“Don’t you,” she asked, her smile falling. At that moment, as I stared into her hopeful expression, I knew I would say anything to keep her happy.

“It’s definitely more exciting than grammar lessons,” I said, and she giggled.

It was easy enough to spot the man on the table. When we did, I read over the long list of what Cain had found in his home and the proof he'd gathered. I looked over my shoulder at our lesson and never would've suspected him as a serial killer. His victims were homeless people, which was sad. Wasn't it bad enough not having a home? Let alone someone like this man killing them?

In a split second, everything turned upside down. Did I think that killing was good? No, but I was confused as I copied the notes and returned to the table with Kallie and Troy.

The rest of the training session was about places to inflict pain and why those areas were better than others. Cain would spin his blade in his hand and point out locations that would inflict pain but not kill, and other areas that would kill in seconds. We each had to sketch the areas on the image of a human body in our notes. Troy talked more than I'd ever seen.

"Why can't we just kill him," Kallie asked.

"Because there is a process, and that process will make the kill more efficient and keep us out of prison," Troy answered Kallie, who rolled her eyes at her cousin.

"You have always been my top student," Cain told Troy. "It should not shock me that you would see the value in our discussion."

I'd never seen Kallie look more pissed off. If Troy weren't careful, it would be his cousin he needed to worry about and not the police.

"That is all for today. We will pick the lesson back up tomorrow. Troy and Kallie, go finish your homework. I need to speak to Carter for a few minutes."

What? This was it. I was dead. My throat dried out, making my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth as I stared into Cain's blank expression. I watched the other two leave, the door locking behind them. It took all my willpower not to run for the door and try to escape.

"Carter, please come closer to the subject."

I stepped up to the table, and all I could hear was the man asking me for help. The muffled begging was like a song on repeat. Cain pulled a folder from a drawer behind him and laid it on Soares's stomach before lifting the cover.

"Mr. Soares here had another secret. He likes little girls," Cain said.

Photos of girls no older than Kallie stared back at me, their eyes filled with fear as they sat in small cages with next to nothing on.

"He killed the mothers and took the daughters and, since they were homeless, it took a long time for anyone to notice or care. These were Mr. Soares's targets." He flipped the pictures over one at a time until I was sick to my stomach and looked away. "I want you to look at who you want to save."

My eyes snapped up to his. How had he known? I'd kept my face blank.

"If I let him go, he would take Kallie right now if we let him. Is that what you want?"

"No, but...killing him? Shouldn't we take him to the police?"

Cain smirked and, like a large predator, walked around the table. Everything in me screamed run, but running from a lion would only make them chase you. I chose to stand my ground.

"Do you think the justice system would do its job? Or do you think they would spend the time and resources it would take to get a long conviction since his victims were of no importance to them? Do you really feel he would get what he deserves in prison?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but you can't tell me you care about him or what he's done. I know you don't care about anything," I said, then sucked in a deep breath, surprised at my bravery...or stupidity.

"Do you know what I am?"

"You like to kill people and have done it a lot, so I'd say a serial killer," I said, and the words held weight, pressing in on

my chest. Knowing them and saying them out loud were two different things.

“Such a drop from superhero status.”

I wasn't sure if he was trying to joke around with me when he looked so serious. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Why don't we call me a vigilante instead? That's what I am now. I don't kill just anyone.” He looked at me and smirked. “At least not anymore.” Why did it feel like a threat no matter what he said? “So here's the thing, Carter, I know you're protective of Kallie. In fact, I know you would save her even if it meant sacrificing your own life.”

I had no idea how he knew all that. We never sat down and had a heart-to-heart about anything other than schoolwork. I never spoke about it with Kallie because she would think I was ridiculous, but he was right.

“Yes, sir.”

He held out his hand to the man who had fallen quiet and was watching us.

“Then you need to understand I'm not showing you this to teach you how to kill. I'm showing you this to ensure Kallie doesn't get caught or pick the wrong mark.”

“What?”

“Did you think I was training my daughter for fun?” His lip curled up. “I mean, it's entertaining, but I don't enjoy it the way you are thinking. I'm doing this to keep her safe. Like me, she has urges, and we need to channel them. She must learn to be safe and pick safe targets, and she needs someone watching her back.” Cain walked to the board he had us studying.

“It may not be this year or even the next five, but she will give in to what she desires, which is her need to kill. You, Carter, are going to be her Kirby. Kirby kept me safe, watched my back, and was loyal to the cause. She set me on this path.” He waved his hand at the board.

“Aunt Kirby made you start killing?”

Cain chuckled, and a chill raced down my spine. “No, she got me to stop taking just whoever was an annoying waste of space and instead use my talents for good.”

“And you want me to watch out for Kallie and get her to kill for good?”

“Yes, to the watching out for her part. The killing for good we need to see.”

I glanced at the board and then at Cain. “You want me to learn all the same skills so I can be her protector?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see how me learning all this will protect her.”

“Let me put it to you this way, Carter. Kallie is like me, but she is also like Abel, her impulse control will become an issue, and I won’t always be here to protect her. Or do what needs to be done when necessary.”

“But...I’m only eleven. What will I be able to do?”

“I don’t expect anything right now. You will learn and be there for Kallie as she explores her interests.” He spoke about killing like it was a hobby. I could think of a million hobbies that didn’t involve taking someone’s life.

“Will...will she kill me,” I asked, unsure why that was my top concern.

“Doubtful. She loves you. Kallie does have emotions, which is something I struggle with.”

Picturing Cain struggling with anything seemed farfetched, but I liked the idea that she loved me. It made me feel special, like I was part of an exclusive club.

I pointed to the table, “So, what are you planning on doing with him.”

“Oh, we’re going to kill him. It will just be slower than my normal process. So, are we in agreement?” The man began crying and begging through the strange gag, and I turned my head away.

“Do I want to know what will happen if I don’t want to do this,” I asked, gripping my notepad harder to my chest as his cold eyes found mine.

“Then you will end up...looking at the flowers,” he said. I knew what he was referencing and swallowed hard. Kallie had always loved anything horror or thriller, and *The Walking Dead* was one of her favorite shows. I’d watched the episode so often that I could say it word for word.

“Understood, Sir,” I said.

“Good. I promised Kirby I’d look out for you, which is the only reason you’re still breathing, but if you threaten this family or, more specifically, Kallie’s wellbeing....” He didn’t finish the sentence, and I didn’t need him to. I heard him loud and clear. I was dead if I opened my mouth. I needed to find a way to be okay with this. I quickly glanced at the wall with the images and realized that at least they were all bad people that had done terrible things to others. That was what I needed to remember.

Nodding, I walked to the door before stopping and looking back at Cain. “Did you love her?”

“Kirby?”

I nodded.

“With all that I’m able. I miss her every day.”

Those words held weight for me, and for whatever reason, I wanted to protect Kallie more than ever before.

Chapter Eleven

KALLIE

SIX YEARS LATER

“Dad, you cannot back out of our deal. You promised I could attend high school like a normal kid this fall.”

“Technically, I didn’t promise anything,” Dad said as his hand slowly carved an image of a tree into the man’s chest.

“Dad, don’t be like that,” I complained. “I could easily place into senior year, but I’m happy to do grade nine.”

“I think you need more time.”

I didn’t want to wait another year. I was bored to tears, and Carter was already in high school. I missed having him around all day with me. He’d also started to date, which I wouldn’t admit pissed me off. Carter was my best friend, my sort of brother, and mine if I wanted to date him. I looked back to where he was leaning against the wall staring at his feet like he was the one dying of boredom.

“Do you not have anything to add to this?” I said, annoyed that he wasn’t sticking up for me.

“Who me?” Carter raised his head. He’d changed a lot in the last two years. It seemed like he had doubled in size overnight. He was so much taller and had added on muscle by working out and playing baseball all the time. He was always practicing something..

“Yeah, you.” I crossed my arms and hit him with a glare.

“Shit, I don’t know. Your dad knows what’s best for you.”

“Are you kidding me?” I threw my hands up in the air stomping toward the table and the man who hadn’t stopped crying since I walked in.

“Dad, I’m smart, and I can do this. Let me show you. I don’t know why you have to make everything so difficult.”

His eyes flicked up from his work. “Your intelligence is not in question. You’re my daughter. Of course, you’re highly intelligent. It’s your temper and lack of self-control that’s the

issue. You're too much like your uncle," he said, finishing the trunk of the tree.

"I've gotten better. I'm practicing breathing and word techniques. Talon is coming back and going to school, and Troy is enrolled. I will be here alone. I need to be normal for a change." Leaning on the table, I touched the blood and rubbed it between my fingers before drawing a question mark on the man's forehead.

My dad hated it when I interfered with his work, and he immediately grabbed a cloth and wiped the question mark off.

"You're not normal, Angel. You'll never be normal," he said as I drew another mark on the guy's chest. My father glared but didn't say anything and wiped it off. Now this was a fun game. How many could I make before he lost his cool?

Dipping three fingers, my dad snarled at me. "Don't you dare."

Challenge accepted. I made an exclamation mark this time, right down the front of the guy and my dad's artwork, but my dot ended up off-center as the man squirmed on the table.

"Ugh, don't move," I said. "You ruined it."

"This is precisely what I'm talking about. You can't control yourself. The answer is no."

White hot rage exploded inside of me. Reaching out, I grabbed the massive knife off the tray of tools and, with a scream, slammed the blade down into the guy's heart three times. There was a soft scream through his gag, his body tensing and then convulsing as it realized this was the end.

Blood flew in all directions, coating my dad and myself. We looked like we'd done a round of paintball, and I couldn't help but laugh at the look on his face. His nostrils flared as his angry stare found mine.

"Well, I guess you just made my point," Dad said, tossing the towel he was using down. "Learn to control your temper Kallie, or I'll lock you up down here."

Tears filled my eyes.

“Dad...”

He pointed to the door. “Get out, leave your clothes in the hamper by the door, and get cleaned up. I don’t want to see one drop of blood tracked through the house, or I swear you’ll never leave it again.”

“Ahh! You’re impossible. Mom would’ve let me go to school.”

“Now,” he said, and I marched for the door. I knew I could be a handful sometimes, but Uncle Abel was far more erratic than I was, and he had a family and kids and held down a job. Why did my dad not have any faith in me that I could do that too? It felt like I was nothing more than a screwup to him.

I stood in front of Carter and whipped my shirt off over my head.

“Holy shit, what are you doing,” he asked, closing his eyes before jumping and turning around.

“Spare me. I’m sure you’ve seen June’s tits before,” I said and tossed the material into the hamper.

“That’s different. She’s my girlfriend.”

“She’s a slut,” I said, the anger brewing higher.

“No, she’s not,” Carter argued. “She’s nice.” I wanted to tackle him to the ground and make him see that he was with the wrong girl. I could see it clearly in my mind. He was meant to be with me.

“Did she let you touch her?”

“I’m not answering that.”

The storm of fury already brewing was trying to make another appearance, but I didn’t dare say anymore. I could feel my dad’s eyes watching me like he was waiting for me to screw up again. Pulling off my jeans and socks, I tiptoed over the few droplets of blood I’d left on the ground and slipped out.

My dad was right about one thing. I was different from him and needed to prove that being me wasn’t bad. I could do

this. The question was, how do I convince him?



CARTER

The door shut, and I slumped against the wall, shaking my head. Shit, that was close. Why did I have to be attracted to her? Not only was it wrong when we'd grown up like siblings, but she was fourteen. Fuck, I hated my body's reactions, and looking out for her and not falling harder for her was getting more difficult.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly turned around. Cain had already gotten the wheelbarrow from the secret passage and was loading the guy into it.

“We should find a better way to dispose of the bodies. The pigs are so well-fed that they are leaving parts behind for too long. I had to sift some hands and feet out and put them in the grinder, then in the compost to be spread.” That was definitely a sentence I never thought I'd have to say.

“Yes, I noticed. That was good thinking. I've set up a new disposal station through the doors,” he said, wheeling the barrow away.

I followed, realizing that I was no longer affected by the limbs hanging over the side and the sound of begging. Stepping into the secret passage behind Cain, I spotted the extra-large oven and screwed up my face. When did this get installed? I didn't wait to be asked and grabbed the guy's feet, helping to toss him onto the metal slab already pulled out and ready to go.

Cain shoved the metal into the oven and closed the door before hitting a switch. Fire erupted, and within minutes the body was consumed by the flames.

“When did we get a crematorium installed?”

“Mr. Robins, that owned the funeral home, let me buy all this equipment when he decided to retire.”

“Let you buy the equipment?” I lifted a brow at him but only got a smirk in return. Yeah, there was more to that story, but I didn’t want to know.

“I’ll help you clean up,” I offered.

“No, I want to do this alone.”

“Okay.” He didn’t have to tell me twice. I walked toward the door, stopped, and turned to face Cain. “I know it’s not my call or my business, but forcing Kallie to stay here is getting her more fired up.”

“So, what are you saying?”

I shrugged. “That staying here like a prisoner may have the opposite effect than what you’re hoping for. No one will hurt her with me around, and it gives me a chance to help her for two years before I graduate. I can keep her on the right path.”

“I’m more concerned with her hurting someone and drawing attention to herself needlessly.”

“Fair, but I think she will behave. I can sit with her at lunch and keep the jerks away from her.”

Cain sighed and looked up to the ceiling. “I’ll think on it.”

Nodding, I slipped out the door and promptly wanted to smash my head into the wall for suggesting this. If he said yes, I would be around her all day, every day. What the hell had I just offered?

“Fuck.”

I walked up the stairs as if I had just been told I was next on Cain’s slab. Rounding the corner, I saw Kallie sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. I didn’t understand what it was like being her or her father. They wanted to kill and needed to end lives. The only thing I could equate it to was waking up hard as a rock and wanting to jerk off, but that didn’t hurt anyone. Terrible comparison, but it was all I had.

“Hey, you okay?”

Dropping into the chair across from her, I helped myself to a glass of the lemonade she'd set out.

"No, I'm not. He doesn't get it. I need to experience life," she said and lifted her head. "I'm fourteen, and you're my only friend. Even if you don't want to be around me anymore."

"I didn't say that," I said.

It was the complete opposite. I had to keep my distance. We were just separated enough in age that it had become weird to do things that at one time would've been normal. Water fights, for example. Two years ago, I could've sprayed her down with a hose and not given a shit that her shirt clung to her like a second skin. Now all I wanted to do was kiss her. Hello problem.

"You didn't have to. You avoid me no matter what it is. I can't even get you to play a video game with me anymore. If you're disgusted by me, just say so. At least then, I wouldn't hold out hope that you still want to be my friend."

I ran my hand through my hair. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?" Her piercing blue eyes stared into mine, and I couldn't figure out what to say. "See, I knew it." Pushing away from the table, Kallie stood and walked away.

Fuck. Why was life so confusing?

Before she could dart up the stairs, Cain opened the basement door and stepped out into her path. I would've shit my pants if he did that to me, but Kallie stuffed her hands in her pockets.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I know that I need to get better at controlling my anger, but being here all the time is driving me crazy. I love you, but I need to be around people my own age and try new things and..."

"Yes," Cain said, and her head snapped up.

"What?"

"Yes, you can attend school in the fall. I will make the call, but..." He held up his finger, eyes narrowing as he gave Kallie his death stare. "If you go off the rails and jeopardize this

family and our secret, I will yank you out so fast your head will spin. You also won't be allowed to return until I feel you're ready, no matter how long that takes. This is a trial that I'm not sure you're equipped to handle, but I'm willing to give you a chance to prove me wrong. I'd take it since it rarely happens."

"Really?" She squealed.

"Yes."

Kallie slammed into her dad, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Thank you, I promise you won't regret it. What changed your mind?"

"Carter vouched for you, so don't let us down," he said, and I blushed as Kallie looked over her shoulder, smiled and mouthed, thank you.

Of course, my heart pounded hard, and I felt warm and fuzzy all over. I needed to figure out how to stop this from happening every time she looked at me.

With a flourish that only Kallie could create, she dashed out of the room.

"Famous last words," Cain and I said together and then stared at one another.

"You better keep your promise as well. If anything happens to Kallie, I'm holding you responsible."

I slumped as Cain left the room, assuming the position Kallie had been in when I came upstairs and put my head in my hands. Most people would never meet a serial killer, and here I lived with four of them, or five if you counted Bo. Now, it was my job to ensure Kallie didn't speed off the track. What the fuck?

Chapter Twelve

KALLIE

FIRST DAY OF FRESHMAN YEAR

I couldn't believe Dad had let Carter take the car, but I loved it. My arm was out the open window, and the air traveled over it as I held it like a wing. I pointed toward the ground, and the wind pushed my arm down and then pushed it up again with a flick of my fingers.

I wanted to hang my head out the window and scream at the top of my lungs just because I could. Glancing at Carter, he seemed so cool and relaxed. I wondered if people would think we were dating when we pulled up. Was it wrong that I hoped they would? He made my heart beat fast, and my blood hummed with excitement.

"I'll find you at lunch, and we can sit together," Carter said, and I forced myself not to smile or seem too happy about the idea.

"I thought you'd want to hang with your friends," I said, leaning my head back on the seat.

"After you've made some friends, you won't want me around anymore."

I doubted that. Friends were a foreign concept, and I always wanted him around, but I needed to play it cool. That was what all the dating quizzes in the magazines said.

We pulled up to a stop sign and were just about to go when a pick-up truck filled with guys in the cab, and more in the bed, came speeding from the other direction, blowing through the stop sign.

"Loser!" The guys in the back screamed and gave Carter the finger. All I could see was cutting their fingers off and sticking them up their noses until they tickled their brain.

"Who the hell are they," I asked, glaring at the guys all wearing matching red jerseys.

"Ignore them. They're always idiots. That's the football team, and they think they are better than everyone else, not

just me.”

I recognized two of the boys sitting in the back as guys on Troy’s specialty team. Of course, Troy would be on a specialty team. He was Mr. Amazing.

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

Carter shrugged. “Why would it?”

“Because they almost hit the side of the car, and look at them, they are....” I pointed at the windshield and the guys making faces at us as we followed them.

“Something you need to realize about high school. You have nice people and idiots. If you let every idiot annoy you, you will want to kill everyone, and you cannot do that. Remember what your dad said, and I promised to look out for you.”

I crossed my arms and glared at the side of Carter’s face. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Okay, Trouble.” He rolled his eyes.

“I don’t. I want to do this to prove to my dad and myself that I can,” I said, and Carter nodded.

“Good, but I’m still looking out for you, and it’s not babysitting. The guys on my teams watch my back, and I watch theirs. Same thing.”

“Why does your dad think you can’t handle high school,” Talon asked from the backseat. I kept forgetting she was in the car. My cousin was clueless. She had no idea she was surrounded by serial killers, and Aunt Aspen wanted to keep it that way. I thought it was a stupid idea. The probability of her being home and seeing something she shouldn’t was high, and how were we supposed to handle that? I couldn’t kill her. Well, I could, but I shouldn’t.

“He’s nervous about it. He’s been like that since my mom died,” I said, smoothly lying to my cousin.

Turning further in my seat, I looked at Troy. “How can you hang out with those idiots?”

He didn't stop looking out the window. "They don't bother me, so I don't worry about the dumb shit they do."

"Yeah, well, it was our side they would've hit if Carter hadn't been paying attention, so maybe you should care."

Troy's head slowly turned away from the window, and it was the first time I realized how much he looked and acted like my dad. I kinda hated him for it. He was always the better student, the number one gold star suck up my dad spent more time with than anyone else.

"That was far from running into us, but I will speak with Chad."

Sitting by the other window was Bo. Cain had brought him home after finding him in the woods smacking a deer with a branch. Bo was like the rest of us, and I found it ironic that a serial killer had moved in beside an entire family of them. He even joined our classes. Bo was...different. So, of course, he became instant best friends with Troy. He was also totally in love with Talon, even if no one else saw it. Even now, he was staring at her like an ice cream cone he wanted to lick, but she was oblivious. Then again, she was oblivious to everything. I really wanted to burst out in song, 'Which one of these doesn't belong with the others,' but she was my cousin, and at some point, we had to find something in common. I hoped.

As I turned around in my seat, I took an extra second to look at Carter, wishing he looked at me like Bo looked at Talon. I would find a way to make that happen because no little miss sugar, spice, and everything nice would take him from me.

We pulled into the parking lot, and Carter backed into a spot far enough away to be called a marathon from the front door.

"Why are we parking so far away?"

"Cause I don't want some asshole to scrape your dad's car."

"He wouldn't care. It's not your fault," I argued.

"Yeah, he would," Carter and Troy said simultaneously.

“Whatever.” I got out of the car, and it felt amazing to do something like a normal kid.

“Hey, dipshit, watch where you’re going next time,” the football guy, Chad, said. His face fell as Troy got out. “Aw shit, sorry, man, I didn’t know you were in there.”

Troy smiled and clasped the guy’s hand. “No worries, bro.” I had to admit I was impressed with his instant cool guy transformation. I’d never witnessed it in person other than from my dad. I needed to learn to do that. Wear a mask for everyone else like it was my camouflage. Troy, Bo, and Chad wandered off.

“Talon!” A girl squealed and ran over. “Oh my god, you are even prettier in person. Come on, girl. I’ll introduce you to the other club addicts.” The girl laughed, and I had no idea what a club addict was, but Talon walked away, leaving me alone with Carter. Not that I minded.

“Come on. I’ll give you a quick tour.” He nodded toward the school, and nervous excitement flooded my body.

We had almost reached the entrance when a pretty blonde wearing a Suzy McSunshine dress burst out the door and leaped on Carter.

“Oh baby, it’s so good to see you. I missed you the last three weeks while I was in Paris, but I have so much to tell you.” The girl kissed Carter, and I envisioned ripping her tongue out of her head as she stuck it in his mouth.

The girl, who had to be June, slid down his body, and Carter had a starry-eyed look on his face. Yeah, she needed to die or have an unfortunate accident like tripping and falling on a set of train tracks, and she happened to get stuck. How sad.

“Hi,” June squealed as she looked at me. “You must be Carter’s baby sister. Oh my gawd, you’re adorable. I love this look. Are you going for grunge chic?” She smiled, but it was fake. My dad’s training taught me many things, and one of them was reading people. This girl was worse than I pictured in my head, and it was now my sole mission to destroy her.

“Adorable is not a word I would use for someone that could academically wipe the floor with you. I’m guessing you’re struggling in at least three classes and failing another. Not that I’m surprised when you spend more time trying to look like a Barbie replica than doing actual schoolwork.” Her mouth fell open as Carter smacked a hand over his eyes. “I’d also say you’re looking to get knocked up in the next year. That way, you don’t need to worry and can stay home, watch the kids, have your nails done, and get fucked by a hot yoga instructor while your husband is at work. Then again, what do I know? I’m just a baby?”

Smirking at her, I pushed open the door to the school. “I’ll show myself around, Carter. I wouldn’t want you to have to take time away from your game of tonsil hockey. At least with her, you can score a goal.”

That last bit was a low blow, Carter was an amazing hockey player, but I was annoyed now, and as far as I was concerned, he was lucky I was only using my words. Finding the office was easy. I grabbed my schedule and a map and was on my way to my locker.

There was a girl putting things into the locker beside mine. She was about my height but had bright green hair. She was wearing what looked like coveralls but with more style, while round metal glasses perched on her nose. I instantly liked her look, it was different, and she stood out.

“Hey, I’m Kallie,” I said as I pulled open my locker and began organizing it.

“Hi, I’m Alexandra, but I prefer Alex.” I held out my hand to shake hers. “What class do you have for first period,” Alex asked.

“Math in room 110.”

“Perfect, so do I. Do you want to sit together?”

“Sounds great.” I slammed my locker, securing it with my fancy new lock, and was off to class. See, I could do this. I’d even made a friend. What was my dad so worried about?

Chapter Thirteen

CARTER

TWO MONTHS LATER

“I can’t take this anymore,” June cried. She wiped at the tears running down her cheeks while I stood staring at her like a deer in headlights. Actually, a deer would’ve looked less shocked by the semi coming for it.

“She is a terror, Carter, and you won’t stick up for me.”

“I do stick up for you, but what do you want me to do, spank her,” I asked, then wished I hadn’t just put that visual in my head.

“She should be locked up.” June’s face was turning an unhealthy shade of red as she fumed.

“Locked up? For putting a sticky note on your back that said, ‘Whistle at me like a dog. I love it.’” I had to give it to Kallie. It was creative.

“What about when I sat on that pile of gum?”

“You don’t know that was her,” I argued, even though I was pretty sure she had done it.

“Fine, what about when my locker got filled with the balloons shaped like dicks and my face? It was mortifying to watch the guys pretending to be fucking my face.” I bit my lip. That also was hysterical, but I held back the laugh.

“Again, no one could find proof it was her.” I still had no idea how she got those balloons or snuck into June’s locker.

“See, this is what I mean. You won’t stick up for me, and it’s not fair. I’m your girlfriend. I’m the one you’re supposed to love and protect.” June was reaching eruption status, and I could see people passing the ends of the bleachers we were standing under, staring as they walked past.

“I’m only stating facts. I asked Kallie, and she said it wasn’t her.” That wasn’t entirely true, I asked her why she did it, and she just shrugged and looked out the window on the way home from school. She’d been acting strange ever since the first day.

I offered to sit with her at lunch, but if June came to sit with us, she left, or the two would end up in a fight that Kallie won more times than not.

Placing my hands on June's shoulders, I tried to calm her. I liked her well enough, she was my girlfriend, and she was pretty and nice and all the things I should want. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to stop speaking to her, and I want you to embarrass her like she has me," June said, and my hands dropped from her shoulders.

"I can't do that."

"You can, or we're done."

No one would make me choose between Kallie and them. Kallie would win every time, and not just because I was terrified of Cain. She was special to me, and even though it was wrong, my feelings for her stretched beyond brotherly.

"Then I guess we're done."

"You're such an asshole!" June yelled as she whipped off my jacket that was over her shoulders to help keep her warm. She slammed it into the middle of my chest and stomped off.

Kallie picked that moment to show up at the end of the bleachers and leaned against them with her arms crossed.

"Aww, did I interrupt a lover's quarrel?"

"This is all your fault," June said, her voice breaking as she shook her finger at Kallie. June had better watch out. With the way Kallie was staring at her finger, there was a good chance it would get bitten off. "I know it was you, all of it. I hope you're happy, you heathen."

"Heathen? Wow I'm wounded," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not going to say I'm sad you broke up. You were never good enough for Carter," Kallie said, and I groaned.

"How dare you!"

Why did she always have to egg people on? Marching for the two women, I grabbed Kallie's arm and dragged her away

before a fight could break out. She was hysterically laughing as I stormed for the car.

“Why Trouble? Why did you want to ruin my relationship? And don’t bother with all the denial. I know it was you bullying June.”

“Oh please, it’s not like the two of you were engaged. Besides, I meant what I said. She was never good enough for you. She was a user and would’ve cheated on you with the next guy that came along who seemed like a better catch.”

“Thanks for the confidence,” I mumbled and let go of her arm as we neared the car.

“I’m serious, Carter. You’re way out of her league in a good way.” An uneasy silence fell between us that was as charged with electricity as a lightning storm. I shook my head. I could never think about her like that. We would never be together, and I valued having all my fingers and toes. Kallie slipped into the car, breaking the staring contest first. She was going to get me killed.

“Aren’t the others coming,” Kallie asked as I got into the driver’s seat.

“No, Abel picked them up to go to something called the Pink Elephant exhibit.”

The drive home was tense. I could remember when it was easy to talk to her when we could have popcorn fights and laugh all night at stupid movies. Before I parked, Kallie was out the door and stomping up the porch steps to where Cain waited.

Kallie gave him a quick hug before disappearing inside the house. Cain’s lethal stare promised a lot of pain as it found mine. Could I just stay in here?

“Why is she upset?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It should be me that’s angry. June broke up with me.”

Cain tilted his head. “What does that have to do with Kallie?”

“Hmm?” That was the best I could come up with.

“What?”

“What,” I asked, trying for confusion.

Cain stood up, and even though I had gone through a huge growth spurt the last year, it still felt like he was a giant otherworldly being that could rip my heart out where I stood. It wasn't far from the truth.

“I asked you, what does my Angel being upset have to do with your breakup with June?”

I mentally punched myself. I hadn't told Cain anything that happened at school. I didn't know what he would think was enough to yank Kallie out. If that happened, she'd never forgive me, and I couldn't tell her, but I liked having her at school. Well, most days, I did.

“Oh, nothing. I just mean that if anyone had something to be angry about, it's me. Kallie had a normal day.”

Cain's eyes narrowed, and I almost felt him reaching into my soul to see if I was lying. Jumping over the railing and running for my life as he stepped closer was looking like a good option. I think I could make it to the main road before he ran me over with the car.

“I'm going out. I have some things to take care of. Can you handle making dinner,” Cain asked, and my wildly beating heart calmed down. I was panicking over nothing.

“Yeah, of course, hot dogs coming right up,” I said, and Cain made a face. “Joking, I've wanted to try out this new pasta recipe I found. It's called spaghetti aglio olio e peperoncino.”

“You do realize that means spaghetti with garlic, oil, and hot peppers? You hate spicy food.”

I stuffed my hands into my jeans, embarrassment filling me. I could feel the earlier fear returning. “Yeah, but Trouble likes spicy food.”

He didn't say anything but lifted a single eyebrow. I stopped breathing as I waited to see what he thought.

“Good idea, she’ll like that.” Cain trotted down the stairs and slipped behind the steering wheel before disappearing down the long driveway. I couldn’t figure him out. Maybe that was the point?

Shaking my head, I walked into the house and heard Billie Eilish coming from upstairs. I headed into the kitchen and got to work on the pasta. I decided to pair it with chicken and found a recipe that sounded like it would work. Cooking wasn’t my strong suit, Cain had always been the one to make the meals, but I liked the idea of pulling my weight and not because Cain would kill me. It was one of the few things I didn’t think he cared about.

I sat the savory chicken on the board to rest while plating everything else and didn’t notice when Kallie came into the room. Arms wrapped around my waist, and she laid her head against my back. I sucked in a startled breath that had more to do with her touching me than her scaring me.

“What are you doing,” I asked, frozen in place, my body instantly responding to her.

“I miss you.”

“I’m right here trying to finish prepping dinner,” I said, but I knew what she meant. I stayed busy. I kept an eye on her at school, but once she was home, I would take off. Most times, I sat by myself in the park by the school to study without worrying about a moment exactly like this.

“No, I miss you being around all the time, and I’m not sorry about June. She was very bitchy and only wanted you to get rich as a baseball player and knock her up.”

“That’s a pretty harsh judgment call to make when you never spent more than thirty seconds with her,” I argued.

“I didn’t need to. She said it herself in the girl’s bathroom. I happened to be in the far stall. It’s not my fault she didn’t check before running her mouth. So ya, I picked on her, but she deserved it. No one says shit like that about you.”

I had no idea what to say as my pulse pounded hard and my stomach flipped. I wanted to turn around and kiss her so

bad.

“Ah, well, thanks for saving me, I guess.”

“Gee, don’t sound so excited.” Her hands moved, and panic washed over me as one hand moved up and the other went down. I pressed my stomach hard into the counter so she couldn’t go any lower than the bottom of my abs.

“Trouble? What are you doing?”

“Being troublesome,” she said. “When did you get these abs?”

I could tell she was smiling, but I needed to get away from her. I tossed the pan down on the stove and grabbed her wrists, forcing her to let go as I stepped away.

“Why are you always like this? I don’t get it. We used to be so close.”

“You’re fourteen, and I’m seventeen. It’s inappropriate, Kallie,” I said, using her name. She looked like I’d hit her, and I hated it. I wanted to hold her and kiss her...fuck, I needed out of this house. “I promised Troy I’d hang with him and Bo tonight. Your dad is out. I’ll see you later.”

I stomped for the door and grabbed my backpack on the way.

“I’m not a little kid Carter,” Kallie yelled at my back.

“Maybe, but you’re still very underage, and I happen to like staying out of jail and keeping all my appendages attached.”

“Really? You’re worried about touching me when I kill people?”

It was a fair question, but I needed to have some morals. Fuck I had smothered most of them and thrown them to the pigs with the rest of the bodies, but this was something I could keep. Even if it seemed ridiculous to anyone else.

I turned around to look at Kallie, and her hands were in fists at her sides, anger written all over her face. I wondered if Cain was wrong and it would be Kallie that took my life.

“I don’t know what you want from me, Kallie. I’m seventeen. I have no interest in dating a kid. Is that what you think would happen? I’d break up with June and run to you. Would you want to be with some eleven-year-old?” I hated that I had to hurt her to get her to back off, but I was way too close to rushing across the room and kissing her. I could and would accept many things this life threw at me, but willingly becoming a statutory rapist was not one of them.

“Well, no, but this is different. We are different.”

I shook my head. “No, we aren’t. I want to have sex, and I can’t do that with you.” I shrugged and backed out the door even though each step felt like my feet were weighted.

“Carter....”

“You need to grow up, Kallie. The real world is complicated, and to the world, I’m your brother, never mind the age gap. Do you really think your dad would want CPS or the police knocking on his door because people are talking about his two kids committing incest?”

Her bottom lip trembled, her eyes filling with tears. It wasn’t until now that I understood her feelings may be closer to mine than I realized, but that only made this worse.

“So you do like me?”

Why did she have to be so smart?

Saying anything more was going to trap me in a corner. I shook my head and looked away from the blue eyes that haunted me every hour of the day.

“Keep pushing, and I’ll move out.”

I let the door slam and jogged down the stairs and along the drive toward Troy’s house, but once I was out of sight, I veered off and walked through the trees to the narrow stream that ran through the property. I never hung out with Troy. That was like hanging out with Cain all night. I wondered if I would end up maimed or dead before the night was over.

I dropped into the chair I’d brought down here for times exactly like this. Opening my bag, I pulled out the small pile

of pictures that I took everywhere. The first was of me, my mom, and my dad on a ferry. I was just a baby then, but sometimes when I closed my eyes at night, I could feel them and remember the soft hum of the song my mom would sing to help me sleep. Had I made them proud, or would they be disappointed in me and what I did for Cain?

The snapping sound of a twig made me jump. Kallie stood at the edge of the small clearing with two takeout containers in her hands.

“Kallie....”

“I’m sorry, Carter. I just miss you, and I’m sorry I do things that make you uncomfortable.” She held out the closed dishes. “You made a great meal and didn’t get to eat it. Can the food you made be considered an olive branch?” She smiled, and my heartbeat tripled like I was doing suicide sprints.

Fuck, I wish I could just tell her I loved her and always had.

“Sure.” Standing, I offered her the chair and took the spot on the log, but instead, she sat beside me and placed her head on my shoulder. She reached out and took the photos from my hand, staring at my parents before flipping to the next picture, which was taken after I’d come here. It was a photo of the four of us together before Kirby was killed.

“I miss her so much,” she said, and unable to help myself, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

“Me too.”

“I love you, Carter. I’m sorry that’s wrong, but I do.”

I opened my mouth to say it back, but instead just held her tighter.

Chapter Fourteen

KALLIE

ONE YEAR LATER

This trying to act normal shit was for the birds. A group of popular girls were giggling amongst themselves in the corner. Each said something nasty about another student as they walked by, yet they were the first to create a fake account to talk shit about their so-called friends.

Everywhere you looked, a group was trying a little too hard to be something they weren't. It didn't seem to matter which group. It was just the way of what Carter called the real world. It was stupid, and I hated it, but I'd learned to wear a mask like everyone else. I was the artsy, grunge girl with a foul mouth and sharp wit. The one thing I absolutely refused to do was say anything to my dad and have him give me that look that silently said, 'I told you so.'

"You okay? You look like you're planning on killing someone," Alex said, and she had no idea how close to the truth that was.

"I'm fine, just thinking."

I gave her a small smile as I tore my eyes away from Blair, Carter's newest girlfriend. They were standing, talking to his friends, with his arm around her waist. His thumb would move against her side, and I had to refrain from snarling at them as she snuggled closer to him. He dated a lot, but I managed to get rid of them as fast as he asked them out. This one worried me more than the rest. She actually seemed like a girl he should be with. Someone nice with the same morals and values, but I wouldn't let him go. He was mine, and I was counting down the days until I was legal age. No girl, no matter how perfect she seemed, was ruining my plans. Call me a bitch. I didn't care. Carter was mine.

"Don't look now, but Taylor is heading this way," Alex whispered.

I glanced in the opposite direction, and sure enough, Taylor was walking over, giving me his best cool guy smirk.

“Shit,” I mumbled, pushing away from my locker to escape. I had no idea why Taylor, the newest football captain, was suddenly interested in me, but he’d already asked me out twice. I had no interest in round three right now.

“Hey, Sexy, where are you running off to so fast?” Like a pack of wolves, the team surrounded me. Alex was quickly pushed out of the ring. If I’d been interested in the football team, I probably could’ve gotten an amazing team gangbang out of them, but I only had eyes for one guy.

“Taylor, how can I help you?” I really wanted to say ‘Go away or I will rip your balls off and shove them down your throat’ but staying calm was my school mantra.

“Don’t be like that, Sexy. I just want to talk to you.” He leaned against the locker beside me, and I knew I would have to hurt this fucker. Sorry Dad, but sometimes you just had to stick up for yourself.

“Don’t call me that. I know you don’t mean it.” I crossed my arms and glanced at the guys towering over me. I couldn’t get any more outnumbered than this. My one hope was Troy. They didn’t bother me when he was with them, so I wasn’t surprised when I didn’t see him.

Taylor reached out and ran my dark hair through his fingers, and I snapped my teeth at his hand, making him laugh. “You’re so fucking feisty. You remind me of my turtle.”

“Your turtle?” I hadn’t seen that particular insult coming.

“He’s a snapping turtle that I picked up on the side of the road. It took some time, but he no longer bites me.” Taylor leaned in and smiled. He had a cruel streak that was easy to see burning in his eyes. He was the type Dad would have fun playing with, but I needed to take care of this shit myself. I couldn’t run to my dad every time someone picked on me.

“Are you sure it’s still breathing? That’s the only way I wouldn’t snap at you.”

“So, is that still a no to a date?”

“No, I am not going to be your Laney.”

His brow knit together. “Who the hell is Laney?”

“You know the movie, She’s All That? Never mind. The point is I’d rather eat dog shit than go on a date with you.” The team laughed and made noises.

Taylor’s voice dipped low, so only I could hear. “You’ll regret that.” He grabbed my arm, his fingers easily wrapping around my bicep. “What do you think, boys? I think she needs a lesson, maybe a trip to the boy’s locker room.”

“I’d let go of me,” I said, knowing he would laugh, but I had to give him a chance to let me go.

“Not until I’m ready.” Taylor jerked me hard, and I stumbled as he pushed a kid at his open locker away and tried to shove me inside.

In a move my dad would’ve been proud of, I broke his hold and landed a solid punch to his kidneys, followed by a hit that cracked his nose before he had time to react. I kicked out at his friend coming at my side and he doubled over in pain, but I was wrapped up by a set of arms that felt like a bear had a hold of my five-foot-six frame, yanking me off the floor. I thrashed around and slammed my head back, trying to get free, but Taylor jumped to his feet and smacked me across the face so hard that my teeth snapped together.

No one had ever slapped me, and the sharp sting brought tears to my eyes. The part of me that my dad never wanted me to show in public ripped free of my control, but before I could do anything, all hell broke out around me. One moment I was dangling in the air, and the next, I was covering my head as a massive fight erupted.

The screams were loud, and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t get to my feet without being slammed into the lockers or stepped on by feet.

Two guys landed right beside me. I blinked as I stared at the side of Carter’s face. He had a cut over his eye and blood dripping from his nose, but his fists were flying as he relentlessly brought them down on Taylor’s face.

Another guy fell to the ground next to me, and this time it was Troy landing the punches. I took a shuddering breath in. This was the first time I realized that as much as we pretended here at school, we protected one another when it came down to it. We were our own pack, just like wolves.

A shrill whistle was blown, and teachers started pulling people away like refs. One of the coaches grabbed Carter around the chest and heaved him off of Taylor.

“Don’t you ever touch her again. You touch her, and I’ll kill you,” Carter yelled, his eyes wild. “You hear me! Touch her and die.”

He loved me. He really did love me. As much as he tried to hide it, I could see it as his eyes found mine. He was definitely getting suspended for this, and he’d done it for me. I stared into his bright green eyes until I couldn’t see him anymore, then burst into fake tears putting on a show for the teachers.

I was quickly whisked away to a room by a teacher so I could tell them what happened. I used all the right trigger words like ‘threatened’ and ‘felt unsafe’ and ‘he was bullying me and told me he planned on doing more.’ If Carter was getting into trouble, so were Taylor and the rest of the Dickcicles. They would find out that they just fucked with the wrong family.



CARTER

Fuming, I stomped across my bedroom floor. I couldn’t believe I was suspended for three weeks while that asshole Taylor got four days. Can’t have the captain of the football team suspended when a playoff game was coming up even though he was bullying a girl and then smacked her across the face. No, of course not. The game was far more important. And people wondered what the fuck was wrong with the

world? I knew what was wrong. Maybe Cain was right, and he was doing everyone a service.

With a yell, I spun and slammed my fist into the wall. Coach had set up a combine next week that scouts were coming to watch, and now I couldn't play, they wouldn't let me on the property. I'd do it all over again without question, no one touched Kallie without dealing with me, but that was beside the point. Those scouts were my ticket to a full scholarship and a ride to the big leagues.

"That's not going to help you play better," Kallie said.

I slowly turned around and slid down the wall until my ass hit the floor. "What do a few more bruises matter? It's not like I get to play next week."

"It's not fair. Taylor attacked me, and you're punished for protecting me." She walked into the room and sat beside me. As soon as her shoulder touched mine, I felt better. "I hate them, they should pay for what they did, and I'm sorry you can't play next week. If I hadn't fought back...."

"Whoa, I know the rules better than anyone about keeping a low profile, but I'm happy you broke his nose. That asshole deserved worse."

"I'm pretty sure you gave it to him." She nudged me, and I couldn't help but smile.

"I did, didn't I?"

I looked down at her and the energy between us shifted in a blink. The room was gone, the pain in my knuckles and jaw disappeared, and all I could see was her. The way she held her mouth open just a little like she was hoping I'd kiss her, while her dark lashes fanned her cheeks as she blinked. Her skin was so soft. I ran my fingers down the side of her neck, my body heating and hardening at the slightest touch. Everything throbbed, and all of it was wrong.

My lips hovered just over hers. "You make me want to do things I can get arrested for," I whispered.

"I do, do things I can get arrested for," she whispered. "I want you to kiss me." Kallie closed her eyes, and my

willpower snapped.

“Carter, get down here,” Cain yelled, and I’ve never jumped up so fucking quick in my life. I stared at Kallie’s face. Fuck, he knew I was about to kiss her. I looked at my window, but I would never make the two-story drop without breaking a leg.

“Shit,” I swore. “I’m dead. He’s going to kill me.”

“Calm down,” Kallie whispered and grabbed my hand, but I jerked it away and had to ignore the hurt look on her face, or I’d pull her into my arms all over again. I thought I was getting control of this.

“No, no, no. This is exactly what I was worried about.”

“Carter?”

“Coming,” I called back. “Fuck.” Great, my life was over at seventeen. I was going to be fed to pigs after he dismembered my body.

“Carter, stop panicking, he doesn’t know anything, but if you go down there looking like that, he definitely will. I still don’t know why you think he would care anyway.” She crossed her arms, giving me her best indignant eye roll.

“You’re not a dad. You wouldn’t get it.”

“Neither are you unless there’s something I don’t know,” she said, her voice suddenly as menacing as her father’s.

“No, of course not. It’s just different for dads. I better get down there before he looks for me and finds you in my room.”

Jogging down the stairs, I knew Kallie would follow, and I wanted to tell her to stay upstairs. If I was going to die, I didn’t want her to watch. If she enjoyed it, my heart would be crushed.

“What took you so long,” Cain asked as I walked into the kitchen, and just like all the other times he asked me something, my mind went blank.

“I....”

“He was talking to me. I was upset about what happened at school and his three-week suspension. Dad, it’s not fair. That guy tried to shove me in a locker, and I defended myself. Look.” Kallie pointed to her cheek. “I still have finger marks.”

“Yes, I’m aware, and I’ve talked the school into a week’s suspension. You are allowed to play in your combine held at the school next week as long as you only arrive on the property with the rest of the guys and then leave with them when it’s done.”

My mouth fell open. “What? Are you serious?”

Cain looked around the kitchen. “Why do people ask me that? Do I seem like the joking type?”

“No, no sir, you don’t. I’m just in disbelief. How did you manage that,” I asked, my heart soaring with relief that not only was he not going to cut my cock off, but he’d fixed this for me.

“It pays to know things. Both of you would do well to remember that,” Cain winked as Kallie hugged him.

“Thank you, thank you for making this right. You aren’t pulling me out of school, are you?”

“No, but I was thinking we’d go get some ice cream and maybe canvas the principal’s home,” Cain said. Kallie screamed and jumped up and down.

“Are we going to kill him? He’s a jerk dad, can we please?”

“Not tonight, but I like to survey any potential targets. If he goes back on his word, I will be paying him a visit.”

“Oh, I’m so excited. I’ll go get changed.” Kallie bolted out of the kitchen, and I was left staring at Cain. Getting ice cream, I was down with. Stalking my principal not so much, but I wouldn’t say no.

“Thanks for helping out.”

“It’s what Kirby would’ve wanted, and I like that you protected Kallie. I always knew you were the right person for the job.” My jaw dropped again as he walked out. “I’ll be in

the car waiting.” That was the closest thing to a compliment I’d ever received, and it felt fucking good.

Chapter Fifteen

Troy wandered up the hallway, football uniform on and holding thermoses. I opened my locker and let him put them inside.

“That enough,” he asked.

“It will be. I’ve already calculated the math with the gallon size of the tubs.”

“I have to admit, cuz, this is an ingenious idea. I kinda wish I’d thought of it,” Troy said. “You planning on telling Carter or your dad?”

“No, and I want you to keep quiet as well. This is my thing, my revenge.” I looked at the bottom of my locker. There were five thermoses that I’d collected over the last couple of days.

“Alright, let the fun begin.” Troy smiled that eerily similar smile to my dad’s before he walked away. I wondered if other schools had this many killers, or was it just something in the water around here? It made me wonder how many more of us there were.

“Hey Troy?”

“Yeah.” He turned around but continued to walk backward.

“How do you play with that bunch of idiots and not go insane?”

“Football is for me what being a mechanic is for your dad,” he said, turning around and jogging away. As strange as that answer was to anyone else, it made a lot of sense.

The game started in an hour and was conveniently at our school. The hallways were quiet, and I took advantage, ducking into one of the classrooms where I could see the football field. Sitting on a desk, I let my feet swing as I listened to the marching band play and the announcer introduce the teams. I patiently watched the game as I counted down. There was a very small window that I had to pull this off, and I waited until the line of red jerseys made their way onto the field after half-time before jumping down and heading out into the hall.

I needed to be fast. First, I grabbed the laundry bin I'd stuffed in the janitor's closet and pushed it back to my locker. There I loaded my little surprise before jogging to the locker rooms. The only sound was one squeaky wheel that needed to be greased. Poking my head into the boy's locker room, I didn't hear anyone and quickly pulled the laundry cart inside.

Troy said the team always took ice baths at the end of a game. There were eleven tubs in a line, and just like Troy said they would be, each was set up with cold water already. Pulling out the heavy gloves and gas mask, I put them on to be safe and opened the first thermos. I dumped half of the lye powder into the tub, then turned and put the rest in the second. Each one of the thermoses held enough for two tubs unless I wanted to melt the skin from their bodies. I didn't want to go quite that far, but burns that made them walk funny for months was perfect.

I quickly laced the ten tubs, then pulled the plug on the eleventh so Troy had the excuse not to use one. He was never a fan of ice baths with the other guys, so it wouldn't be odd for him not to participate. Part one was complete, and I tossed the empty thermoses in the laundry hamper again, pushing the cart out into the hall. Part two was to dispose of the thermoses in the green garbage bin that conveniently would be picked up tomorrow. Part three was my favorite part of all.

I could hear cheering as I dashed back to the locker room with my laundry bin. Lining it up with the others, I found the locker Troy had mentioned, slipped inside, and took out my phone.

This was my first real stalking mission, and my heart pounded hard as the excitement coursed through my body. Not only had this group of jerks picked on me time and again since I started here last year, but they got Carter suspended. If it weren't for my dad, he wouldn't be able to participate in the combine, and that was something I couldn't tolerate.

Each breath I took calmed me a little more until my hand stopped shaking from the adrenaline. Of course, I couldn't help but think about the kiss Carter had almost given me. My dad had the worst timing. Just ten more seconds, and I would've had my first kiss. Instead, he was back to avoiding me unless it was for breakfast and dinner. I wondered what he tasted like, what his lips would feel like moving against mine. Would he run his fingers through my hair or grip the back of my neck?

If I closed my eyes, I could feel his breath on my face as he spoke and the warmth of his body pressed against mine. The feral look in his eyes as he'd fought Taylor sent a thrill through my body.

The door banging open with a cheer jerked me out of my fantasy, and I quickly hit record.

"We are the champions, we are the mother-fucking champions," the guys yelled and gave one another high-fives as they banged their helmets together and smacked one another on the ass. I really didn't understand the dynamics of a sports team. To me, they all acted like animals with no manners. It also didn't seem to matter which team it was. They all behaved the same way. Even Carter's teams celebrated by hooting, hollering stupid chants, and pounding their chests.

"Alright, quiet down," Coach Brown said as he came through the door. The guys quieted as I watched them through the narrow slats of the locker. "You were all winners out there, but more importantly, you're all winners in here. I'm not going to do a long speech. I'm sure you're all sick of those this year, but I'm proud of all your hard work and what we accomplished tonight. Have your baths, head home, and then tomorrow night, we party at Vampirism."

The guys cheered again. I knew the name of the strip club. I'd even seen it a few times when we drove out to a neighboring town, but why would a coach take the guys there? I mean, he was like a teacher. Did all teachers take their students to strip clubs? Had Carter's coach ever done something like that? I would have to kill the coach if he had.

"You're the best, Coach," Taylor said, and I smirked. Too bad his cock was going to be out of commission tomorrow.

The trainer came in and began dumping ice cubes into the tubs. I heard him swear and knew he'd found my empty tub.

"Shit, one of the plugs came out. We are short one tub. I can quickly refill it."

"Naw, man, you know I hate the ice baths. It must be kismet. You guys go for it, and I'll stick to my 'oh so bad for me' hot shower."

"Wuss." The guy who had picked me up in the fight said and then snapped Troy on the ass with a towel. Troy laughed, but I could tell he wanted to jump on the guy and rip his throat out. As the others rounded the corner to the training area, Troy glanced at the locker I was in and smirked before he strode off to the showers.

It didn't take long before the guys began complaining about a burning sensation, and then the sweet sound of screaming started. There was splashing and more screaming as guys yelled for help, but the priceless moment was when Taylor ran into the changing area, hysterically crying that his cock was melting off.

I hadn't put in enough lye for that, but damn, his dick was in bad shape. It was dangling and looked like a sloppy piece of bright red and blistering meat. Some skin was definitely peeling off as he wailed along with the rest of the team. All they needed was smoke rising from their bodies to complete the picture.

Troy ran around the corner, "What the fuck is going on?" He skidded to a stop, and I zoomed in on his horrified

expression. “Holy shit.” He dutifully ran to the phone on the wall and ordered the guys to go to the showers.

Only a few of the guys made it, and the rest were crying like a bunch of babies. A few of them made the unfortunate mistake of touching their faces, and their skin was blistered and swollen. The coach burst in as Troy was on the phone with 9-1-1. It was mass hysteria, and I fucking loved every second of it.

Ambulances arrived, and the police took water samples and interviewed everyone, including those being loaded and shipped out. Troy was one of the best actors I’d ever seen. If I didn’t know him, I would’ve said he was traumatized. He was hugging his body as he bounced on his feet and kept saying, ‘Oh my god, that could’ve been me,’ and ‘Are they going to be okay?’ The police seemed to believe he had nothing to do with what happened since he was with the guys the entire time and only opted not to have the bath when the trainer said one was empty.

It took longer than I expected for the mess to be cleaned up and for the staff and the authorities to leave. I knew my dad would be wondering by now what was taking so long when the game ended a few hours ago. In hindsight, I should’ve set up a camera I could control remotely, but seeing this in person was the icing on the melting cock cake.

I did, however, set up the final piece to my revenge while I was trapped. It paid to have a hacker in the family willing to show you the basics. Carter was freaking awesome with any tech. I was much better with a blade. I knew just enough to get by and had set up a burner phone and a fake school account last year for just the right moment. This qualified as the right moment.

I even set up the release on a timer for three days from now. I went with an image of Taylor naked, his burnt red cock on display with the words, ‘My night at Vampirism was so hot it burnt my cock off.’ I then readied the clip of the coach saying he was going to take the guys to a strip club and got it ready to send to all the staff.

The lights finally turned off, and when I could no longer hear voices, I slipped out of the locker and tiptoed to the window on the far side of the room. I had to pick up one of the wooden benches and put it under the window to reach the latch on the top. My arms were shaking by the time I slipped the lock open and pushed it out enough that I could fit.

“Could you help a girl out?” I whispered, and arms reached in and clasped my hands. Troy heaved me out the window, and I fell to the ground.

“Took you long enough,” he said.

“Please, I had to wait for you to get your Academy Award.” He smiled and pulled out a set of black gloves and wipes. He cleaned off any potential prints and then closed it for me.

“My dad is going to be pissed at how late I am,” I said. “I should’ve set up a better excuse.”

“Naw, it’s all good. I already called Cain and told him we were practicing some training together tonight. He seemed pleased that we were working on our skills in a constructive manner. Besides, he knew I’d keep you in line.”

I glared at my cousin. The worst part was that he didn’t say shit like that to gloat. To him, he was just stating facts.

“Of course, he was happy. You said it to him.” I shook my head. Sometimes it seemed like I would never be out of my cousin’s shadow, but tonight and what happened...that was all me, and I was proud of my work even though no one would ever find out it was me.

Walking into the house, I peered into the living room and spotted my dad sitting in his favorite chair, sipping a beer and staring at a picture of Mom. I missed her every day and wished she was still here, but I was young when she died. I found him doing this often like he was hoping the picture would somehow come alive. I hated that he was so alone.

“Hey, Dad,” I said, and his head lifted, his eyes slowly registering it was me.

“Hey, Angel. Did you and Troy have fun?”

“Yeah, we did.” I smiled, wishing I could share what I accomplished. But I was worried he would say it was too public or I needed to kill them instead and pull me from school for being reckless.

“You thinking about Mom,” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

He lifted the picture for me to see. “I was thinking about the last time we spoke.”

“You think you’ll find the guy one day?”

His lip curved up, his blue eyes hardening. “I dream about it.”

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I gave him a hug. “I do too. Goodnight, Dad.”

Making my way upstairs, I poked my head into Carter’s room. He was on his stomach, sound asleep. He’d always slept like a drunk starfish.

There was something I had to know before I could sleep. Crawling onto the bed, I straddled his body and leaned down to his ear.

“You’re mine Carter, you can deny it and fight it all you want, but I’m going to have you. Every last inch of you,” I breathed softly into his ear. I rubbed my cheek against his as he mumbled something incoherent.

“Did your coach ever take you to a strip club?” I asked.

“Huh?” His voice was groggy, so I asked the question again.

“Kallie? What are you doing?” His voice sounded panicked, and a part of me loved it. Not that he was scared around me, but that his interest in me terrified him. He’d figure out soon enough that we were meant to be.

“Answer the question, did your coach ever take you to a strip club?”

“Where the hell is this coming from? Get off of me.”

“Answer the question, or I will pull my shirt off and rub my tits on your face while I call my dad’s name.”

He sucked in a deep breath.

“No. No, my coach didn’t do stuff like that with the team. We did overnight at the amusement park this year. Remember?”

“Good.” I slipped off his body, and he pushed himself up to look at me.

“What the hell is this all about?”

“I just needed to know.”

Carter tilted his head as he inspected me. “What would’ve happened if I said yes?”

“There would be a few titless strippers walking around.” I paused as I opened the door and looked back at Carter, who was staring at me with his mouth open. “Goodnight.” I smiled and closed his door softly. Only eight months to go, and I was of legal age. Nothing and no one would stop me from having him after that.

Chapter Sixteen

I loved that they'd decided to do this. A night game that anyone could watch. It was electrifying to play in front of a packed crowd. This was my big moment to shine. It was the final trial, and we'd been divided into teams to play a game. If we won this, not only would I impress the scouts, but we would have bragging rights for the next year.

More importantly, this was my ticket to a free ride at college and my path to all my dreams coming true. It was the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, and I was the winning run with no one out. I'd hit seven home runs off this guy last season.

The pitcher wiped his brow as he mumbled to himself. Good, stay worried. I smirked as he got set. I could feel it. This pitch was going out of the park. Adrenaline flooded my body, and the chanting voices fueled me. He reached back, picked up his knee, and the ball left his hand. The second it did, I knew it was off and cringed, turning to avoid the impact, but I didn't move fast enough, and the fastball smashed into my kneecap.

I screamed in pain and dropped to the ground. It was broken. I didn't need an x-ray to tell me that. I heard the bone crack.

My eyes flew open, and I tried to sit up, sucking in a deep breath a moment before the pain hit.

"Ah." I flopped back onto the hospital bed, my arm draped over my eyes. It wasn't a bad dream. The doctor had given me pain meds, but they must have been wearing off because it was

doing nothing for the throbbing in my knee. It felt like someone was stabbing it over and over again.

A hot tear trickled down my cheek. No team was going to want me. My free ride, my ticket to punch into the big leagues, it was all gone. By the time I was able to run again, all the teams would be full, and every team would question if I was a ticking time bomb of medical issues.

“Carter?” Kallie’s voice was as soft as her fingers on my arm. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I know how much this meant to you.”

“You should be happy. It means I’m trapped here,” I said, jerking my arm out of her hold. It wasn’t her fault, none of this was, but I also knew she didn’t want me to go, and the sad look on her face seemed fake, even if it wasn’t.

“Don’t be like that.”

“It’s the truth?”

She glared at me, and the look should’ve made me get up despite my broken knee and run away. Instead, I wanted to grab her and pull her down onto the bed with me as I kissed her.

“So, being around me is like being trapped?”

How did I explain that it was? How did I say that I fucking loved her and that every goddamn second I spent in the same house was a torture that was eating me alive? I glanced behind her, but I didn’t see Cain.

“He’s not here,” she said, guessing who I was looking for.

“Trouble...I...” I licked my lips. “I...” Sighing, I looked away. “I’m sorry. You didn’t throw the ball, but I’m angry, and you’re here.” I looked up at the monitor showing my heart rate, but it was silent. “Why am I still in the hospital? I thought they were going to discharge me.”

Kallie sat on the edge of the bed and picked up my hand. Her touch was freezing, but her skin was soft. I couldn’t help running my thumb over her hand. She was the farthest thing from cold. Her dad was like ice, but Kallie was the complete

opposite. She ran hot and was the most determined and fiery person I'd ever met. My heart pounded harder with every touch we shared, and my resolve to do the right thing was slipping. I would lay in bed at night, thinking about her. I jerked off at the thought of crawling into her bed in the middle of the night. I was an asshole. Living with the Buchanans was screwing with my head.

I made a feeble effort to try and get her to let go. But just like all the other times I tried to push her away and keep boundaries firmly in place, she ignored them and held on tighter.

“Don't bother, I'm not letting go, and I'm not going anywhere.” Rolling my head to look at Kallie, I was instantly drawn to her, staring at her mouth as she talked. “The doctor came in and said that he talked to a sports injury specialist, and he is flying in tomorrow. He's some fancy surgeon for MLB teams. He said he can stabilize your knee, which will heal in half the time and be stronger than with just a cast.”

“What?” Was this the dream I needed to wake up from?

“My dad researched your injury and asked the doctor to make the call,” Kallie said.

That all seemed above board and what a parent would do regardless of whether they were blood relations. But in this case, that was code for—he ordered the doctor to make the call, or the doctor would never perform surgery again unless he wanted to learn how to work without hands. What scared me was that I didn't care how he accomplished it.

“How much faster?”

“I'm not sure what half would be, but I overheard four to six weeks.”

A smile spread across my face before I chuckled, which turned into a whole-body laugh. I shook my head as I realized my moral compass had been spinning out of control for so long that it now always seemed to point north. I had no idea what was right anymore as hope rose in my chest and glowed brighter than any sun.

I locked eyes with Kallie. She was so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at her. “I have to ask, was it you?”

“Me what?” She smirked, and despite the pain in my knee, I wanted to pull her down and roll her over so she was under me.

“You know what. The reason the men’s locker room was closed and the team had to use the women’s instead.”

It was rare to see her shy, but she looked away and blushed, her cheeks glowing a rosy color.

“Are you going to tell me that I shouldn’t have?”

Everyone in the school knew what had happened to the football team. There were a million possible explanations, including a rogue fan from the other school, but as soon as I heard, I knew what really happened.

“No, I’m not. I wish I could’ve seen the look on Taylor’s face. He deserved it. He never should’ve touched you.” I squeezed her hand tighter and wished this quiet moment between us would never end. It had to, but I would take what I could get right now.

“You’ll get to see it soon enough,” she said, the corner of her mouth curling up and showing off the devil that lived in her heart.

Pulling on her hand as I smiled, she took the invitation and curled up beside me with her head on my shoulder. “You know this can’t happen again, right?”

“Are we talking about the football team or right now,” she asked slyly.

“I mean right now. It’s a one-time thing.”

“Eight months.”

“What’s eight months?”

“My birthday, and then I’m legal.”

“Sixteen is barely legal, and I’ll be nineteen, but that’s not the only reason we can’t be together, and you know it.”

“My dad is not going to care.”

Okay, I did have to laugh about that. “Trust me. He will care about anyone you date. Not only will he care, but he will cut me up, and you will never know or see me again. I would just disappear like all the rest.” She shook her head and snuggled closer to my side. This felt so right yet was so wrong, but right now, I didn’t have it in me to push her away.

“You worry far too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough.”

“Well, I’m not moving, and I’m not going anywhere. So you can fight this all you want. You can date anyone you want. Hell, you can even fuck anyone you want, but you are mine, Carter, and one day you’ll see that I was right and we’re meant to be.”

“You’re so much trouble, Trouble,” mumbling, I kissed the top of her head, loving the feel of her pressed against me. I should’ve been worried that she claimed me like that, but instead, my heart swelled. I hated that this fleeting moment in a hospital room was all I could have.

Her hand relaxed, and her breathing evened into slow breaths, and I knew she’d fallen asleep.

“I love you, Kallie. Even though I can’t have you, I want you to know that I will always be here for you and protect you.” I kissed the top of her head and breathed in the scent of her sweet shampoo.

Eventually, my eyelids felt too heavy, and I had to close them.



A WEEK LATER

Who would've guessed that getting injured like I had would make me a celebrity? At least, that was the only thing I could compare it to. Everyone at school wanted an autograph or selfie with the guy that started the eight-run comeback win. After I got hit and forced in a run, the team went on a rampage and stormed back to take the win.

Girls I'd never met sat in my lap and kissed my cheek for a pic. They didn't seem to care that I hadn't won the game. Everyone remembered when the crowd went silent as I rolled around on the ground in pain. That was the catalyst for a win and was all they really gave a shit about, but it felt good.

The guys on the football team were not getting the same kind of attention. They were back at school but were walking around like they'd ridden a horse for a week with a pickle up their ass. It didn't help that there was vomiting in the hallways when Kallie's school text—with the close-up image of Taylor's blistered and peeling cock—was sent out. I had to give it to her. She was creative.

"Mr. Kohlmann, can you come in here, please," Mrs. Peterson asked.

I didn't have her for any classes, but the latest photo of girl got off my lap, and I turned the wheelchair around to follow her into the classroom. I couldn't help but notice Kallie leaning against a locker door, her arms crossed and eyes so intense my pulse pounded harder.

She didn't like all the extra attention I was getting. It was fucking terrible of me, but I enjoyed her jealousy. I'd fought my feelings for so long, but it felt pointless. I couldn't be with Kallie, yet trying to deny I loved her, wanted her, and did things I would normally never do if someone touched her was too tiring.

The door closed behind me, and I looked around at the empty English classroom with the pictures of all sorts of

famous people on the walls. Mrs. Peterson walked past me toward the windows, her hand brushing against my shoulder as she did. I wasn't sure if it was on purpose or not.

"How are you feeling after the surgery," she asked, the little chain rattling as she pulled the blinds down.

"Okay, I guess. My knee is sore, but the surgeon was amazing, so I'm hoping to be on my feet soon."

She closed the next and then the next, the room slowly darkening with each one. I'd barely spoken to Mrs. Peterson before, but suddenly I was getting a weird flirty vibe.

"I have all the faith that you'll be up again very soon," she said, but the look on her face wasn't as innocent as the words coming out of her mouth. She licked her bottom lip and fanned at her face. "Is it warm in the school today?"

"Um...no, I think it's fine." It was November, and the school was known for not turning on the heat until you were sitting in class with your teeth chattering, wearing your winter jacket.

"I think they already turned up the heat, or maybe there's another reason." I looked over my shoulder. Was I being punked? Was this going to end up on some news channel? Because she was definitely flirting as she undid the top two buttons of her blouse. It wasn't enough that I could see anything, but it was enough to hint at the promise.

"Did you want something, Mrs. Peterson? The bell will ring soon, and it takes me a little longer to get to class now."

"Call me Carol." She leaned against the desk, and her legs stretched out in front of her, which pulled her skirt up. If it went any higher, I would've been able to see if she was wearing any underwear. She was a beautiful woman, but I wasn't into the whole student and teacher thing and really just wanted to get the hell out of the room.

"Okay. Carol. Was there something you wanted?"

"Oh, there are a few things that I need." She stepped out wider with one leg, and my eyes followed the movement. I couldn't keep the shock off my face as I stared at her naked

pussy. Holy fuck, this was really happening. I gripped my wheelchair tighter and quickly looked away from the very open invitation. “I thought we could find some time for private tutoring sessions. I’m sure there is a subject or two I can help you improve in.”

Her hand slipped into the open part of her blouse, and she moaned as she squeezed her tit. If I were a normal guy, I’d tell her, ‘Sure, let’s go right now.’ But no, of course not. All I could think about was getting the hell out of this room before she knelt between my legs, and we looked like some crazy movie with her holding on while I wheeled backward, trying to get away.

“I really appreciate the offer, Mrs. Peterson, and I will certainly think about it, but I need to get going.”

She stood up straight as I backed the wheelchair for the door.

“Are you sure? I have some free time. We could even go to my house, where it is quieter.”

I could’ve sworn she was married. Then again, that didn’t stop most people nowadays.

“I really need to go, but maybe another time,” I said, not wanting to insult her. I still had visions of this ending up twisted around, and somehow, I had tried to seduce her and got arrested or some shit. Oh my god, I could see the look on Cain’s face now.

Mrs. Peterson smoothed out her skirt and did up one of the buttons on her blouse. I now understood why she did so much tutoring. Fuck, half the guys in the senior class said she tutored them.

“Well, alright then. You have a good day, and remember the offer stands. It’s never too late to improve your grades.” She smiled as I reached back for the handle on the door.

“This is true, thank you. Have a good day, Mrs. Peterson,” I said, not using her first name.

I got out into the hall and felt like I’d escaped a bear trap. My heart was beating so fast.

“What did she want,” Kallie asked from behind me, and I jumped in the seat, wincing.

“What did I say about sneaking up on me?”

“I didn’t sneak. You almost backed into me. I was standing here the entire time,” Kallie said, grabbing the handles of the wheelchair and pushing me.

“Fine.” I relaxed into the seat and let her. I knew she wouldn’t stop without a fight anyway. “And I don’t know what she wanted.”

“Bullshit, she wanted to fuck you.”

“Shhhhh, fuck Trouble, you can’t just blurt that out like that,” I said, glaring back at her.

“Why not? She’s the asshole for trying to screw one of her students,” Kallie said. She had a point, but that didn’t matter.

“Just...because. I can see that getting turned into some shit where I was the aggressor. Or, I grabbed her ass inappropriately or something that would get me charged or suspended...again.”

“Hmm.”

I didn’t like that noise, that meant she was thinking, and I glanced up at her. “What’s hmm?”

“Nothing. I just think I need to do a little digging after school.”

I covered my eyes and swore. This would end badly, I could see it coming, and it would be like trying to stop a train going full steam. You either let Kallie do her thing or got run over.

Chapter Seventeen

KALLIE

CHRISTMAS

After our moment in the hospital and over the last few weeks, I thought I was getting somewhere with Carter.

He seemed more open and didn't jump when I touched him, but I was wrong. He started pushing me away again as soon as he could walk and train. We were playing footsies under the table, and I know I saw heated glances, but he took off as soon as Christmas dinner was done. Why was he so fucking stubborn? We both wanted each other, I couldn't wrap my head around his logic.

Just like I didn't understand why we had Christmas dinner in the first place when my dad and Uncle Abel weren't even remotely religious. But Aunt Aspen insisted, so here I was, picking at a piece of pumpkin pie and staring at Carter's empty seat.

"Why so glum, chum," Bo asked, and I shrugged. "Is it because lover boy left?" I glanced around, but everyone was preoccupied with something else.

"He's not my lover, and keep your voice down."

"He is the reason, though, isn't he?"

"What does it matter if he is?"

Picking up a fork, Bo grabbed my plate and ate my mangled pie. "You didn't want this did you," he asked as he stuffed a forkful in his mouth.

"Not now." I didn't care about the pie, but I was tempted to stab his hand. It was annoying that he knew why I was upset.

"Look, all I'm going to say is that he's not like us. As much as he tries and would do anything for you, he's not a killer." Bo pointed around the room. "You should find someone like us, or shit like this will keep happening."

"That's ironic coming from you, considering who you're stalking." Bo paused with the forkful of pumpkin halfway to his mouth. "Don't look at me all surprised. I see everything,

Bo. You would do well to remember that.” I leaned a little closer to him, my voice dropping. “Just like how I know you have videos of a certain someone you really shouldn’t have.” His face paled. “I can vividly picture what you do with those videos late at night when you think you’re all alone. But are you?” My lip curled up. “I may even have made a copy or two.”

I’d never snuck into Bo’s room, and I certainly had no interest in watching him jerk off to my cousin, but he didn’t need to know that. He just needed to wonder if I had.

“What do you want?”

I screwed up my face. “Nothing. At least not now.” I smiled, plucking the fork from his fingers and eating the last bite of pie. “*Rule number three, always be prepared for anything.*”

Smiling, I stood and wandered home. I was sick of playing the part of the happy Santa loving family.



FEBRUARY

“No, you can’t come with me,” Carter said as he pulled on his favorite hoodie.

“But you just said that you’re going to get ice cream. Why can’t I come for that?” He sighed as he walked toward the bathroom.

“Because I’m not going alone. It’s a date.”

I ground my teeth together. “Fine, whatever.”

“Fine?” Carter poked his head out of the bathroom. “What does that mean?”

“Last I checked, it still meant fine.”

Turning around, I stomped away and slammed my door closed but tiptoed back down the hallway. He didn’t want to take me, fine. Carter still wanted to try and deny us, no problem. Nothing was stopping me from having a little fun with it.

I ran out the back door and down to the small slaughter area Dad set up years ago. Going to the freezer, I pulled out one of the pig heads. It always amazed me how heavy they were. Luckily, there had been an early thaw and then a cold snap, so all the snow was gone, and the ground was nice and hard to hide my tracks.

I glanced up at the house, then opened the rear door on the old truck Carter bought, placing the head on the backseat. He always had an extra sweater or something in here, and sure enough, there was a black sweater on the floor. I tossed it over the head, not bothering to tuck it in so it would easily slip off.

I was done waiting around and officially took back what I said. I wasn’t fine with him dating, and Carter couldn’t ignore me anymore.

Closing the door quietly, I ran to the back of the house and watched him walk out the front door a few minutes later, smirking as he drove away. Okay, Carter, game on.



CARTER

“Shit!” I swore and slammed my hand off the steering wheel. I hated upsetting Kallie. I hated hurting her even more, but every time we started to get close, I heard her father’s warning.

“My Sunshine and Angel are the only two things that matter to me. If you ever do anything to hurt either of them, it will be the last thing you ever do.”

How was I supposed to forget that? The look in his eyes had been carved into the back of my eyelids, so even in sleep, I saw his face. I couldn’t do anything without his warning ringing in my mind, and I could picture him sitting on the deck, whittling his newest sculpture, thinking about the best way to cut me up. Why did a serial killer start carving little wooden things? They were never anything normal, like an animal or something pretty. No, they were decapitated bodies and eyeballs. I knew why. It was his way of silently warning me that if I touched Kallie, I wouldn’t live to see another day.

As I pulled up to Heather’s house, she waved from her front door, hopping in a minute later.

“Hey, how are you,” I asked, not really caring as I put the truck in drive.

“Are you not going to kiss me?”

“It’s our third date. I usually go on the date first, then the kiss, but who am I to argue?” I leaned across the seat, and Heather grabbed my face like she wanted to devour me instead of kiss me.

“What is that,” she asked, looking at the backseat.

I glanced in the back, but all I saw was my sweater balled up. “My sweater.”

“No, that.” She pointed at something I couldn’t see from my angle. Reaching over the seat, she grabbed the edge of my sweater and pulled. A second later, I was cringing and covering my ears as she screamed like I was trying to attack her. She looked at me, looked in the backseat, and, still hysterical, smacked me across the face before jumping out of the truck and running into the house, shrieking the entire way.

“What in the actual fuck?”

Turning in my seat, I looked back and saw an eyeless pig head. I tried to contain myself but burst out laughing.

“I knew Kallie gave up way too easily. Fine....” I laughed until tears rolled down my cheeks and my stomach ached. Okay, I was fucked in the head. “This is very *Lord of the Flies* of you, Trouble. I’m impressed.”

Still chuckling, I put the truck in drive but only made it to the end of the street before being surrounded by three cop cars. Oh, you have got to be kidding me.

“Turn off the vehicle and get out with your hands up.” A speaker boomed with a man’s voice. Lights were trained on me, along with guns, and the situation was suddenly not as funny. Fucking Heather called the cops.

I pushed the button on my window. “What is going on?”

“Get out of the vehicle now.” *Fuck me.*

“I need to undo my seatbelt,” I yelled out the window.

“Do it slowly.”

Holy fuck, I was going to get shot over a pig’s head. I did as the officer said and moved slowly to undo my seatbelt before putting both my empty hands out of the window.

“I’m coming out.”

The moment I was out of the vehicle, two officers grabbed me and slammed me down on the ground face-first. My knee screamed at the sudden abuse on the pavement, and I knew I never wanted to see old, chewed gum up that close again.

“What is this all about,” I tried asking, but no one seemed to want to give any answers as they flung open my back door.

“What the hell?” I looked up at the man talking, who seemed to be in charge. “Get him up.”

I was promptly hauled to my feet, but my knee made me cringe. It had healed quickly, but still couldn't take a hit without barking at me. The guy pointed to the pig head that he held up by the ears.

“It's a pig,” I said and suddenly realized the irony of this moment. Apparently, he did as well and narrowed his eyes.

“Do you think this is funny, son? Terrorizing young women?”

“What? No. I didn't even know it was in my backseat.”

“Really? A decapitated head just wandered into your truck?” He put his hand on his hips.

“No, I just mean I wasn't the one who put it there, and I definitely didn't do it to terrorize anyone.”

“Right. Then how did it get there?”

I really wanted to ask, ‘Why do you ask stupid questions,’ but I kept that to myself and shrugged. “My best guess is it was some of the fans or players from the Wild Boars playing a practical joke. They're still butt sore about losing the combine game to us.”

I lied way more smoothly than I should've been able to. Cain had taught me a few things very well, and being calm under extreme pressure was one of them. The Wild Boars was the baseball team from two towns over and a bunch of their players had been invited to the combine. Of course, we were separated into our rival sides for the game and they almost won, but their pitcher hitting me walked in the winning run.

The officer's eyes widened, and then he looked me up and down. “Well, holy shit. Carter Kohlmann?”

“Um...yeah.”

“Shit, boys, uncuff him. Damn, I’m sorry. We got a call that you were keeping human heads in the backseat of your truck.” He laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “You can’t be too careful these days.”

I rubbed my wrists as they removed the cuffs, “No, you certainly can’t.” The irony of that statement was not lost on me. Fucking strange world I lived in indeed.

“I’m Greg,” he held his hand out for me to shake. “Look, this is the worst time, but would you mind signing my hat? I have it in the cruiser?”

“No, I don’t mind,” I said, following behind him. As if this night couldn’t get any stranger, it did. What was next? Aliens? Were they going to come down and abduct us?

“Thanks so much. My whole family was at the game. We love to see the next stars and could feel you were going to hit a home run. I still say that pitcher hit you on purpose. Shit, I’m so happy to see you’re okay.”

“Thanks. I’m hoping to make spring tryouts to get back on track.”

Greg reached into the car and pulled out the baseball hat and a thick marker. I scribbled my name on the brim while he beamed at me like I was already a superstar.

“Here you go, Greg. Thank you for letting me go.”

“Aw shit, son, I’m sorry. Did you want us to take the head?” I wanted to say yes, but Cain said, ‘Never leave evidence anywhere,’ and I had no idea if that thing would have any or not.

“Thanks for the offer, but I may use it for a little payback.” Greg laughed. At least he thought this situation was entertaining.

“Alright, son, we’ll leave you alone.”

“Did you want a selfie? I mean, I can do one with all the guys if they want?”

Rule number eight, make the most of a bad situation and create something you can use later.

“Well, shit yeah. It’s not every day we get to meet a bona fide rising star. Hey boys, we’re gonna do pictures. Come here.”

An hour later, I turned down the farm driveway and spotted Kallie sitting on the front porch. She smiled as I pulled up. I was going to freak out at her, tell her she had to stop doing this kind of shit, but that was what she wanted. Besides, I kind of liked her games even though it had almost gotten me arrested or shot tonight.

Shutting off the truck, I grabbed my pig head and slipped out of the vehicle with a smile.

“Back so soon?”

“Training early tomorrow, but this was a nice touch.” I rubbed the head and walked to the fire pit. “Who knew that girls were so freaky? She fucking loved it and wanted to fuck in the truck bed with it.”

Kallie was following me, and I could feel the glare penetrating my back, making me smile. I sat the head on the cooking grate and quickly got a fire going with the supplies that were readily available.

“You’re lying,” she said, but it sounded like a growl.

“Why would I lie about great sex? I mean, she was wild, fucking freaky girls are the best. Thank you for this. I may take one on all my dates.” I watched the pig’s head burn and smiled wide at Kallie, who was glowering at me. “Sleep well. I better get to bed. I’m worn out, and I need to clean my jeans, they got all dirty.” I brushed at the dirt marks from the pavement, and I thought Kallie was going to blow a gasket she looked so furious.

That pissed off look was my sweet revenge, and I ate that look up like a fucking dessert. She was the only one I wanted, and seeing her jealous was the biggest turn-on. I leaned in close to her as I turned to head to the house.

“If you have any other ideas that will lead to mind-blowing sex, let me know. I’ll be sure to use them on my next date. Good night, Trouble.”

She made a noise in her throat, and there was a very good chance this twisted game would lead to her killing me, but I didn't care. There was something about her all fired up like this that was so fucking hot.

“By the way, that new shampoo, the one with the cucumber, smells really nice,” I said, then walked away and didn't look back.

Game on Trouble, game on.

Chapter Eighteen

KALLIE

MARCH

I hated taking the bus home. I'd gotten way too used to Carter driving us, but he had a follow-up doctor's appointment today, so I was in a more foul mood than when I left school.

Stomping up the porch steps, I threw open the door with a bang. "Dad!"

There was no answer, but I knew he was home. All his vehicles were parked in the driveway.

"Dad! Where are you?"

I marched down the stairs to his room in the basement. When I placed my palm on the scanner, the heavy door clicked and let me inside. My dad was coming in from the secret passage.

"Why does it smell like a campfire in here," I asked, sniffing the air. Focus, you're pissed, remember. "Dad, what the hell?"

He had the best creepy stare. I needed to work on mine. He gave it to me now, a single brow rising as he assessed me.

"You seem irritated, Angel."

Oh my god, I was going to scream.

"Irritated? Irritated? Do you think I'm simply irritated? I'm...fucking pissed off," I blurted and then prayed I was too old to be spanked because to swear at my dad was to take your life in your hands. I could get away with more than most, but the look on his face said he was thinking of cutting my tongue out.

"Do we need to discuss respect, Angel?" I swallowed hard and shook my head. "Good, then what seems to be the issue?"

He walked over to his worktable, which still had blood on it from his latest victim. I had a very good idea who'd been on that table not long ago.

“Let’s talk about respect, Dad.”

His eyes found mine as he cleaned off his special tool, the small blade glinting as I walked closer. Dad turned his back on me, and I pursed my lips together.

“I’m listening,” he finally said.

“You’re demanding respect from me, but you don’t show me any.”

He rolled up his tool case and turned to face me. “What exactly is it you think I’ve done?”

“You want me to grow up and prove myself to you, but then you turn around and don’t let me take care of my problems,” I said, leaning on the worktable.

“Is that so?”

I hated when he did this. It was a trap. He asked just enough and said just enough for everything to get turned inside out and still end up my fault.

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, you’re going to have to be clearer on what you’re talking about.”

He was always so methodical. I loved my dad, but sometimes, just sometimes, I wished he wasn’t who he was. At least with Uncle Abel, you knew how he felt and what he was thinking, but with my dad...I struggled, and I thought I knew him better than anyone. Well, other than my mom. God, I missed her. She would know exactly how to deal with Dad.

“I’m talking about Taylor from my school. You know the football captain that has been missing for days.”

He shrugged. “What about him?”

“What do you mean? What about him?”

“Ask your question, Kallie. This beating around the bush is tiresome.”

I threw my hands up. “Fine, why did you kill Taylor? I had everything handled.”

It took everything in me not to yell and stomp my feet as he pulled out a jug of cleaner and rubber gloves.

“Tell me something, Angel. Why do you think I had anything to do with this Taylor’s disappearance, and if I did, why would I have done something to him?”

My mouth opened and closed. Shit. What if it wasn’t him? Then I would have to tell him what I did to the football team. I assumed he knew, but now I wasn’t so sure. Dammit.

“Are you going to answer or look like a koi fish breathing all evening?” He smirked as he pulled on the gloves and poured cleaner on the bloody table.

“Dad...why are you always like this? Can’t you just tell me for once? Why does everything have to be a lesson?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

My father stood up straight and gave me the full weight of his even and unyielding stare. “Alright. Yes, I killed Taylor. His body is disposed of, and he suffered. I made sure his death was excruciatingly painful.”

“I knew it,” I growled. “So what am I supposed to do now?”

“You do what you always do. You go to school like normal. There is no evidence to find, so if someone asks you if you’ve seen Taylor, you say no.”

I shook my head, annoyed that he swooped in and took the joy of my payback. “You can’t kill everyone who is mean to me, Dad!”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Is that why you think I killed him?”

“Well, why else? I doubt it would be because of Carter,” I said, realizing that some of what Carter had been saying was right. If my dad thought Carter was a threat, he would kill him in a blink. Shit. That was a revelation for another time.

“I did it because he was going to expose who and what you are. Which would also put me, your Uncle Abel, Aunt Aspen, Troy, Talon, and Bo all at risk.” He held up his fingers as he

named everyone. “It would even put Carter at risk of being interrogated or jailed depending on what warrants they could get. We no longer have your Mom to safeguard and act as a buffer between what we do and the authorities, and you put us all in those crosshairs with your revenge stunt.”

“That’s impossible. I was careful,” I said.

“Not. Careful. Enough.” His glare somehow intensified, and I stepped back from the table. Even though his tone never changed, anger burned in his eyes. “How do you think Taylor always knew the latest gossip about the other students?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I just assumed he talked to people all the time.”

“And what do I tell you about assuming?”

I nibbled my bottom lip. “*Rule number thirty-two, never assume anything. Always make sure you know the facts.*”

“Exactly.” Grabbing a small scrub brush, he swirled it around in the cleaner and sanitized the table. “Taylor had a camera hidden in the air exchange. He recorded everything said in the men’s locker room and watched the girls change in the women’s.”

“Son of a bitch, what a pig,” I growled, but it made sense, and I hated that I didn’t think to check for cameras or listening devices.

“Yes, he was. He planned to repay the favor by sending the video to the police. Luckily I stepped in and stopped him before he could. I also removed the cameras and stole his laptop from home.”

Backing up and leaning against the wall, I shuddered at the thought of coming so close to being caught with my first mission. This was all me, other than the part Troy played, and I screwed it up.

“How did you find out?”

“Because I always know my enemy. I keep telling you that knowing your enemy is key to any situation. The moment he hit you, I looked into him. I searched his home and learned his

passwords. I watched him sleep and went through his binders. I became him. I understood him so I could effectively kill him. Also, did you think I wouldn't notice half of my lye missing?" He snorted. "Rookie mistake. I would've given it to you if you asked. I also would've helped you ensure the other mistakes didn't happen, but you seem keen to believe that you now know everything."

"I just wanted to do this on my own. To prove I'm as good as Troy and can be as good as you."

My dad stopped cleaning and looked me dead in the eye. "Angel, you need to realize that may never happen."

It felt like a punch to the gut, and my lip trembled. "Why?"

He looked around the room. "It should be obvious, but I will tell you. You're too much like your mom and Uncle Abel. You feel deeply, become irrational when emotional, and still have trouble keeping your temper in order. You do not think straight and with calculated intent like Troy and I do. We do not feel the same way. We only have manipulation and calculation to guide our actions." He shrugged. "Emotions make you erratic, they blind you, and they impede your ability to assess situations. This is just a fact. It's not like you can turn it off."

"Does that mean you don't have any emotions? What about mom? Didn't you love her? What about me? Do you not love me? Do I make you weak?"

He was quiet, and tears leaked out of my eyes. "I will tell you what I told your mother. Your mother was, and you are, the most important thing in my life, but feeling real love is beyond my ability. I am overly protective of you. I want you to be safe and happy and all the other things a parent wants for their offspring. I will provide for and guide you, but what you are asking is impossible for me to say yes to. Your mother understood that, and she still loved me, and I devoted all my attention to her."

"But you don't love me?"

He tilted his head, and I was reminded of when I was a little kid, and he would look at me exactly like this when I was being difficult. “I’m a psychopath, Angel. You know I cannot process emotions the same way. I do not choose not to love you. I simply cannot love you the way you mean. It does not mean I don’t feel something.”

Even though I knew all this, hearing him say he didn’t love me hurt me to my core. I loved him and Carter with all I had, and they both kept me at arm’s length for different reasons.

I sprinted out of the room and ignored my dad as he called my name. I rushed up the stairs two at a time and burst through the door, almost hitting Carter as he walked down the hall.

“Fuck me...you just gave me Hershey squirts,” Carter growled teasingly, but I couldn’t stop the tears as they flowed. I darted around him and grabbed my jacket.

“Trouble, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Trouble, this is me. You know I’m always here for you.”

I stuffed my arms in the jacket. “Do I?”

“Yes, of course.” Carter walked toward me, but I didn’t want him to touch me, or I would lose it completely.

Spinning, I ran outside and headed for my mom’s grave. She was the only person who would understand me. I knew it, and she was gone. The air was cold and moist, freezing me more than the coldest day in winter.

As soon as I reached her grave, I dropped to my knees and let the emotion tear from my chest. I was a lone wolf and not by choice. I wanted to be part of my pack, but they didn’t want me.

“Mom, I miss you so much. You would know what to say or do. And you’d know how to handle Dad.” I cried, laying my hands on the ground. “Dad doesn’t love me, and Carter hates me. Why did you leave me here with people who don’t want me around?”

My body shook as I sobbed, my breathing so erratic I was gasping for breath. It only got worse as arms I would recognize anywhere wrapped around me, pulling me into him.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” Carter said, his voice soft and caring.

“Leave me alone,” I said, but I didn’t push him away.

“No, I told you I would always be by your side and protect you.”

“I’m pretty sure a promise you made as a child doesn’t count now. You’re free to go,” I said and pulled away from him to wipe the tears off my face. “I wouldn’t want you to hang out with someone you can’t stand.”

I gasped as Carter grabbed my face and kissed me. “I don’t hate you,” he whispered and brushed his lips softly against mine again. “I could never hate you.” Kiss. “I always want to be near you.” He nipped at my bottom lip. “You’re beautiful.” He didn’t deepen the kiss, it was hardly more than a friendly hello, but I would’ve paid any amount of money or killed anyone to stay like this with him forever.

His lips were soft yet firm and commanding. My ears rang as my heart pounded so loud I would’ve sworn my dad could hear it in the house. Butterflies took flight and made my stomach feel like it was dancing. Carter tasted like coffee, chocolate, and sweet sin.

“It feels like you do,” I whispered against his lips as he softly kissed me again.

“It’s just so complicated, Trouble, but don’t ever think I hate you. I promise you. I don’t. I never could.”

Sitting down, he pulled me into his lap, and I curled myself up, pretending we were a real couple. I balled his jacket into my fist, never wanting to let him go. But I knew he would sprint away again when we left this spot.

“My dad can’t love me. I just realized that all this time, he was tolerating me.”

“No, that’s not true. I know Cain can’t feel the same as you, and I can, but there is a part of your dad that loves you

fiercely. It's just different for him. Trust me. You're the most important person in his life. He would lay down his own for you."

"I don't know what to believe anymore," I said and closed my eyes as Carter kissed the top of my head. "Can you tell me about my mom? I remember so little of her," I said, relaxing my head onto his chest and listening to his heartbeat as he spoke. I wasn't like the kids at school, and no matter how hard I tried, I was only partially like my dad. It made me feel like I didn't belong anywhere.

These brief moments I shared with Carter were the only times I felt like I belonged. He wasn't a killer and didn't have the urges the rest of us did, but he understood me better than anyone else.

I couldn't let him go. I would never let him go.

Chapter Nineteen

KALLIE

JULY 19

I didn't think things could get more strained between Carter and me, but they did when he accepted an offer from the University of Virginia and said he was moving out. Since then, he'd been, what he called, prepping. What the hell did that even mean?

"Today's going suck," I mumbled and tossed my stress ball—an eyeball replica—into the air and caught it.

The door opened, and I couldn't be bothered looking over.

"Wow, who pissed in your cereal this morning and on your birthday," Carter asked, and I slowly rolled my head in his direction.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, genuinely shocked he wasn't hanging out with whatever girl he was dating this week. There wasn't even a point in chasing them away anymore. He was doing a fine job of that all on his own.

"It's your birthday. Of course, I'm going to be around for that." He walked into the room, shirtless with only swim trunks on. His new workout was evident, and I didn't hide my gawking, taking a second to appreciate the view. He'd also gotten a full-sleeve tattoo that looked sick on him. "No."

"What?"

"I know what you're thinking, and just because you're officially sixteen...."

"Blah, blah, blah," I finished for him. "You're becoming a bore, Carter," I said, annoyed that he could still make my heart pound and my blood sing. He had succeeded in keeping me at arm's length, and now he would be living over an hour away.

I tossed the eye into the air, and he snatched it, smirking at me, his eyes full of mischief. I hadn't seen him this relaxed in awhile.

"The sex you got last night must have been good for you to be this chill."

“Wasn’t bad, actually.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure. Can I have my ball back, and can you leave my room now? I prefer to spend my birthday alone.”

“Not a chance. We’re going out,” he smiled and squeezed the ball, distorting the eye. I was suddenly curious if a real eye would act the same way when squished.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck you’re annoying.”

He whipped the squishy eyeball at me, and I squealed, laughing as I blocked it, and it sailed across the room. Jumping up, I ran at Carter, who sprinted out the door and down the hall to his room.

“I’m going to get you.”

“You can try,” he said, sticking his tongue out to taunt me. This felt normal. It was like we’d been transported back in time when we hung out all day, laughed freely and didn’t care what the world thought.

I expected him to slam the door in my face, but he didn’t, and I ran into his room, skidding to a stop as I stared at the pretty little box he held in his hand. He cocked his brow at me in challenge, and I smiled back, running at him to try and grab my gift.

We ended up in a crazy game of me trying to grab him, but for someone so tall, he was surprisingly fast and agile. He jumped over his bed, and I hopped up on it.

“Come and get me, Kallie, if you can.” With a wink, he ran out the door again, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I leaped off the bed and chased after him. I hated that he could take the stairs three at a time.

I could smell bacon and knew Dad was cooking breakfast before twirling around the banister hot on Carter's heels. My dad gave us his patent, 'What the fuck are you doing' look as we ran past him and into the living room.

Shit, I was losing ground. He was so freakishly fast. I turned and ran back the other way and almost caught him, but he spun out of reach and ran back up the stairs.

"Freaking teenagers," my dad said, making me laugh.

"Come on, Trouble, you're slow."

"Jerk. Give me my gift." I bounded up the stairs, not caring about the squeaky boards. We must have sounded like elephants charging through the house.

Carter veered back into my room, and I managed to put on a burst of speed, jumping on his back before he could run around the loveseat I had in my room for reading.

With a scream, we tumbled onto the small couch before bouncing off and ending up on the floor. I couldn't stop laughing. It felt like forever since I had this much fun. The bonus was feeling Carter on top of me as he laughed. Running my nails up his arms and over his shoulders, I locked my fingers behind his neck, and all the humor between us evaporated.

"You should open your gift." His soft voice flowed over my skin, reminding me of warm blood.

"There's only one thing I want for my birthday." I moistened my lips, and his eyes followed the movement.

His cheek rubbed against mine as he dropped his head. Thump, thump, thump, the blood whooshed through my veins.

"Maybe one day, Trouble, but not today," Carter said. My initial reaction was to press, but this was the first time he even hinted that something could potentially happen in the future.

Carter may not have realized it, but if there was a single crack in his armor, then it was pierceable. I just needed to be smart about it. I let my hands drop from his neck, and he groaned as he sat up and leaned against the love seat.

“Did you hurt your knee,” I asked as he rubbed it.

“Naw, it just gets stiff, but it’s getting stronger every day.” He held open his hand as I sat up beside him. “Here you go.”

I plucked the small package from the palm of his hand, and I couldn’t help thinking it was a ring. I mean, that was stupid. Wasn’t it? Shit, what would I do if it really was a ring? Did I want to marry Carter? I was just sixteen but couldn’t see myself with anyone else.

“Are you going to open it or just stare at it like it might bite?”

My face flushed hot, and I could feel my ears burning with embarrassment. “I’m admiring the wrapping. Do you mind?”

“Uh-huh.”

Not bothering to continue the pointless argument, I tore open the paper and stared at the small velvet box. Holy shit, it really was a ring. My brain fried trying to decide what to do, but I couldn’t stare any longer and lifted the lid.

I was simultaneously thankful and saddened that I didn’t have to worry about him proposing. Inside the box was a gothic-style, silver pendant shaped like a knife with the word, Trouble, engraved on the blade. It was beautiful.

“There’s even a tiny bit of red on the tip for blood,” Carter said.

Looking up at him, I realized that no matter what, he accepted who I was and what I craved. Taking him by surprise, I threw my arms around his neck and held him tight.

“Thank you, it’s amazing.”

He held me, and the turmoil that usually swirled inside me settled. He was the calm, and I was the storm.

Carter cleared his throat as I pulled back and kissed him on the cheek. “I love it. Can you help me put it on?”

“Why don’t I do that when we get back?”

“Where are we going?”

“You’re supposed to have an amazing memory. Did you forget what you said you wanted to do for your sixteenth birthday?”

Right now, all I could picture was sitting on his lap and taking what I really wanted, but instead, I tapped my chin and tried to think back.

“I’ll give you a hint. I’m already dressed for it,” Carter said, and I looked down at his swim trunks. That was a bad idea as more wildly sexy images flooded my mind.

“Wait! Six Flags?” Excitement flooded me as I remembered the conversation clearly. Carter nodded, but then his face fell.

“There’s only one catch.”

“Oh no, what’s that?”

“Your cousins are coming with us.”

Groaning, I laid my head back on the loveseat. Just like that, my fantasy of being alone and wet with Carter all day was dashed.

Chapter Twenty

I had to admit this was a freaking amazing day. Bo ended up coming as well, the shock of all shocks...not. There was no logical reason for Talon not to see how obsessed Bo was with her. He followed her around like a puppy, and he just happened to have a couple of screws loose, which was why I'd taken my insurance policy when I could.

We rode rides all morning, and Carter was my partner the entire time. He splurged and purchased one of the craziest pictures of us on a ride, and he hadn't been strange or awkward with me all day.

Finding a grassy area for lunch, we started with burgers and fries, and Bo ordered an extra-large pizza. I couldn't resist eating a slice, and now we had deep-fried Snickers with ice cream and chocolate sauce. I would need to be rolled out of here by the time we left.

I leaned back and let the sun beat down on me, enjoying that Carter was having trouble keeping his eyes off me. The pretty little bikini was definitely the way to go. I was wearing dark sunglasses, so I kept my head tilted up, but I watched every move he made.

He always drew stares from girls. A group of them in line behind him were checking him out, but his eyes were locked on me. That's right, ladies, you can fuck right off. His phone buzzed, and I looked down, instantly wanting to destroy it.

I flicked my gaze back to Carter, but he'd moved up in line to get us water and wasn't paying attention, so I picked the phone up to see the message.

Hi, Carter. I'm looking forward to seeing you tonight for your tutoring se—

I was still staring at it when two feet entered my line of site.

“What are you doing?”

I'd tried to get into his phone to see the rest of the cut-off message, but every password I could think of didn't work, and the phone finally put me in time-out. I handed it to him, the anger in my body burning so hot that I would've happily picked anyone passing to slit their throat just to relieve the toxic rage.

“Mrs. Peterson texted you. She seems to be very eager to get together later. I honestly didn't think you'd screw the teacher too.” I jumped to my feet, and Carter stared at his phone.

“I'm not. I don't know what she's talking about.”

“Right, like I believe that.” I stuffed my feet into my flipflops, but Carter grabbed my arm and kept me from marching off.

“I'm not sleeping with her,” he said, but it was too late. Even if he wasn't, the text reminded me why I was so angry lately. Carter was leaving. I was still a virgin, and he held to his moral high ground with me but made a sport of fucking anyone and everything else. He went out every night, said he was meeting someone, and didn't come home until early morning. What else was I to think? It seemed pretty obvious what he was doing.

“Looks like she didn't get the memo. I need a moment alone.” Carter let go when I tugged on my arm, and I bent down, grabbing my towel to tie around my waist.

“I don't think you should be alone right now. When you're this angry, bad shit happens,” he said. He was right, but it still pissed me off that he treated me like someone that needed handling.

“Don't do that. Don't talk to me like you're my dad and think I can't control myself.” I lowered my voice. “Do you

really think I'm going to go off, grab a knife and kill the first random person I come across?"

That actually sounded like a fucking fabulous idea. I would leave them in the bathroom and watch the chaos. The issue was the cameras everywhere. You couldn't go twenty feet without a camera on a pole or in a store. It wasn't safe, and I wasn't stupid.

"Truthfully," Carter said, and I glared at him.

"Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence." I marched away and spun around as I saw his shadow move. "Don't follow me. I just need a few minutes to cool off, and you're making my anger worse."

Why did everyone think I was the loose cannon? I hadn't killed anyone yet...on my own. Becca didn't count because that was Troy's idea. I assisted. Troy had killed a couple on vacation, and my dad helped teach him maiming techniques. Bo killed his entire family and sat around in their blood for days. Never mind the countless animals he'd slaughtered since, and it was only a matter of time before he killed the old man he lived with. Only Dad knew what Uncle Abel got up to. As for my dad, he had a new person strapped down at least once a month and was hunting hard to find prey, but that wasn't the point.

I was the one everyone watched like I would erupt and sink the entire family, even though I hadn't murdered a damn thing other than some bugs. Screw them. Screw all of them.

The water slides seemed like a good place to go and have a reason to scream. The line for the tallest slide was short and I made my way toward it and started climbing the stairs. I wasn't a fan of heights. Scared was the wrong word, but I definitely preferred not walking up a tower with the wind blowing my hair and a towel wrapped around my waist. When I reached the top, about twenty people were waiting, and I could hear a group of guys acting like idiots coming up behind me.

"Great," I mumbled under my breath as they thumped up the stairs causing vibrations to travel up the tower. I gripped

the railing a little tighter.

“Stop pushing, you fuck,” one of them yelled, but it was followed by laughter.

I wasn't in the mood to deal with this kind of bullshit because I knew what was coming. I could feel it like a sixth sense.

“What do we have here?” And there it was, the sexual innuendo comment, just like fucking clockwork.

I knew that voice. My back stiffened as memories of having my milk poured over my head, and my lunch flipped off the table into my lap flooded my mind. The last time I saw Chester was the day my mom was killed, and he'd grabbed me by my backpack and dragged me into the girl's bathroom, where he hit me across the face and took the five bucks I had in my pack for emergencies. All my books had gotten wet from landing in water from a flooded toilet.

He'd laughed and called me Shit Stick. I'd replayed every moment and interaction I ever had with this guy over and over, hoping that one day I would see him again. This was not the day or the way I'd envisioned.

“Nice ass.”

I didn't bother to turn around. I needed to keep my cool, and engaging with him would not accomplish that. But guys like him couldn't leave well enough alone.

“I gave you a compliment, bitch. You should say thank you,” he said softly, his voice close to my ear. Unlike most people who might be intimidated by this walking dick for brains, I dreamed of throwing him over the railing and watching him fall just to be sure he landed on his head and it exploded on impact.

“And that will be why you haven't fucked anything that's not tied up, so it can't run away,” I said and glared over my shoulder at Chester.

“Oh damn, Ches...,” his friend said and proceeded to laugh as Chester glared.

“You would only be so lucky,” he said.

“Thanks, but I’d rather have my dog lick my kitty. He doesn’t look like a pimple on a toad’s asshole. Besides, I don’t do shriveled-up raisins for cocks. Thanks anyway.”

“Damn, dude, she burned you good.”

Chester’s face flamed red, and he clenched his hands before his eyes went wide, and I knew it had dawned on him who I was.

“Shit Stick?”

The line moved, and I stepped up but whipped around when my towel was pulled off. I watched it sail over the railing and flutter away in the wind as my hand balled into a fist.

“What are you going to do, Shit Stick? Nothing, because you’re just as pathetic as the day you ran away from school like a little baby.” He made crying noises, and it was the first time I was simultaneously furious and completely calm.

Was this what my dad felt like? Unemotional all the time? I didn’t know how I could feel the two opposing emotions at the same time, but I did.

“No stupid comeback?”

“No, I’m just amazed that so much shit can come out of your mouth in one breath.” I stepped onto the top platform and followed behind the guy in front of me. He kept looking back at Chester, and I knew it wasn’t just me who thought he was a loser.

“You should watch that bitch mouth of yours.”

“Ches man, maybe just leave her alone,” Chester’s friend said and grabbed his arm, but Chester shrugged him off. He looked like a giant road cone with his fluorescent orange and black striped shorts and matching towel.

“Shut up and get off me.”

“You really should listen to your friend Chester, but then again, you didn’t listen to anyone about purchasing those

shorts you're wearing. You look like you're trying to audition for a B-rated version of Tony the Tiger." I smirked. "Then again, I doubt even a fictional character would want you to play them. How did you get guys to hang out with your ignorant and bullying ass? Did you threaten them or pay them." I looked at his friend. "Whatever he's paying you, it's not enough."

Chester looked like an angry tomato same as he did the day he dragged me into the bathroom.

"Now, if you're done spewing garbage, I'd like to get back to enjoying my day before you came along and sprinkled your obvious internal unhappiness on the rest of us." The person in front of me stepped up to the mouth of the steep slide as the lifeguard demonstrated how to go down feet first and keep your arms crossed.

"You'll regret saying that."

"Oh, I'm scared," I said, but I didn't bother to turn around and face him.

That proved to be a mistake.

When the guy in front of me slipped over the edge, I was shoved from behind. Unable to stop my momentum, I fell forward and landed on the water slide. The water took me over as the guard yelled as loud as I did.

There was a moment of blind shock before utter terror gripped my chest as I faced the vertical plunge. The water was choking me, and I had to close my eyes as the spray hit me in the face. My elbow and knee banged so hard against the side and bottom wall that the pain radiated through my body. But, the ultimate humiliation was when I felt my bikini bottoms get pulled off just before landing in the pool with hundreds of other people.

I didn't want to come up. I would've stayed under the water forever if that had been an option. Surfacing, I looked around for my bottoms but didn't see them. I gasped and wrapped an arm around my chest as a group of guys looked over and began catcalling. At some point during the ordeal,

my top had come undone and was floating in the water, doing nothing.

Frantically, I swam to the shade of one of the other slides and hid out of sight. My hand shook as I covered my mouth, the embarrassment so strong that all I could do was replay the moment in my mind.

Weak was not in my vocabulary, but the reminder that I needed to be aware of my surroundings and know my enemy was so loud that I wanted to tell my dad to shut up, even though he wasn't there.

Splashing drew my attention, and I prepared myself to go another round with that asshole Chester, but it was Carter, his eyes wide.

“Oh my god, there you are.” He had a towel over his shoulder and gripped my arms, looking me all over. “Are you okay? What the hell happened?”

“Can you do up my top? My hands are shaking,” I answered instead, and he nodded.

Turning around, I held the material as he tied a bow. “Did you see all of it?”

“Yes,” he said, holding my elbow up and looking at the red burn mark. “I know you wouldn't attempt that, so who pushed you?” He growled, the look on his face intense as he continued his inspection.

I wasn't going to tell him, I wanted to deal with Chester myself, but I decided a half-truth would work. “I don't know who he was, just some guys roughhousing behind me, and I got bumped. Didn't anyone else come down?”

Carter searched my face, and I kept it as straight and sincere as possible. This wasn't his fight, it was mine, and I intended to finish it.

“Let's get you out of here. Do you want to go home?” I nodded as he walked with me to the edge and held the towel like a shield so I could walk into it and wrap it around my waist.

Carter hugged me once the towel was in place, and only then did I realize he was shaking. “You looked like you would fly right off the slide. I was so fucking terrified. Don’t ever do that to me again. I can’t lose you, Trouble. I just can’t.”

“You’ll never lose me. I already told you that. You’re mine.”

I expected a speech or for him to push me away, but he just held me tighter.

Chapter Twenty-One

KALLIE

ONE WEEK LATER

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open my dad's work area door and immediately felt bad for interrupting him. He was sitting on the floor with his eyes closed and his head against the wall. It was rare to see him show emotion, but he was smiling as he hummed, *You Are My Sunshine*. I hated seeing him like this.

I stepped back out of the room, but he stopped me, "Kallie, what do you need?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to bother you."

His eyes opened, and that cold stare—that made anyone else shrink and hide in a corner—found me. "If I didn't want to be bothered, I wouldn't have stopped you from leaving." Fair enough. "Now, what is on your mind," he asked, pushing himself to his feet.

"You told me when I pulled the prank on the guys from the football team that you would've helped if I asked."

"I did."

"Did you mean it?"

He smirked. "When have you known me to say something I didn't mean?"

Again, fair point.

"Spit it out, Angel." He walked toward me, and I couldn't help wondering what it would be like to be his victim. What did they think when he stalked toward them, or did they see him coming at all?

I glanced at the wall, and there were more faces exed out now than those without. He hadn't added any since Mom died.

"I need your help. This boy used to bully me at school before Mom died. He was at the waterpark and...."

"That's how you almost died coming down the slide?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

Reaching behind his back, he pulled out the largest knife I’d ever seen and spun it in his hand like a small sword.

“Let’s go.” He walked past me, and my mouth fell open.

“But, don’t you want to know more?”

“You’ve done your homework like I taught you?”

“Yes.”

“And you know where he lives?”

“Well, yes, I have a whole package.”

He looked over his shoulder, never breaking stride to the stairs. “Then close the door and get ready to go.”

Jumping into action, I closed the door and ran after him.



“He’s heavier than he looks,” I said and groaned as I held Chester’s body in place so my dad could finish tying him.

“They always are.” He stepped around the massive tree I’d chosen. “There, all done.”

I stepped back and couldn’t hide my smile. Seeing the fear in Chester’s eyes when he opened them and realized where he was and who had him was a thrill I was anxious to feel.

“You plan on leaving him here?” I nodded and looked up at my dad. “Very theatrical of you. I like it. Now you remember what I told you about...”

“I promise I won’t leave any evidence behind or DNA on his body.”

“Excellent.” My dad put his hand on my shoulder, and my heart swelled with joy. “I’m proud of you, Angel. I’ll be in the car and will keep watch.” He grabbed his bag and reached

inside, pulling out a pair of knives in leather holders. He held them out to me.

“What’s this for,” I asked, taking the buttery black leather from his hands.

“Congratulations, Angel. I’ve been waiting for your first kill to give you these. They strap to your legs.” Pulling one from the sheath, I smirked and stared at the perfectly sharp blade.

“Dad...this is...” My throat went dry and closed up as tears trickled from my eyes.

“Your mother would be proud of you.” With a kiss on my head, he turned and walked along the long path back to the car.

“What the...” Chester said, and I turned to face him as he licked his lips and slowly lifted his head. “Shit Stick?” He snorted. “Back for more? Just couldn’t stay away?”

“Something like that.”

I did up the leg straps and pulled one of the knives holding it under his chin, forcing him to look up. Panic filled his eyes when he realized he couldn’t move, and the blade was very real as it cut into his skin. Keeping the point of the knife under the soft part of his jaw, I stepped in closer to my prey.

“Hello, Chester, I told you to listen to your friend and shut up, but instead, you tried to kill me.”

“I...I...I didn’t mean to. It was a joke. I already got banned from the waterpark. They yanked me off the ride.”

“Aww, poor you,” I mocked. “So sad that you won’t be able to scare anyone with your ugly shorts or bully people anymore.” I pressed the tip into Chester’s skin, and a single drop of blood slid down the blade, falling to the ground below. “I used to dream about you, Chester. I used to dream about you exactly like this. Tied up and helpless. I wanted to cut off your body parts one at a time, watching you scream as I swallowed down your pain.” I licked my lips and moaned at the thought.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Wrong question Chester?” I leaned in close to his ear. “The correct question is, what am I?” Pushing myself back, I ran my gloved hand down his cheek and loved the shudder of fear and goosebumps that followed with the simple touch.

Gripping his chin, I squeezed hard. “Scream for me,” I said, but Chester just stared, his mouth hung open, but nothing came out. “I said scream.” Quickly, I shoved the blade up through the soft tissue of Chester’s lower jaw until I could see the silver in his mouth.

“Ahhh!”

I closed my eyes and soaked in the sound. Fuck yes. “So much better. You’re a bad boy, Chester.”

Pulling the knife free, I smiled as I stared at the blood left behind.

“You’re fucking crazy,” he said, voice shaking.

“You have no idea how true that statement is.” With quick and precise jabs, the blade sank hilt deep into the soft tissue of his squishy belly. It was so pale it could compete with the moon, but it wouldn’t be for long. Soon he would be coated in bright red.

He screamed and thrashed around as I slowly dragged the blade along his arm to expose the bone. “These are so beautifully sharp. Don’t you think so, Chester,” I asked as he wailed in pain. Tears and drool were dripping off his chin. “No?” He didn’t answer. “It’s rude not to answer me, Chester.”

I now fully understood why my dad forced me to become ambidextrous as I switched the knife to my other hand and created identical cuts on the opposite side of his body. Chester screamed like he was trying out for the role of a banshee.

“I knew you were a little bitch. Probably why you think picking on other people is fun, isn’t that right, Chester?”

“Please don’t do this, please,” he begged as blood ran in steady streams down his skin, looking like red rivers. If I had more time I would sketch out how this looked in real life. It was far more vivid than my imagination had been able to conjure.

“Do it again,” I whispered and locked eyes with Chester.

“Do what,” he asked, the words trembling on his lips.

I smiled. “Beg.”

He screamed and cried instead, and I ate those sounds up just as eagerly.

“Maybe your corpse will deter other bullies from fucking with girls, and if not...well, I can say that I’ll have fun eliminating every last one of you,” I said as I carved the word bully across his chest.

“No, no, no.”

“Have you ever wondered what you would look like with no skin on your face? Let’s find out, shall we?”

I didn’t think he could scream any louder, but he surprised me.



I finished cleaning off my blade and put the rag in the plastic bag to take with me. I stood up straight and took one last look at my work. It was beautiful. I didn’t have my dad’s artistic talent, but I was very good at playing the dismemberment game.

“Well, Chester, this is the best birthday gift you could’ve given me, so thank you for acting like a worthless piece of shit and screaming so enthusiastically.”

Chester was no longer recognizable and mumbled something, but the extreme pain made him delirious. Bending over, I picked up the sharp axe I’d brought just for this occasion. Using both hands, I lifted the blade over my head and slammed it into the middle of his chest. The metal lodged like he was a tree, and his body jerked. Less blood than I

thought sprayed out around the sharp edge. Horror movies had it all wrong.

It was late, and I needed to get going. There were rules to follow, though, and I did one last sweep before scooping up my bag and swinging the strap over my shoulder. I marched for the mouth of the trail but spotted something on the ground and bent down to see a peacock feather.

This was an odd place for a peacock to wander around. Picking up the single feather, I held it up in the moonlight. Chester's chest seemed the best place to leave the feather, so I stuck it in the sticky, already drying blood.

Smiling, I pulled the night vision goggles on and sprinted off into the darkness for the car. It was where my dad said it would be, and even though it had been three hours, he was still sitting there wide awake, reading a book.

I hopped in the front seat beside him, and unable to help myself, I cheered. He gave me his 'What the fuck is that' look, and I laughed as the overwhelming ecstasy flowed through my body.

This was what I was born to do. I was the daughter of an apex predator, and like a blindfold had been ripped off my eyes, I could see my path. I knew who I needed to become.

Chapter Twenty-Two

CARTER

AUGUST 6

Stuffing a towel in my bag, I looked around the room. Seeing the packed boxes bothered me more than it should. The university wasn't far, still in the state, but the thought of leaving Kallie behind was tearing my heart out. I put on a good front. I'd been doing it for so long that it was second nature to look into her eyes and lie about where I was going and what I was doing.

It was safer for her to think I was a slut, fucking the entire school, rather than pining over her while I sat in coffee shops and libraries all night studying. But staying away all night or slipping in to watch her sleep was very different than living in a dorm.

"Where are you going," Kallie asked from right behind me and giggled as I jumped.

"You love doing that to me."

Her eyes were full of joy and humor today, her cheeks were pink, and she looked amazing.

"Guilty as charged. But you didn't answer the question." She pointed to the backpack slung over my shoulder.

"I'm heading to the beach with the baseball team. It's our last weekend together before heading to different schools."

"Oh." Her expression fell. "It's your birthday. We always do something special on your birthday."

"I would invite you, but Claire is coming with me," I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

Kallie smiled, but the kind of smile that made you want to check her hand for a knife.

"That's perfectly fine. I'd love to meet Claire. Besides, I can invite Alex or bring Talon to hang out. You'll never know I'm there."

This was so not a good idea.

“Happy birthday.” Kallie pulled her hand from behind her back and produced a square package. I picked up the perfectly wrapped box from her hand. It wasn’t heavy and was a little larger than a Rubik’s Cube.

“Do I want to know?”

“Oh, shut up.”

She was beaming, but she didn’t realize that all today did was remind me of our age difference. No matter how many times she tried to tell me our ages didn’t matter. To me, it did. I never wanted her to regret anything that happened between us.

“Just open it.”

“Always so demanding.”

“You like it.”

That was a truth I couldn’t admit. I picked at the edge of the pretty sparkly tape. Where did she even find sparkly tape? Kallie made a snoring sound and let her head fall back and her mouth open.

“So funny.”

“Dude, it’s a gift. Just open it already.”

“Fine.” I dropped my pack on the ground and tore into the gift. I held up the glass case with a baseball inside and almost dropped it as I read the signature. “Oh my god.”

She held out a piece of paper to me. “It’s authentic. This is the certificate for it.”

“This is Mike Trout’s signature,” I said, and Kallie laughed.

“Yes, I know. I bought it.” I was speechless. I couldn’t form words for what this meant to me. He was who I looked up to, who I wanted to become, who I revered and tried to mold my play after. “Do you like it?”

Blinking, I looked into Kallie’s worried eyes, “Yes. This is fucking incredible Trouble.”

Setting the case down on my dresser like it would break and disappear, I turned to Kallie and wrapped her in a hug. She knew me so well. Having her body pressed against mine was dangerous, and my blood pressure spiked with the innocent contact. She looked up at me, and I made the mistake of looking down into her eyes and then lower to her lips. I was in trouble.

Kallie touched my face, and I should've stepped away before this went any further, but no matter how much I ordered my limbs to let go of her, they wouldn't. I watched her rise up on her toes and felt as trapped as an insect in her web. She was intoxicating to every part of my body and mind. I swam in a pool of insanity with her near me.

Her lips were moving, and even though the softly spoken words weren't penetrating my brain, I knew she was ordering me to kiss her. The voice in the back of my head was telling me no and to let her go, but like an addict, I felt my resolve slipping and justifying why just once wouldn't hurt.

"Fuck," I breathed out as she nipped my bottom lip. All my muscles were tense and shaking as I tried to force myself to do the right thing, but some wars would never be won. I captured her mouth like a beast finally freed from its cage.

My morals soared out the open door, and I kissed her hard, taking what I'd been dreaming about for years.

"Fuck, Trouble, you're going to get me killed." Even saying the words out loud didn't help this time.

"I like trouble," she purred, and I shivered.

Pushing her against the wall, I attacked her mouth with all the pent-up frustration eating me alive. Kallie moaned into my mouth, and I swallowed every one of those sounds down like she was the first meal ever to satisfy me. With a great deal of effort, I broke the kiss, but Kallie jumped and wrapped her legs around my waist, her body grinding into my dick.

"Fuck, Trouble. Shit," I growled as she bit my lip harder this time. The sharp pain was as sweet as the feel of her rubbing against my throbbing cock. "You taste like cinnamon

hearts,” I said, tasting every inch of her mouth that was sweet and spicy, just like her. They were my favorite candy as if I needed another reason to be obsessed with her.

“I know.” She licked my cheek like a cat, and I fucking growled at her. What she did to my brain wasn’t sane. “Mmm...I was just sucking on some,” she whispered, emphasizing the word sucking. I shuddered and closed my eyes to rein myself in before I ripped her clothes off. I clenched my hands into fists and braced them on the wall.

“No.” Her arms tightened around my neck. “Don’t you dare stop,” she ordered, and I groaned as she sucked the side of my neck right over my pounding pulse. “I know you want me. Stop fighting it. We’re meant to be.”

I was panting hard and found myself caving to her thought process. I loved her, and age didn’t matter. She wanted me. When I kissed her, everything seemed perfect and exactly how it should be. Why was I fighting this so hard?

“Kallie, Carter, breakfast is ready,” Cain yelled up the stairs, and I jumped like I’d just been shot. My heart seized as quickly as my cock wanted to jump off my body and run away. If he came up and saw us, that would happen anyway. I would get a front-row seat to watch as my dick got cut off and tossed out the window.

I tried pulling her arms off my neck, but she shook her head at me, clinging to me like a little koala bear.

“Okay, Dad, Carter is just opening the gift I got him,” she called back, but nothing was going to fix this. The bubble surrounding us burst. “Stop panicking. You look guilty,” she sighed, obviously as annoyed by the terrible timing as I was.

Nodding, she released her legs and dropped to the ground. She poked me in the chest. “I don’t care about Claire coming today, but remember, you’ll always be mine.”

“You know that can’t happen. Case in point.” I pointed toward the stairs and my guaranteed death. Some of the guys on my team were scared of the fathers of girls they dated, but they didn’t know what real fear was. They didn’t live with a

notorious serial killer. You could put all those fathers in a room together, and they still wouldn't be as terrifying as a single look from Cain. I was sure he already had my death planned out. He made it clear that I was always a threat. I was still shocked that I made it to nineteen alive. Every birthday I would stay awake all night staring at the door, waiting for him to come and get me. To tell me that I was now too old and knew too much.

“He is fine with you and would be fine with us. Maybe we should just tell him how we feel.” Kallie stepped toward the door, and I jumped in her way, grabbing her shoulders as my stomach dropped. It felt like she had poured ice water on my head.

“No, please. You don't understand. He's your dad and sees you differently. I'm nothing more than a reminder of your mom and what he lost. I'm the burden he took on, not his flesh and blood. Trust me when I tell you he would whistle a fucking tune as he strapped my body down to his table and plucked my eyes from my head.” I sucked in a deep breath. “If you really care about me the way you say, then keep quiet about what just happened.”

She crossed her arms and pursed her lips, and I knew she was mulling over what I said.

“Fine, I won't say anything, but you need to tell me how you feel about me right now.”

Oh fuck. Hey Carter, would you like to stand in front of a speeding semi or a runaway train?

I licked my lips. “Trouble...”

“No, no more denying. Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't want me. That you don't love me. That you don't want to fuck me until I'm screaming your name.”

“Shhh.” I glanced out into the hallway, my heart pounding so hard I thought I might faint. “Let's talk about this after we eat. We need to go.”

Kallie grabbed my arm. “No, we do this now or....” She tilted her head and looked so much like her dad that I

swallowed hard.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, knowing that if I lied and said no, she would pick up on it like a bloodhound on a scent. Why was she doing this to me?

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, of course, I want all that and more, but...”

“No buts. That’s all I needed for now.” She ran her hand down my arm as she left my bedroom. “We will have that. You will cave, and you will see that it was inevitable.”

I watched her ass sway as she walked away and down the stairs, and all I could think about was the Borg. ‘Strength is irrelevant. Resistance is futile.’

“Happy birthday to me. I just signed my death certificate.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Okay, I lied. I said I was fine with Claire before realizing she was a freaking octopus who wouldn't stop touching him. I swear to god, if she ran her hand over his ass one more time, I would cut off her hand and shove it up her ass so she could feel one forever. I had thought about inviting Alex, but we really only hung out at school. Talon was a better cover because she was so oblivious to everything. Watching Carter was easier with her around.

Carter looked over his shoulder at me, and I loved how the green in his eyes reflected the blue of the ocean and made them look teal from where I was sitting. There was a hunger in them now that he couldn't hide from me anymore. Grabbing the tube of sunscreen, I squirted a large glob in my hand and held back the smirk as he stared at it. I smoothed it over my arms and then purposely ran my hand over my chest and inside the cup of my bikini top, squeezing my boob.

His face flamed a vibrant shade of red just before he whipped his eyes away, making me chuckle. He marched off, and for once, little Miss Octopodidae didn't follow like a dog in heat since she was busy playing volleyball.

Jumping up, I dusted myself off and stalked him to the bathrooms, then leaned against the wall and waited for him. I really wanted to know if he was in there touching himself to thoughts of me, but with so many people at the beach, it was too risky to sneak inside.

As I waited, I caught sight of a familiar blonde. Mrs. Peterson was arm and arm with a guy that didn't look much

older than Carter. I stepped around the side of the bathroom into the shade to keep an eye on her without being seen.

She pointed to a tent selling margaritas, and her errand boy ran off. What the fuck did she do to get these guys? She headed for the women's bathroom just as Carter stepped out of the men's.

"Well, I didn't expect to see you here," Mrs. Peterson called out, waving at Carter.

He looked genuinely confused, but being the nice guy he was, he stopped and waited for her. "Mrs. Peterson, nice to see you.

Any idiot would pick up on the professional tone except her. "It's much nicer to see you. Look at these muscles. You really are turning into quite the man. I'm in love with these tattoos. Very sexy."

I rolled my eyes. The woman giggled, making me want to gag as she reached out and squeezed his bicep. "Very big indeed."

Her eyes dipped down, and I almost jumped around the corner and dragged Carter away just to keep from having to listen to this pathetic attempt to get into his shorts. I rubbed at my leg, and even though I'd only worn them once, I missed my knives.

Carter stepped back but stayed true to his nature and was polite. I had to admit it frustrated me, yet I admired how he kept his cool.

"I have to stay in shape to start a new baseball season on a much harder team. How is your summer going?"

Mrs. Peterson sighed and fluffed out her hair which somehow exaggerated how she was pushing out her chest. At this point, I didn't know why she didn't just whip off her bathing suit and jump on him. I mean, it would save time and be hysterical to see the horrified look on his face. I could picture it now and almost wished she would...almost.

"My summer is going well, but it would be far better if you came to visit. Did you get my text?"

“I did. How did you get my number?”

That was an excellent question. I was surprised Carter hadn't messaged her back. I didn't think he was sleeping with her, but I understood now that it was safer not to answer than to open up that line of communication. It gave me a whole new level of respect for Carter. Not that he needed it. I would fucking gut anyone that tried to hurt him.

“It was on your school file. Since it was for school purposes, I was able to access it. I was disappointed you didn't answer.”

“I didn't need to book a tutoring session and just assumed it was a mistake,” Carter said, his hands going to his waist. My eyes traveled up and down his body, and I wasn't sure why, but I realized he was worried. There was something about Mrs. Peterson he didn't trust, and that set me off faster than someone screaming fire. Carter was a great judge of character, and over the years, I'd learned to trust what he said as fact.

“It's something I like to do with all the students to ensure they're prepared for the next stages in their lives.” She took a step toward him, but he smiled and stepped back. He lifted his hand and waved at our group, but I didn't see anyone waving back. “Sorry, I have to go. My girlfriend is looking for me. Have a great summer, Mrs. Peterson.”

“You too, Carter, and if you ever need anything, anything at all, you have my number.”

Carter walked away, and she tilted her sunglasses down, and I knew she was watching his ass. Not that I blamed her. It was a nice ass.

I waited until she left before I slipped out of my hiding spot and decided to make the most of my little excursion now that Mrs. Peterson had ruined my chance to get Carter alone. There was more than one way to torture him, and right now, making sure that I was all he could think about was my goal.

Ten minutes later, I wandered back over to our spot, and Carter jogged up to me. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

My eyebrows rose with the question. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“I mean....”

I swirled my tongue around the top of the tall ice cream cone with three flavors. It was so hot that it was already dripping, and Carter was frozen mid-sentence as he watched me lick my fingers. Not taking my eyes off his, I dragged my tongue from the bottom of the ice cream to the top. He licked his lips.

“Would you like some?”

“Huh?”

“The ice cream, would you like some?”

I held it up to him and had to keep from rubbing my legs together as he dropped his head to the cone and sucked the tip into his mouth.

“You were saying?”

“I...um....”

“You said I gave you a heart attack?”

“Oh...yeah. Don’t take off like that. You freaked me out. There are a lot of assholes here.”

I smirked, considering I hadn’t been hit on all day, but a creepy teacher had just hit on him.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Don’t call me that. Anything but that.” He shivered, making me laugh.

“How about, Sir?”

“How about my name?”

“You’re no fun,” I said, joking with him until the octopus skipped over. Claire looked like she was trying out for a lifeguard show, and I wanted to vomit.

“Hey, you two coming to play the next round?”

“Sure, why not.”



Troy picked me and Talon up so Carter could take Claire out for dinner. She stupidly announced where that would be, and I realized I needed a better way to track people. It just sucked that the person I'd ask to help me track someone and the person I wanted to track were the same person.

As soon as we got home, I ran inside and changed into black yoga pants and a snug long sleeve black shirt. Hmmm, maybe I should buy something professional, like a catsuit. I could picture the look on my dad's face if I said I wanted to dress like *Cat Woman* to stalk people. His first words would be, that doesn't blend in, and he wouldn't even see the humor.

Smiling, I shook my head. I loved my dad, even if he was cock blocking me. Carter's earlier reaction made me wonder if Dad had threatened him at some point. It was totally something he would do.

I strapped on my knives, but they stood out too much.

"Where are you going?" I jumped as my heart beat like a race car going from zero to sixty in two seconds flat.

My dad casually leaned against the door frame, and I weighed my options. I could lie, or I could tell him the truth.

"I wouldn't bother lying to me. I'll know and then follow you anyway."

And there went the first option.

"I'm following Carter," I mumbled, looking at the ground.

"Following Carter or stalking Carter," he asked, and I shrugged.

"Technically, they're the same thing...right?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. This felt like a touchy subject, even though he'd never said anything to me before.

“Is that a serious question?” He held up his hand before I could try and argue the point that would get me nowhere. “I don’t care if you stalk him, although I’m not sure what the point is. He can take care of himself. What I do care about is that you’re not caught. I thought about that, so I had this made for you.” He tossed over a piece of black leather, and I caught it out of the air. “It’s an arm sheath for one of your knives, and if you decide you want a boot or back one, let me know.”

“Jesus, I’ll look like a character from Assassin’s Creed.” He tilted his head like he was analyzing me.

“I don’t know what that is, but I’ll take your word for it.” He pointed to my outfit. “What you’re wearing is fine, but change the leg for the arm knife and put a ‘cute’ jacket on.” He air-quoted the word cute.

“You’re really okay with me doing this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Well, there was a loaded question if I ever heard one.

“I’m going out at night and stalking someone.” I shrugged.

“You do remember who I am, yes? How I met your mother. How she fell in love with me and how you were conceived.”

I held up my hands. “Okay, you can stop there. Yes, I remember. No need to share again.”

“Teenagers are strange creatures,” he mumbled. “What I care about is that you don’t get caught and are smart. Think before you lead with emotion.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Shaking his head, he turned and left my room.

I quickly changed the leg sheath for my new arm leather and found it surprisingly easy to slip the blade in and keep it out of sight. At the last minute, I grabbed a baseball hat and jogged down the stairs.

I poked my head into the living room, and my dad sat in his chair, staring at my mom’s picture again. This was unhealthy. I didn’t want or expect him to date, but it felt like

he'd stopped living. Abel and Aspen hardly came over, Carter was moving out, and I was pretty much an adult now.

“Why are you staring at me, Angel?”

“I was debating about asking you to help me with some research. Only if you want to,” I said, an idea forming.

He sat the picture down. “What kind of research?”

“I need to find out about a teacher at my school. I think she's doing some shady shit to the guy students.” He cocked an eyebrow at me. “I don't mean just sex, although I'm pretty sure that is happening too. I just get the ick feeling.”

“Ick feeling? Is that a scientific term?” He rubbed at his eyes like I was giving him a migraine. “What is this teacher's name?”

“Mrs. Peterson.”

He stood from the chair and grabbed his jacket. “No time like the present. Can I ask why you care?”

I shrugged. “I don't know. I don't like seeing people bullied or taken advantage of.”

“Huh.”

“What does huh mean?”

“Nothing, just interesting. We better go if you plan on catching up with Carter.”

Walking out the door, we went our separate ways, but I couldn't stop smiling as I watched him get into his car. Maybe this was how I could help my dad. Maybe he needed a hobby or a new challenge. My mom had given him FBI files, but he was almost done with those. I had an idea percolating, but for tonight it would have to be put aside. I needed my head in the game to find, follow, and ensure that Claire realized she needed to keep her hands off Carter.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“So, after I do the first two years, I think I’d like to take some time off school and travel around the world. There is so much I want to see,” Claire said. “What do you think?”

I shrugged. “If that’s what calls to you, then go for it.”

“But, would you be upset?”

Sipping my milkshake, I stared at Claire, wondering what that meant. I wanted to finish this date and get the hell out of here. There wouldn’t be any more dates with Claire. I made it two and a half weeks this time, which was a new record.

“Why would I be upset about you following your dream?”

That was apparently the wrong answer as she crossed her arms and looked out the window.

“I just thought you might miss me,” she said, and I burst out laughing, earning a dark glare.

“Oh, shit, you were serious.” I sat the empty glass on the table. “Claire, we hardly know one another, and we’ll be going to different schools in a couple of weeks. What exactly did you expect?”

“Obviously nothing.” Pushing herself out of the booth, she stood in a flurry like I’d just insulted her. “I want to go home. Now.”

“Okay.” Tossing money down on the table, I followed her out of the restaurant. But no sooner had we walked outside when she turned around and smacked me hard across the face. I stumbled to the side in shock. “What the fuck was that for?”

“I saw you staring at your sister. You’re disgusting, and I wouldn’t want anything to do with you anyway.”

“So you hit me because I was staring at Kallie or because I said I wouldn’t miss you after dating for seventeen days? I’m confused what exactly your mad about.”

She was lucky. If she’d pulled that with pretty much anyone I lived with, they would all have her tied up in the back of their vehicle for being rude. Cain was big on manners growing up, and I’d seen firsthand how that training presented itself in Kallie and how terrifying she could be when someone was disrespectful.

Claire glared at me and looked like she might hit me again, so I took a step back. “The two of you are incestual perverts,” she half yelled, and a couple going inside paused to stare.

“First, Kallie is not my sister, and second, she’s my best friend. If you want to talk shit about me, feel free, but don’t you dare say a word about her.” Two weeks and this was how she acted. I dodged a bullet. What the hell would she be like after two months or two years? “You know what, Claire, it’s been nice knowing you, but lose my number.” I glared at her as I walked past. “Oh, and find your own way home. I wouldn’t want you getting infected by my incestuous ways,” I said, not giving a shit who was listening.

“You’re leaving me here?”

“Bet your ass I am. You have a phone. Use it to call a cab or walk since you’re right around the corner, but you’re never getting in my truck again.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“If you say so.”

My teeth were grinding as I walked to my truck, anger burning in my chest, but I wouldn’t give her any ammunition. She was obviously looking for a reason to make me look bad. I’d already had one completely fabricated story sold about me in high school. Cain hadn’t been happy about that, so I cleared it up before the snowball effect got rolling. I didn’t know Claire’s motives, but I had a hard time trusting anything

anyone said other than, shockingly, the serial killers I called family...as screwed up as that was.

Pulling the truck out of the parking lot, I headed toward the farm, hoping Kallie was still awake. Maybe we could salvage the rest of the night by watching a scary movie. I should've just done this, to begin with, but I was so fucking worried that if she pushed, I would cave. I wanted to, but I also wanted to remain breathing. I kind of liked it.

Maybe we could be something one day, but it wouldn't be tonight.



KALLIE

There was some shit in this world that bothered me and other things that put me in a white-hot rage. Watching Claire slap Carter and then him having to defend his and my relationship fell into the rage category.

Opting to leave my car in the nicely hidden spot at the back of the large parking lot, I followed Claire on foot as she stomped toward home. Claire was yelling as she told whomever she was talking to how Carter was an asshole to her and left her at the restaurant.

I had to give it to Claire. She pulled the wool over my eyes, which told me she was more like me than I gave her credit for.

Know your enemy.

My dad's words were on repeat in my head as I kept to the shadows at a distance.

“No, he wouldn't let me take any selfies. I know. I thought for sure I'd get a few great smutty photos. Nope, he wouldn't fuck me either.”

“Blackmail?” What the hell had she been up to? It wasn’t like Carter had a ton of money. Wait, did she say he didn’t sleep with her? Where the hell was he every night when he said they were together? Very interesting.

Claire rounded a corner and walked to her front door. It was a decent house —think *Mary Poppins* meets *Stepford Wives*. She lived alone or had roommates who weren’t home since it was completely dark.

“Yeah, I’m home now. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Claire hung up and dug around in her purse for her house keys.

My anger had grown as I listened to her tell lies and try to come up with ways to tarnish my and Carter’s name. He was a decent person and would never retaliate. I wasn’t decent, and I would always find a way to tear your throat out.

I hadn’t mastered lock picking like my dad, and I didn’t dare borrow any of his toys to shut down alarm systems. If I did, he would know I was doing more than watching. So nothing else mattered other than getting into her home. All was quiet as I dashed across the road from my hiding spot. Timing it just right, I didn’t slow down as she opened the door and stepped inside.

Claire turned around with just enough time to register what was about to happen. Her eyes went wide before I slammed into her like a charging bull. The impact sent her flying backward, and I watched her sail through the air, amazing myself. She crashed to the ground hard before sliding across the floor and hitting her head with a thud. She didn’t move as I closed her front door and locked it behind me.

I pulled my knife and twirled it around in my fingers, loving how it felt as I approached my prey. Kneeling, I put the tip of the blade under Claire’s chin, and her unfocused eyes rolled to mine.

“Such a naughty girl, Claire. I think it’s time you learned some manners.”

I hit her exactly how my dad taught me, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

“I want you to know, Claire, that I planned on just telling you to back off, but now...well...you’ve earned my undivided attention.”



“What...what’s happening?” Claire slurred as she started to come around. “Ow, my face hurts,” she whimpered and lightly shook her head from side to side. “Why can’t I move?”

While Claire was unconscious, I took my time and searched her entire house for information, cameras, weapons, and signs of other humans. She lived with her parents, but luckily for me, they were on vacation. I really wanted to see their faces when they came home and found their daughter. What stage of decay would she be in when they walked through the door?

I found one nanny cam set up in the bedroom, facing the bed, of course. I played with its ears as I sat on one of the dining room chairs.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, I hummed.

Claire was a lot heavier to move and pick up than I imagined, and I decided to start working out.

“Where am I?”

I didn’t bother answering. I knew when Claire remembered what had happened because she tried to jerk upright before she saw me sitting beside her.

“Kallie? What? What’s going on?”

She pulled on her arms, securely tied over her head with yarn I found in her room. She was the last person I pictured knitting, but the yarn balls worked well as a rope. It added a pretty flare with all the colors wrapped around her body to hold her down.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are,” I sang in a whisper, loving that she shivered.

“Why are you singing that?” She looked around like she would miraculously find a way to jump up and run as I rose. She finally looked down at her body and realized that she was naked. “Oh my god, why am I naked?”

I didn’t bother to answer that either. She would find out soon enough. *Rule number forty-two, never offer more information than you wanted someone to know.* I stood up and put the bear on the kitchen counter so that it could watch the show, then pulled my knife. I ran the tip along her arm and watched goosebumps rise all over her body. Even her nipples hardened.

“Stop staring at my boobs.”

I stopped singing as I giggled at the ridiculous reaction. “Really? You’re worried that I’m staring at your titties? That’s what’s concerning?”

“What do you want,” she asked, her eyes shooting daggers at me. Too bad I was the one holding the blade. “You better not want to fuck me, I’m not into girls.”

Such an idiot. I shook my head and using the flat side of the knife, I smacked it off the side of her face. “Ouch.”

“Don’t be rude.” I got low and stared at her features. “You are a pretty thing, but also stupid and self-centered. I guess I don’t need to wonder why he wouldn’t fuck you,” I said mockingly. Claire pinched her lips together, her nostrils flaring ridiculously.

“All of this is about Carter? What a prick. I don’t want anything to do with him. We’re done. So run along. You can have him. He was a waste of my time,” she uttered with obvious disdain dripping from her every word.

She had no way of knowing this, but the more she talked shit about Carter, the angrier I got.

“How very generous of you to offer me what is already mine.” I smiled. “And you’re wrong. Carter is the furthest

thing from a prick. You would've been lucky if he fell for you, but he was smart enough not to do that."

"Whatever." She tried rolling her head away, but I held my knife firm, forcing her to remain looking at me.

"I'm not sure you understand the seriousness of the situation Claire." Sliding the blade point down her face, I marveled at how it left a papercut thin line with little droplets of blood.

"Just tell me what you want," she said.

I slowly walked around her body, dragging the knife along her skin. It was mildly annoying to have to skip over the ties.

"I thought that was obvious." Smiling, I pressed the knife into her quad. The scream was a little louder than I anticipated. It sounded like she was going to alert the entire neighborhood. That would never do. Leaving the knife stuck in her leg, I went to the kitchen and grabbed a roll of cling wrap.

"No, please," Claire cried, her eyes filled with fear as I sat the box down beside her head.

"Did you think the knife was for show? That I wouldn't really kill you? Oh, Claire. I'm so sorry. I should've properly introduced myself. My name is Kallie Buchanan. Now that may not mean anything to you, but you may remember...The Chameleon." Her lower lip trembled as she shook her head no. "Well, how anti-climatic was that?" I laughed and grabbed her phone, holding it over her face before she figured out what I was doing.

The screen glowed with several unanswered messages from friends and social media, but I was after the internet and punched in the name the FBI had given my dad and Uncle Abel. Gruesome images of crime scenes filled the screen in small boxes, and my heart beat faster, staring at them. This was my legacy.

I tapped on one picture, a covered body left leaning against a tree, and I turned it so she could see. Her eyes followed as I scrolled through the photos and stopped to read the headlines.

Claire lifted her head, looked at her leg with the knife stuck in it, and cried harder. “I’m going to bleed out! Please take your sick pictures and go. I’ll never talk to Carter again and won’t mention tonight to anyone.”

“Claire, these aren’t sick. Each one of them is art. Artwork my dad created.” Her eyes found mine, and she went completely still. “See, now I think you’re starting to understand. Your blood and screams are all I want.”

Smirking, I put her phone down just out of her reach and pulled the cling wrap roll from the box.

“No, no, no. Ah! Help me! Some...” I punched her across the jaw, and she cried out but stopped screaming.

“I’d hold your breath for a minute.” Wrapping her head like she was a mummy, her cries became muffled. I took an extra minute to watch her struggle, enjoying every second. I should’ve done this first. It felt a little Dextery, but it really worked.

Using the knitting needles I’d brought down, I poked little nostril holes, and she sucked in a ragged breath. She was begging, I didn’t have to understand all the words to get the gist, but she sealed her fate the moment she slapped Carter across the face.

Each cut spilled more blood, and I appreciated my dad’s special table much more. Claire was still blubbering, but it was getting too dangerous to move around the table and not get blood on my boots, tracking it everywhere.

“I’m sorry, Claire, I wish I had more time to spend with you,” I said, then got low to her ear. “I want you to remember you brought this on yourself.”

Picking up the knitting needles, I poked them through the plastic in the shape of an X and lined them up with her eyes. The soft popping sound mixed with the hysterical scream as she tried to thrash around was a bigger rush than Chester. She was still alive and would be for a little while yet. I really wanted to ask her what she was thinking right now, but it was safer to clean up as best I could and head out.

I quickly carved a peacock feather into her chest, cleaned off my knife, grabbed my new nanny cam and slipped out the backdoor into the night. Smiling, I rounded the corner to the tall wooden gate and pulled it open.

“Hello, Angel.”

I let out a little scream and leaped into the air at my dad’s voice before slapping a hand over my mouth.

He pushed away from the wall and the shadows concealing him.

“I think we need to have a little chat.”

Oh shit.

Chapter Twenty-Five

A door slammed closed, and I sat up straight, looking at the time. It was two in the morning, and all I could think was that we were being robbed, and god help them. Then I heard Kallie's voice. I threw off the covers and ran for the hallway.

"Dad, please don't do this," Kallie said, and I relaxed when I realized there was no immediate threat.

"I told you this is non-negotiable." Cain's voice was as cold as ever while I could feel Kallie's anger from the stairs.

"This is not fair."

"Not fair?" What sounded like a fist landed on the counter, and I jogged down the rest of the stairs. Cain glared at Kallie, and I'd honestly never seen him this angry. "What you did was irresponsible. After our talk about the football team, I would have thought you learned your lesson, but you're too much like Abel. You don't think before you act."

"I did think," she tried to reason.

Neither seemed to notice me as I walked closer and leaned against the wall. I was trying to act relaxed, but I was anything but. This tension between them was new, and even though I didn't think Cain would turn on his daughter, there was always that little voice in the back of my head reminding me he was different from the rest of us. He called himself an apex predator, and he was.

"No, you half thought and then acted. If you'd thought, we wouldn't have had to spend the last two hours scrubbing down

a house and body.”

Words you would never hear in another house, and they were said like she’d forgotten to load the dishwasher.

“You didn’t even finish your kill. I had to do it. That is the worst rookie mistake. If she’d lived and they found even a single fiber of corroborating evidence, you would be in a cell.” Cain tapped the side of his head.

“I wanted to prove to you that I could do this. You didn’t trust me and followed me, then treated me like a child.” Kallie growled, her hands balling into fists.

“I treated you exactly how you acted,” Cain yelled back.

Kallie crossed her arms. “I just wanted to prove I could do it alone and be as good as you.”

“And if you start using the intelligence you were gifted with rather than the emotions that burn through your veins like toxic waste, you will be. But until then, all you’ve proven to me is that you’re not ready. No more killing until you’re eighteen, and you will train with me and only me from now on.”

“But Dad, I just got the training wheels off.”

Cain walked toward her and stared down at Kallie with an intensity that made the hair on my arms stand up. “And now you will have them put back on. I lost your mother when I didn’t listen to my instincts. I will not lose you too. Do not leave this property again for one of your extra excursions, or I will know, and you will like your next punishment even less.”

Cain looked up at me, and I swallowed the rising bile. He didn’t say he would go after me, but the look implied it all. Using me as a chip to keep his daughter in line was vile. I also didn’t know if it would work. Kallie was quite literally holding my life in the balance.

Kallie looked over her shoulder and noticed me standing there. Her body tensed up even more as she looked between me and her father.

“You wouldn’t,” she breathed.

“Test my rules again, and you’ll find out.” Cain walked out of the room and opened the basement door. “I’m busy for the next two nights, but we will start the project of my choosing after that. I know you’re thinking of testing me.” He shot a look over his shoulder. “I wouldn’t.” The door slammed with a thud.

The hurt look on Kallie’s face made me reach for her, but she marched away, her eyes filled with tears, and I was left standing alone in the kitchen. When we were little, Kirby would make us hot chocolate when we were upset. After she was killed, whenever Kallie was sad about her mom, I would make it for her, so that was what I did.

Putting the kettle to boil, I grabbed the tin of hot chocolate and prepared the mugs. Searching the cupboards, I couldn’t find marshmallows and sighed. Instead of milk, I spiked them with a splash of Bailey’s. I was already on the hit list—literally—giving Kallie an ounce of alcohol was the least of my worries.

Reaching her closed door, I tapped our unique knock, and Kallie slowly opened it. She looked like she’d been crying, which I hated. It hurt my heart, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap her up in my arms.

“I brought hot chocolate,” I said, holding the mugs. The corner of Kallie’s mouth curled up, and it wasn’t fair that she was so beautiful. She’d showered, her hair was still dripping wet, and the fresh scent of her shampoo filled my nose. Every moment I was with her was a temptation, and my resolve slipped a little more.

“Thanks,” she said and took one of the mugs before stepping back and inviting me in.

My mind screamed not to step over the threshold, but my body was already in motion, and before I could stop myself, the door closed behind me. I glanced around her room, and it could’ve been anyone’s. The walls were the color of the ocean on a sunny day, and the trim was bright white. She had pretty accent pillows and images she’d sketched in small frames to

create a collage on one wall. There were flowers in a vase and family photos on her dresser.

You'd never suspect a budding serial killer lived here. I'm not sure what I would expect to find, but maybe small animal skulls lined up on a shelf or a display of knives with black walls. I once had a nightmare about a room like that, and it stuck with me.

"Earth to Carter," Kallie said. I turned to look at her but had no idea what she said. "Are you going to sit down or stand there and stare out my window all night?"

Parking myself on the end of the bed, I watched as she sipped the hot chocolate. She moaned and licked the cup, and I had to look away. This was too much. I was trying to be a good guy with morals, not a walking hormone stick. But, shit...every nerve ending came alive with her near me.

"So, what were you and your dad arguing about?"

"That's what you're going to ask me?"

"What am I supposed to ask you?" She was giving me a curious expression that I couldn't quite decipher.

"My dad threatened to kill you if I didn't behave, or did you not pick up on that?"

Chuckling, I smiled at her over the top of my mug. "Um... I hate to break this to you, but that is not the first time. You being told to stay in line or else is new, but I'm not surprised. And, yes, Cain would do exactly what he claimed, and there is nowhere I could run that he couldn't hunt me down."

"How are you so calm about this?"

Shrugging, I took another sip. "What exactly would you have me do, Trouble?" She looked adorable when her brows knit together as she thought hard. "Don't you think I've been through all the options in my head? I don't think your dad wants to kill me, at least not anymore, but he does know I'm not like him or Abel, Troy, Bo, or even you." I could see the wheels spinning in her mind, her face falling.

“You must think we’re monsters. It’s like you got dropped into a house of devils,” she said, covering her mouth as it finally occurred to her what it must be like to grow up, not wanting to kill but forced to watch someone new die every week. “What the hell do you think of me?”

Why did she keep asking me these loaded questions?

“I don’t see you as a monster. I’ve lived here since I was two. I was there when you were born, and we grew up together. But that doesn’t mean I want to head down to the basement with your dad and have a skinning session. With someone else or me on the table.” I smiled at my joke, but Kallie burst to her feet, hot chocolate spilling over the side of her cup.

“Oh my god. You’re not safe here, Carter. My dad will kill you at some point. I know he will. I can’t let him do that.” She paced from one end of the room to the other. “I need to find a way to stop him and make him see reason.” Tears filled her eyes, and I had no idea what was going on in her head. What I just said wasn’t news. Had something happened? “I don’t know if I’ll follow all his rules, and what if he decides to teach me a lesson by killing you or....” She looked up, and her beautiful eyes found mine. “No...he’d make me do it. I won’t. I won’t do it.”

I put my mug down and walked over to Kallie. Her hands were shaking badly, so I grabbed her cup and wrapped her in my arms before she made a complete mess.

“Trouble, if he were going to kill me because you randomly did stupid shit, then I would have been dead long ago.”

She snickered into my chest. “Asshole.”

“Maybe, but it’s true. Do you remember when you accidentally set the house on fire? Or how about when you thought you would help decorate the house and used crayons all over the walls so they were pretty? Or what about when you told that old woman at the grocery store that your dad was a serial killer? Thankfully she thought you were making a joke

about his eating habits.” Kallie laughed and wiped away the tears.

“You’re really not concerned?”

“Some days, and when it comes to you, yes. Look, I know your dad doesn’t show love like anyone else, but you’re the single most important thing to him.” Leaning back, I looked down into blue eyes that could capture anyone’s soul. “It’s why, no matter what, we can’t be any more than what we are right now. I’ve tried to tell you, but I think you’re finally understanding.”

“I’m happy you’re going away to school. Maybe the space will make things easier,” she said, but there was no joy in her eyes, and I felt the same way. “Will you lay with me? I don’t mean sex. I’ll be under the blankets, and you can have the throw.” She pointed to the bed. “And I promise to be good. If I’m not, you can get up and leave. I just...I don’t want to be alone.”

Of all the terrible ideas...but I knew my answer.

“Yes.” Her entire face lit up, and my heart soared. I would do anything to make her smile like that. “But first, tell me what happened tonight.”

She stepped back and put her hands on her hips.

“Oh, I didn’t like how Claire was treating you, so I followed the two of you to dinner. I couldn’t believe she slapped you over nothing. I mean, you two have been dating for a blink. She was the one that needed slapping, so I killed her.” All rational thought stopped. She killed Claire because she slapped me?

“She was a snotty bitch, right up to the end and then started begging and telling me I could have you. I mean, seriously, thanks.” Kallie rolled her eyes. “Anyway, my dad followed me and didn’t like how I cleaned up.” She finger-quoted cleaned up, like avoiding arrest was a nuisance.

“We ended up scrubbing the entire place down for an extra two hours, even rooms I was never in before, and he insisted on ruining the fucking awesome way I had her displayed. I cut

her up good and had a rolling pin shoved in her cooch and knitting needles in her eyes. It was perfection. You should've seen it. But nooo, my dad couldn't confirm there was no DNA, so he dragged the bitch home in his truck to dispose of her." She crossed her arms. "So annoying. I know what I'm doing, and I was careful. I could've been more careful, but still, what an invasion of my privacy to follow me like that," she said, obviously offended.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I should've known Kallie followed me, and the fact that I didn't feel anything about what she did should've fucking worried me.

"Oh shit, sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's fine." Walking over to my mug, I chugged the rest of my now cold hot chocolate and wished I'd put a crap load more alcohol in it.

"Ugh, I'm such a jerk."

"No, seriously, it's fine. I mean, you can't kill everyone I date, though," I said.

Her eyes narrowed, and I could tell she was clenching her jaw, trying to contain her anger. Fuck why was that so hot?

"We can argue about that later. Come lay down." I stretched out on her bed, which felt amazing even though we had identical beds. How could I be mad at her? I secretly loved that she was jealous over me. It was sick and disgusting, and yet...it was the truth.

She crawled into bed under the blankets while I stayed on top, but I took the opportunity to wrap my arms around her and pull her into my body. I took a deep breath of her hair and leaned over to look at her face.

"Did you get cinnamon shampoo?"

Kallie smirked over her shoulder at me. "What if I did? Do you like it?"

"Fuck, you're so much trouble, Trouble."

Chapter Twenty-Six

KALLIE

TWO YEARS LATER

Carter and I talked almost every night while he was away at school. Which was more than when he lived at home. There was something steadying about how he spoke, making me feel better even when I was at my most chaotic.

He even made a point of us spending a day together rather than hanging out with his old teammates when he was home every other weekend. The only time he didn't make it home was if he had a baseball game, and I would talk either Dad or Troy into going with me to watch him. There was no point in bringing Talon. She was like a hot potato and would leave her seat and disappear after the first inning...if she made it that far.

The holidays were the best. I'd never been so excited about Christmas before, and last summer vacation, we spent most of it hanging out. There was one old teammate of Carter's with a sister who couldn't keep her eyes off him, so she lost them, but other than that, I'd been very well-behaved. My dad even appreciated that I called him to help clean up, and I apologized for losing my temper. #personalgrowth

It was difficult not pushing for more, but I'd been warned that my dad was keeping an eye on me. For normal families, that meant making sure I got home by curfew or did my chores. That wasn't the case with my dad. He could be lurking in any shadow. I smirked at a garbage can by the main gates to the baseball field. He could be in that garbage can right now. Okay, no, he wouldn't. He would have to organize all the trash alphabetically, wash out all the containers, and sterilize them to ensure he didn't leave fingerprints.

The one good thing about Carter being away was that my frustration led me down the path to yoga and CrossFit, which was paying off. I was stronger, faster, and I'd started running every morning with my dad. I didn't even know he ran every morning. He also increased my weapons and self-defense training. Dad had never been a fan of guns, but only because

they were loud and the person died too quickly. Regardless, he taught me how to shoot.

I thought Dad would shoot Uncle Abel when he arrived dressed like a cowboy, yelling about riding him like a horse as he ran back and forth in front of the target.

I could see why Dad didn't want me to end up like that, but I was different. My dad was cold and calculating with his kills. I loved him, but I saw it more as I got older. Talon was in total denial of what she was. Bo had an insanity streak like a switch, and I didn't trust him as far as I could throw him. Troy was a carbon copy of my dad, and Abel was...well, he was his own brand of crazy. I had little pieces of them and still had all my emotions or most of them. I didn't care when I killed someone, so I guess that wasn't normal, but I loved hard, cried harder, and would rip your throat out to protect what was mine. None of them were like me.

Five months ago, Dad finally let me leave the house alone at night. I spent that time learning everything about this new life Carter was building. He probably would've told me, but following him and sneaking into his room was much more fun.

He was in a house instead of a dorm this year and shared it with five other guys, but it was just him now. Everyone else had gone home for the summer, but he stayed here for baseball camp. It made him sound like a child, but it was another stepping stone he said he needed to make it to the majors. So Carter had the house to himself.

However, Carter did make it home for my eighteenth birthday, but what I had originally planned didn't work out. I thought my dad was going to have a heart attack when he asked me what I wanted.

“Have you thought about what you'd like this year,” Dad asked.

He wasn't the type to try and surprise you. Carter and I did that, but Dad thought functional gifts, like my knives, were more practical.

“I have.”

“And what is that?” He started to drink his orange juice.

“Can I have four grand to hire two escorts?”

I’d never seen orange juice fly as far or as fast when he spit it all over the table. He’d never worn a more confused or shocked expression as he coughed up the sweet liquid, either.

“What?”

“Escorts. You know you hire them to....”

He held up his hand. “I know what they are. Why do you want them?”

“Oh! To make Carter jealous,” I said and shrugged as I stood to get a cloth to clean up the juice.

“Kallie, have I taught you nothing?” I turned to look at my dad’s angry face.

“Please don’t try to stop me from pursuing him.”

He waved me off again. “No, you don’t spend that kind of money on anything unless there is no other way.” He gave me that look like I should know what he was talking about. I ran through all of his rules in my head. There were a lot of them, but I stopped when I got to eleven.

“You want me to use rule eleven?”

“Of course I do. You always use leverage first before paying for anything.” He pushed away from the table and stood. “Paying for escorts...I went wrong somewhere with your training,” he mumbled as he put his plate in the dishwasher. Still grumbling, he marched for the door. I guess our conversation was over.

Dad stopped with the front door open and looked back at me. “You don’t need them anyway. He already wants you.”

With that, the door closed behind him.

So I was taking his advice. My fingers drummed along the top of the steering wheel as I thought. It was easy enough blending

in with students. I'd done that multiple times already. Jumping out of the car, I headed for the baseball field and smoothed down the front of the school hoodie.

I knew how to get to the best vantage point of the field without being seen. Using a vending machine as a cover, I leaned back like I was relaxing and waiting for someone. A single guard was wandering around, and I waited until he was far enough away before slipping from my spot and heading for the gates.

Once inside, I found the door that led to the announcer's booth and took the stairs two at a time until I reached the top. I doubted anyone would be in there, but I opened the door quietly and poked my head inside to be sure before stepping into the small tower with open windows overlooking the field.

Carter was easy to spot, even among the thirty or so guys, and my heart fluttered like it always did when I saw him. He still hadn't come out and said how he felt. He danced around it like he was doing an Irish jig and said things like 'It doesn't matter what I think' or 'Of course, I want more,' but never said what more was. I could guess, but I wanted him to say it. No, I wanted him to beg for it. I needed to rattle his cage.

Finding a chair, I watched the rest of the practice. Batting was my favorite part. There was just something about the sound the bat made when they hit a home run that sent a shiver down my spine. Carter knocked five of the dozen balls out of the park, and my stomach tightened. I'd waited all this time to have him. I wasn't waiting anymore, and if my dad had a problem with it, he would have to go through me to get to Carter.

The coach whistled, and the guys gathered around. Surprisingly, his voice carried, and I could hear him when he said what time to meet on the field again.

"Hey, Carts, you wanna go to a party with us tonight? I promise it'll be straight fire."

"I don't know, man, you heard what coach said. We have more scouts coming in a couple of days," Carter said.

They turned in my direction, and I lowered myself down so I wouldn't be seen. Luckily their voices were getting close.

“Dude, that's in two days. Let loose tonight. You rarely do anything. It will be fun, and the whole team is going.” That was interesting news. I hadn't asked, but I assumed he was dating someone. Not that I cared. I would cut the bitch if she thought she was putting a ring on it.

“Fine, I'll go.” I ground my teeth together. A party meant lots of girls. I also needed a way to follow and sneak in.

“Yes!”

“But only for a little while.”

Their voices echoed as they entered the tunnel. Getting up, I dashed down the stairs and out the same way I came in. A normal person would've waited for him to come out and then said hello, but that was too easy. Why talk when you can stalk?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I didn't care what anyone said. Guys took forever to get ready. I thought the next coming of Christ would be here faster than Carter and his teammates. Too many times, I wanted to sneak into the locker room. The thought of seeing him naked and wet under the shower spray was very fucking tempting.

Once they finally emerged, I followed the guy giving Carter a lift to his house. He ran inside and I was prepared to sit for another hour, but shockingly he was only ten minutes. I then had to follow them until I pulled into the parade of cars that all seemed to be going to the same location. Twenty minutes later they were pulling into a large mansion. place was so big it had castle gates. They stood open, and cars were lined up and down the driveway and in the massive cul de sac. A few of the girls heading inside were dressed up like they were going to a fancy club.

Driving around the circle, I parked near the end, facing out for a quick exit. Grabbing my bag from the backseat, I pulled it open and smirked. My dad always said to be prepared for anything. I ran my hand over the blood-red sequin dress. Not sure this was what he meant, but I had my own flare.

I looked like a fucking knock-out as I adjusted the brunette wig with long curls in the mirror and applied lipstick that matched the dress. I doubled checked that the knives strapped to my legs under the dress couldn't be seen and then strode up the street like I fucking owned it.

A single bouncer was at the door, but he was too busy flirting with two girls when I approached. He looked me up

and down and didn't move to stop me. The music was loud, the people louder, and whoever owned this place would have thousands of dollars in damage tomorrow morning.

I no sooner walked through the door when guys playing *Tarzan*, using the massive chandelier in the foyer, tore it out of the ceiling with a crash. I jumped out of the way as it fell and landed with an elegant roll behind a statue.

“Oh fuck, bro! That was epic.” Someone yelled before laughter filled the air. Peering around the statue, I saw the guy lying on the ground writhing in pain with a very broken ankle, but no one seemed to care.

“Not my circus,” I mumbled as I fought the urge to tell them off. If my teeth weren't already on edge, they sure as hell were when I found Carter out at the pool with enough girls hanging around him to create a harem. He peeled off his shirt and pants and jumped in the pool, and I swear I heard every pussy ring like a fucking dinner bell was inside them.

My hand itched, and I rubbed at my knife hidden under the glittery dress. I watched Carter as hungrily as all the other eyes on him, but I didn't want to give myself away just yet, so I went hunting for the security panel or room. A place like this had to have one, and since I was pretty sure more than one person was dying tonight, no cameras were essential.

Swiping a drink left sitting, I wandered the halls and glanced into each room as I went. I pretended to be hammered and leaned against a few walls. It was easier than you would think to act drunk and stumble around. Spotting a second guard, I followed him at a distance, and sure enough, he led me to a small dark room.

I pounded on the door, “Hurry up, man, I'm gonna piss myself,” I slurred.

The door whipped open, and I ran past him to a potted plant in the corner, making a retching noise.

“Oh my god, that's disgusting. Fuck I hate these parties.” I glanced over my shoulder, and his back was to me. “Yeah, all good here, just some drunk chick puking.” When he released

the com piece in his ear, I sprung up, pulled my knife, and leaped on his back. “What the...” The blade cut through his throat like butter. Releasing my hold, I pushed him, and he stumbled forward, collapsing face-first on the black, tiled floor.

“Sorry, friend,” I said, wiping my knife on his suit. Opening the small clutch, I pulled out an alcoholic wet wipe and cleaned where I’d touched his jacket and face. “I have to tell you, not having gloves on is a pain in the ass. You know what I mean? No, you probably don’t.”

The security screens lit up the room, and I watched Carter swim in the pool. The other guys on the team were cozying up to the girls who had hopped in, but he was dutifully swimming laps. Fuck I couldn’t wait to ride him. I was taking him, and he wouldn’t get the chance to argue.

He stopped long enough to sip a drink beside the pool and then pushed off again. I reached for the kill switch on the system but paused as I saw a blonde wander along the side of the pool. It seemed innocent until she turned away from the house, and I knew she was pulling out drugs or something. Her behavior was way too shady to be anything else.

I leaned in closer to the screen as she sat beside Carter’s cup, and when he swam past, she dropped some liquid into his drink.

“You bitch,” I growled at the screen. She stuffed the bottle between her cleavage and leaned back, kicking her feet in the water.

The next time Carter stopped, she started a conversation with him. He sipped his drink the entire time. The little bitch didn’t know it yet, but she had just punched her ticket out of this world. She chose the wrong guy to fuck with. Nobody messed with what was mine.

He started shaking his head, and I knew whatever she’d given him was taking effect. He held onto the side of the pool and made his way up the stairs. Of course, the Cuntbiscuit was right there to give him a helping hand, and oh, even bigger shocker, she didn’t take him to a chair to sit. No, she walked

him into the house. She reappeared a moment later and scooped up his clothes, looking around at the rest of the party, and I was fucking positive she was making sure no one was watching. She disappeared, and as soon as they entered the main hallway, I followed them on camera to a room not far from me.

“Time to play.” I sat down and quickly wiped all the footage from tonight and hit the kill switch on the whole system. Grabbing the guard’s phone, I used his finger to open it and thumbed through images of naked women. “What the fuck were you planning on doing in here? Gross.”

There had to be an app running a place like this. One connected to all the wireless shit in the house, like the lights and thermostat. Finding it so I had a way to turn off lights or set of alarms, I tucked the phone into my dress and walked back into the surprisingly quiet hallway.

Someone came down the hall, and I let the hair of the wig fall forward, covering my face as I leaned against the wall. No one stopped to see if I was okay. I mean, why would they? I could be fucking overdosing or have alcohol poisoning or, worse, raped by some Dickliterator with a huge ego and a little dick, but why would they care. It was better not to know for most people.

Finding the door where Cuntnugget had taken Carter, I tested the handle, but it was locked. Fuck I hated picking locks. Digging into my clutch again, I pulled out the lock modeling set. I could hear my dad now. *That’s fine to use now, Kallie, but you should be able to use either quickly and efficiently.* Yeah, well, Dad, not tonight.

As soon as the mold set, I put it away and slipped on the black gloves from the bottom of the clutch. There would be way too many things to try and wipe down after this. I turned the makeshift key and was happy that the music covered the noise as the lock clicked.

I cracked the door to assess the situation, but I couldn’t see shit from this angle.

“Fuck it.”

Opening the door like I lived there, I stepped inside, and the blonde had Carter on the bed. She didn't have her bikini top on and quickly wrapped an arm over her boobs.

"What the hell are you doing? Can't you see we're busy?" She looked at the door. "I thought I locked that."

I flicked closed the door and stepped back but kept my eyes on my prey as I re-locked it with a loud click that made her shiver.

"What the fuck? Get out!" She ordered, pointing one arm at the door.

"No, I don't think I'll be doing that," I said, smiling.

"I don't share, so you can find someone else to fuck."

I laughed, and the sound made Carter raise his head. "You see, that's the thing...I don't share either."

"Trrrr-uubbble?" He managed to get out, but it sounded like he'd chugged three bottles of tequila. At least, that was how I thought he would sound after three bottles of tequila.

"Hi there, Lover. Don't worry, I'll take care of her," I said, my voice calm, but under the façade, I was seething.

"You're crazy. This is my boyfriend, and we were about to have a private moment. I'm going to get security."

I sniffed the air. "I smell a liar."

Slipping my hands into the side slits on the dress, I pulled out both knives, and she froze. She stared at the shiny metal as I twirled them in my hands.

"What did you give him?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"You can tell me what you gave him, or I can force you to tell me. I must warn you that I'm feeling particularly vicious tonight, so you may not want to go that route."

"Trrr...uuu." Carter pointed at me. "Nooo, killlll."

I ignored him, but the blonde seemed terrified that Carter was ordering me not to kill. She suddenly ran to a door off to

the side of the room. It could've been a bathroom, closet, or hell, another exit, but she didn't make it more than halfway when I unleashed one of the blades, and it spun end over end. She shrieked and crumpled to her knees as it lodged in her lower back. I made sure not to hit her spine. I needed her to be mobile for now.

My little heels clicked on the floor as I neared her whimpering body. "Get it out, please, get it out," she cried as she tried to reach back and grab it.

Grabbing a handful of her hair, I placed the other knife under her jaw, and her crying got louder, but she stopped struggling to get at the blade. As long as I left it in, there was little to no blood which I also wanted...for now.

I hauled her to her feet, and she screamed in pain. The sound was music to my ears. Like a fucking baby listening to a lullaby, I lapped that shit up.

"Come here," I said and dragged her back so she was standing in front of the bed.

"Truuu." Carter tried again. His face was twisted in concentration, but he gave up and flopped back down.

"Don't start with me, Carter. Don't you know that you never leave your drink unattended? That's like party rule 101, especially now that you may get signed. You're a hot commodity to a social-climbing Slutosaurus." He groaned like I was annoying him as he draped his arm over his eyes. "Don't give me that. This bitch was going to take advantage of you. We'll talk about this when we get home."

I yanked the blonde's hair back hard, and she screamed as the knife moved around. I dragged the tip of the other blade up to her eye as she whimpered in my hold.

"It's your turn. I'm sure you realize by now that I'm fucking serious. If not, you're an idiot, and I'd be doing the world a huge favor by killing you so you don't pass along those genes, but I digress. Tell. Me. What. You. Gave. Him," I growled in her ear. "Or I will start by cutting your fingers off one at a time. It would be a shame not to be able to get those

fancy manicures, hold your phone, or even finger your pussy late at night while you're dreaming of my man." I twisted my hand and tightened the hold on her hair to bend her head at an odd angle. "Fucking tell me, or before your fingers, I'll take your nipples." I was going to do that anyway, but she didn't need to know that.

"Please don't. It hurts so much. Please take it out."

"No. Drug first. This is not that difficult. I saw you fucking do it. Just tell me what it was."

"Roofie," she blubbered, and I shook my head.

"A roofie...let me guess. Even though you're beautiful, you're a ladder-climbing Twatwaffle that wanted to trap one of the players by getting yourself knocked up. Carter was a good target since he was away from the other guys and left his drink unattended. Most guys aren't expecting to be roofied, especially by someone resembling a *Victoria's Secret* model."

She didn't answer, but she didn't need to. There was only one of two reasons you drugged a guy for sex, and it was never just for sex. She wanted to get pregnant, or she wanted blackmail dirt. Either way, it was shady as fuck.

Carter suddenly sat up but weaved around in a circle. "Youuuu cannnn't killlll herrrr," he said, his lips pushed together and brows bunched as he focused on his words. Under any other circumstances, I would've said it was funny.

"Oh, you think so? Watch me," I said and smiled over the blonde's shoulder. Her body slumped as she sobbed. I stared into his eyes as I drew the blade across her throat. "You know what, Carter, I've decided I really don't like people telling me what to do anymore."

His eyes widened as he watched the blonde choke on her blood before I let go of her hair, and she fell to the floor.

"Ohhh fuuuck." Carter groaned as he flopped back on the bed.

Blondie rolled over, her hands clutching her neck. I squeezed her nipple, sliced it off, and sat it on her chest. "You know, you could've picked anyone else, and I wouldn't have

cared. Honestly, your moral and ethical ceiling is not my problem. But you chose the one person in the entire party I care about.” I pinched her other nipple and pulled on it hard to get more of it as I cut it off. “I want you to think on that as you suffocate on blood. You brought this on yourself.”

I waited until she was dead, her eyes unseeing as she stared up at the ceiling before pulling open her mouth and dropping the nipples inside. I wasn't a fan of taking body parts as prizes like my dad, but I liked cutting them off and stuffing them in their mouths. I really wanted to carve my peacock feather, but it was too much of a calling card and this party was way too public. I just got my wings back, no carving was worth my dad caging me again.

As I pulled off the black gloves and stared down at her body, Carter mumbled something incoherent under his breath. He lifted his head when I walked to the side of the bed where he was lying.

Bending over, I rubbed my cheek against his. “Don't worry. Tonight's fun isn't over. I'm just getting warmed up.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Pride was a fun emotion. I did well tonight and only had to kill one more person on the way out. The guy questioned why I was leaving through the back gate with a guy that could hardly walk. I mean, really, mind your own fucking business. Get drunk with everyone else, asshole.

One thing I was sure of was that if Carter were any more out of it, I wouldn't have been able to move him. He was heavy and pushing me all over the place as we weaved up to his front door. He kept mumbling half sentences that didn't make sense other than my name.

“Yeah, I've got you. It was a damn good thing I was there, you know that? Bitch was trying shady shit. You need to be more careful. Not everyone is a good person,” I scolded as I got him inside and locked the door.

I stopped when we reached the stairs down to his basement apartment. I looked up at him, and his head rolled in my direction. I could kill that girl all over again for doing this.

“Okay, I don't trust I can get you down the stairs. You need to sit down.”

Carter leaned against the door jamb and slowly slid down until we were sitting. Cupping his face, I stared into his eyes. He still couldn't focus on me. How fucking much did she give him? His hand raised, and he mimicked my position.

I wasn't sure if he was trying to say something or wanted to kiss me. His brows were drawn together, and he opened his mouth, but only syllables came out. Deciding for him, I leaned in, and the moment our lips touched, the little flame that was

always in my chest roared into an inferno. He groaned, and the restraint I was using while he was like this slipped. I wasn't strong enough to walk away from him tonight.

Sucking his bottom lip into my mouth, I gave it a nip. "Do you want me?" I breathed against his lips. The nod was all I needed. "Then let's go."

Getting down the fifteen steps felt like an adventure all on its own. I'd never been so happy to see a door. Propping Carter against the wall, I held him in place with my body as I dug around in his pants that were slung over my arm. I found his wallet in a zipped pocket and opened it, finding the single key.

"Ever heard of a keychain? Talk about making me work," I grumbled, holding him with one hand and unlocking the door with the other.

Grabbing Carter, I once more put his arm over my shoulder and helped him into his room.

"Fuuuck, whaat's...." He turned his head, looking around. "Howww? Wherrr...." he mumbled as I helped him lay down. Closing the door, I leaned against it and stared at his mostly naked body.

"You're back in your room. You got dosed with a roofie, and I saved your ass," I said, and Carter smacked his lips like his mouth was dry. He had a small bar fridge in his room full of health drinks, protein bars, and water. Electrolytes seemed like a logical choice. Cracking the top of one of the drinks, I brought it over to Carter, who was mumbling the word stupid. I assumed he was talking about himself and not me.

"Come on, sit up." I helped him upright, and he was a little less wobbly. Glancing at the clock on his nightstand, it had been approximately two hours since he was dosed.

Holding the drink to his lips, I helped him sip some down and then set it aside.

"Yerrr, soooo pretty," he said, and I blushed. His hand ran down my arm. "I misses youuu."

He had a droplet of red on his upper lip from the drink, and I licked it off. "Mmm, it's like fruit punch."

Carter flopped back down on the bed as I stood up. I turned to face him and sucked in a deep breath.

“I want you so bad, but this is one of those moments that I should be nice,” I said, and Carter’s head lulled my way. I kicked off the red heels and pulled off the long wig to shake out my much shorter hair. “You know, show some moral restraint or some shit.” Reaching behind me, I undid the zipper on the dress and let it fall to the floor.

I smirked as Carter groaned before trying to look away. He failed. He closed his eyes, but even they betrayed him as I stepped up to the side of the bed. His eyes fluttered open, and he stared at my chest as I bent over to undo the leather leg straps.

His eyes followed my movements. “You like that? You think they’re sexy?”

“Truu, weee shoouldnnn’t....” I placed my finger on his lips and loved how he went quiet and focused on my face.

“I’m done with the excuses. I’m an adult, and my father is miles from here. I’ve waited long enough. You’ve always been mine no matter how much you’ve tried to resist, and I’m taking what’s mine. Do you understand?”

He nodded slightly, and I removed my finger. “Besides, even if my dad is pissed, what will he say when you’ve been drugged by some opportunistic piece of trash? I’m simply taking advantage of the situation I now find myself in.” I smiled, and the corner of his mouth curled up. “Yes, I see the irony in the statement, but the difference is....” I unsnapped my bra and let the piece of lace fall to the floor, quickly followed by my underwear. “You’ve always wanted me too. Or am I wrong?”

He shook his head, stopped, nodded, and then shook his head again, making me laugh.

“Let’s try this. Do you want me?” Carter licked his lips and nodded, his movements slow, yet there was no denying it was a yes. “Have you always wanted me?” I ran my hand down my stomach, and he groaned. The word, yes, slurred off

his tongue as he reached out and touched my leg. “Good, then it’s settled.”

Bending over, I kissed him softly as all the emotion I tried so hard to keep pushed down and locked up tight broke free. My blood pounded hard through my veins with the taste of his lips.

“Mmm, you taste like heaven on my wicked tongue,” I whispered in his ear. “You know that from now on, I’m the only woman in your life.” I gripped his chin in my hand and made sure his eyes were locked on mine. “I play for keeps.”

His green eyes were intense. “Say it. Say you’re mine, and I’m yours from now on.”

Carter reached for his nightstand, his hand fumbling awkwardly, but he grabbed one of my leg straps. Panting hard, he laid it on his chest.

He licked his lips, and I could tell he was fighting the drug’s influence in his system.

“Name.” His finger tapped over his heart.

“You want me to carve my name,” I asked, and he nodded before running his thumb down the side of my cheek. Tears filled my eyes. He couldn’t have said anything sweeter. I pulled the knife from the sheath, and I didn’t need to think about how I wanted it to look as I straddled his body, sitting down.

Unable to help myself, I rubbed my pussy on his stomach and loved that his hands went to my hips and squeezed. He pushed up, and I could feel his hard cock, still trapped by his swim trunks, nudging my back.

Carter sucked in a sharp breath but held still as I made the first cut. I worked swiftly and didn’t go deep. I didn’t want to cut his muscle and hurt him or keep him from playing for the scouts in a couple of days. Blood trickled down the side of his chest onto his bed, but he didn’t move and never took his eyes off my face. Whether it was part of him when he was born or if it was living with us his whole life, there was a little bit of something wild and menacing under his normally composed

stare. Within the tranquil cage that encased his heart, there lay a beast only I saw. When I looked at him, I saw its eyes shining back at me as if peering from a darkened cave.

With a twist of my wrist, I finished the last line and the scrolled word, Trouble. Carter glanced at it and smiled. Touching the droplets of blood dripping down his side, I admired the bright red on my finger before putting it in my mouth and sucking the taste of him off.

“Fuck, you taste so good. Wanna try?” I smirked as he opened his mouth. He was so fucking sexy. He always had been. I could remember every detail of our whole lives together, and he always smiled at me like I was special. He captivated me with his spring-colored eyes and calmed the storm in my soul that clouded my mind with an uncontrollable rage. He was my everything.

I wiped up more of the bright red liquid and smeared it on his lower lip, not looking away as he licked at his blood. Just watching him do that would make me come on his stomach. Holding the blade up, I licked the blood off the sharp edge and showed off the nick I’d put in my tongue. I put the knife aside and lapped up the blood on Carter’s chest, making sure not to swallow, and kissed him again.

The metallic taste filled my mouth, and our tongues battled as the kiss deepened. I loved his angry groan as I broke the kiss and stood up. Carter reached for me, but I stepped out of the way and walked to the end of the bed.

“It’s time we got these off,” I said, leaning forward to unknot the tie on his trunks and pull them down. He lifted his hips, and no amount of dirty movies could’ve prepared me to see his cock in person. I tossed the swimsuit aside and knelt on the bed beside him, but my eyes were glued to the cock that was bigger than the dildo I used when fantasizing about him.

Now that the moment was here, I was frozen—my excitement blended with the nervousness coursing through my veins.

I was startled when Carter’s hand touched mine on the bed. One glance into his eyes, and I knew he was asking me if I

was okay. Heat spread throughout my body, my heart rate tripled, and my face got so hot that I knew I was blushing.

“I’m fine, I just...I...” Give me someone to kill, and I could do that in a blink, but this—I was out of my depth.

Carter picked up my hand, and I didn’t resist as he wrapped my fingers around his shaft.

“Uhh, fuck,” he groaned and flexed his hips up into my hold. I never would’ve expected it to feel so hot, hard, and silky soft at the same time. Our hands stroked up and down his cock together, and with each passing second, the unsure feelings melted away.

“You like that,” I asked as our hands slipped over the head, a clear liquid spreading as our hands moved down.

“Yesss,” he said, bucking his hips harder with each stroke.

“Do you touch yourself and think of me?”

“Only....” He took in a deep breath. “You.”

“Only me?” He nodded, his cheeks pinking, and nothing could have pushed me into action faster than knowing that he’d been dreaming of me all this time. “Did you think about me running my hand up and down your cock just like this?” He nodded. “How about my tongue?”

The growl he let out as he nodded had my thighs rubbing together. “How about fucking me?”

“Fuck, yes.” Carter clenched his teeth and closed his eyes as he quickened his pace, sliding through my hand.

Leaning over, I sucked the tip of his cock into my mouth when he pushed up, and his entire body shuddered. That single response was as addictive as everything else about him. I wanted that again. This time when he pushed up, I followed him down and moaned as he filled my mouth and hit the back of my throat with force. I fucking loved it. The harder he fucked my face, the wetter I got.

I was a mess of need when he spoke. “Stop, please,” he said. And I turned my eyes to him with his cock still in my mouth. “Oh sweet fuck, don’t look at me like that Trouble.”

“You sound almost normal,” I said.

“Still sluggish, but....” He looked down at my tongue, flicking out to tease him. “Yeah, I think.”

“You want to take away my lollipop?” I swirled my tongue around the tip before putting just the head in my mouth and pulling it out with a pop, just like he was candy. Carter’s eyes rolled back in his head.

“Am I dreaming?”

“Do you want this to be a dream?”

He was slow to answer, and I lifted my head to stare at him. “I would take you in any form,” he said.

I slid my hand up his stomach, appreciating his hard muscles. “Is that the drug talking?”

“Naw, I’ve loved you for so long I don’t even remember when I stopped seeing you as my step-sister or whatever you want to call us.”

“You love me?” Letting my prize go, I crawled up his body, and he immediately cupped my cheek.

“How did you not know?” He turned his arm to show off the inside of his forearm and the sleeve I thought was so sexy. “Look at it.” It took a minute, but I stopped breathing as the name, Trouble, formed in the swirling lines that made up the artwork. “You see it now, don’t you?”

“Has that been there all this time?”

“You’ve always been with me no matter how fucking hard I try to push you out of my mind and heart. I finally accepted it a while back, but I never wanted you to regret a moment if we got together.”

I didn’t just kiss him. I attacked his mouth and swallowed down his groans. Carter’s hands were hot on my skin, and I had to have him now.

“I love you too. I’ve always loved you and don’t care what anyone says. You’ve always been mine.”

“Yes, I’ve always been yours,” he said, gripping my ass.

Nibbling the side of his neck, I sucked his earlobe into my mouth and moaned. His body flexed with the sound. "I saved myself for you," I said shyly. I didn't do shy often, but I was right now. "You'll be my first. It's the way I always wanted it."

"Fuck."

I sat up to look at him, not sure why he seemed annoyed by that.

"I wish I wasn't like this." He lifted his arm, and it shook before dropping to the bed. "I want this to be amazing for you."

"Don't worry. I've been practicing with toys. I know what I like." His eyebrows shot up as I slid down his body to sit on his cock and rocked back and forth. "Mmm, that feels so good. You ready?"

"Yes, fuck, yes," he said.

He was rocking his hips to my rhythm, and I loved it. I got into position and slowly eased down.

"Holy shit," Carter groaned, his fingers squeezing my thighs tighter.

I could hardly breathe. Carter felt incredible, better than incredible. The uncontrollable butterflies and pleasure were nothing I could put into words. When I finally settled, I was sweating and panting hard as my body adjusted to him. There was a little pain, but it was delicious. I wasn't even moving yet, and I was ready to explode. I tipped my head back and stared up at the ceiling, taking in the emotions and sensations coursing through my body as swiftly as my blood.

His every flex, touch, and shiver, I felt. The deep animal-like noises Carter made were directly connected to my libido. I pinched and rolled my nipples, and Carter swore again. When I looked down, his green eyes were burning with carnal desire, and I'd never get sick of him staring at me like that.

Bracing my hands on his chest, I moved up and gasped as he rubbed against all the pleasure spots inside me. Each one sent an electrical charge or spark to my system. Carter's hands moved up to my waist, and as I lowered myself, he pulled me

down harder and groaned, his back arching as our bodies connected.

“Carter, oh fuck,” I said, the pleasure so intense that my brain couldn’t think of anything more logical to say.

I couldn’t take my eyes off my name carved into his chest as I picked up the pace. A series of devastating events had led Carter to me, and we had grown close as if the universe knew we needed one another.

I was in a lightheaded state of longing and carnal gratification coming together in a vortex. The only thing that came close to this was when I took out my prey. The stalking, torturing, and killing sent a euphoric burst through my body.

“I’ve wanted you so fucking bad for so long,” Carter said, his voice strained as he thrust into me with every bounce. “Rub your clit, come on me. Fuck, I want to feel you come all over me.”

I moved my legs wider so he could watch and slipped a hand between my legs. I spread my fingers and caressed his cock.

“Oh shit! Trouble. Please come for me.”

“Beg me again.”

“Come for me. Come all over my cock. I can’t hang on much longer.”

Using the lubrication from our bodies, I granted him his wish and rubbed little circles on my clit. I was so close to coming myself that it only took a few seconds before I screamed his name and came harder than I ever had on my own.

“Yes, yes, oh fuck you’re perfect!” Carter yelled and thrust up so hard he almost dislodged me from his body as he came. I could feel his cock releasing, setting off another orgasm in my body, and like a wave coming into shore, it crashed into me, catching me off guard.

“Carter!” I screamed, my nails digging into his abs. I collapsed on his chest, trying to catch my breath, and could

hear his heart pounding. It was as fast as mine, and I spread my hand over my name.

“Shit,” Carter mumbled later as he held me.

“What’s wrong?”

“We didn’t use protection. Fuck, I’m an idiot.” I smirked. “Are you smiling? This isn’t good.”

I snickered at the worry in his voice because I didn’t care. Yes, total cliché to be pregnant at eighteen, but I adored kids and animals despite my unusual cravings. If I was pregnant, so be it. I already knew what I wanted to do for a living, and it didn’t require me to work a nine-to-five or take five more years of schooling.

I lifted my head and smiled at his horrified expression, and I knew that look so well that I understood he was actually worried about my dad.

“Stop worrying.”

“How can I not?” Carter rubbed at his eyes. “I will gladly die for you any day, but I really don’t feel like having your dad torture the shit out of me for weeks before he dices up my cock and feeds me to your pigs because I got you pregnant.”

I laughed, and it tightened my pussy around his cock. He groaned as I moaned at the sensation. Yes, we were definitely going another round.

“You said you love me.”

“I do, more than anything. I’d give up ball if you wanted me to.”

He loved baseball, like totally obsessive about it.

“No, that’s not happening, not even if I was pregnant. Almost all players have families. As for my dad, he only wants to know that I’m happy.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that myself. What would Dad say if I told him I was expecting?

“You really don’t care,” Carter said.

“No. No, I don’t. I’ve always loved you, and I want to be a private investigator. I can start that now, quit and restart. I want to be my own boss for reasons exactly like this. If you make a team, I want to travel with you and see the world, and have sex in all the most romantic spots. Do you hate the idea?”

“I’m still fuzzy with drugs, but no, I don’t hate it as long as it doesn’t mean a painful death.”

“If my dad comes for you, he’ll have to go through me first.” I grabbed his chin. “When I said you’re mine, I meant it. No one and I mean no one, will take you from me.”

“You’re so fucking sexy when you talk like that. I still think we should keep the relationship on the low, and when I’m home, no sex under his roof. That seems...wrong and like I’m playing with fire while juggling knives.”

“Fine. For now.” I laid my head back down.

“I hate to ask this, but did you make sure your dad isn’t hiding in the house somewhere? Like my closet or under the bed? That would really ruin this moment for me.”

I laughed hard and sat up, wiggling my hips around, loving the look on his face.

“He’s not here, trust me. Now, are you going to fuck me again? I have a very needy kitty.”

“Oh fuck.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I looked over at Kallie sitting in the stands and winked. I was waiting for my turn to speak to the next scout, and having her here gave me a shot in the arm to really stand out from the rest of the guys. They were my friends, but they were also my competition.

Yesterday was a weird fucking day, yet it was one of the best of my life. I hardly remembered the party or what happened other than arriving and going for a swim. I couldn't believe someone tried to drug me, it seemed insane, but I just got a taste of what thousands of women dealt with every time they left the house. All I knew was that I should've been pissed that Kallie was stalking me, but it turned me on, and I was thankful she was there to stop it. She was my dark angel.

We stayed in bed most of the day, making sure the drug was out of my system. We did whatever we wanted, and I felt like I could breathe and take on the world for the first time. We ordered food, played naked tag throughout the house, and fucked on every available surface before curling up to watch the news together. They showed clips of the party mansion and the yellow tape fluttering in the breeze as police cars sat in the background. It all seemed very ominous, with the night sky as a backdrop to the death I knew they found inside. The girl that drugged me was the host of the party. Not sure why she chose me out of the crowd. I was still a nobody, and there was no guarantee I would make the majors. It made no sense, but I guess it only needed to make sense to her, and now she was dead.

“Doesn’t matter who she was,” Kallie said, shrugging and getting up to grab popcorn.

I did worry, though, it was second nature for me to worry about her and everything around her. The final reporter said there was a serial slayer in the area. Kallie laughed at the name, calling it ridiculous. It wasn’t like she was going from neighborhood to neighborhood killing people.

I couldn’t help wondering if she was growing too bold. In that moment of worrying about her, I realized I didn’t care that three people died. That sealed it for me. I was officially so far into the mayhem that nothing Kallie did seemed outlandish or wrong. Watching people die every week for years as Cain taught us how to stalk, kill, torture and clean up had flipped a switch that I never wanted to turn on. If it did, I wouldn’t be able to be with Kallie, and she was the heart that kept the blood running through my veins.

I squeezed the bat tighter, picturing what I would do if someone ever hurt her. Cain worried about emotion and how it affected a kill. If someone did anything to her, they would definitely have something to worry about.

“Carter, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” the scout for the Toronto Blue Jays said.

“The pleasure is mine. What would you like to know first?” I smiled as I shook his hand.



ONE WEEK LATER

I couldn't see Kallie in the crowd, but I knew she was there. Being with her was a trip. She rarely told me when she was coming and could show up in my bed while I was asleep. Not that I was complaining about that, but I found myself looking behind doors and checking the back seat of my car before getting in. I was out to dinner with the guys and almost choked on my meal when she wandered over in a waitress's uniform. I didn't want to know who she killed to get it. I also prayed that none of the guys acted like pigs and grabbed her ass, or they would end up with arsenic in their food and dead before the night was over.

The last thing I needed was for her to start picking off all my competition. It wouldn't take long for them to start looking at me sideways.

The crack of the bat echoed loud, and I spotted the ball right away, running backward while keeping my eye on it. The lights were intense, and I lost it once in the bright glare but found it again just as I reached the warning track. I counted the final steps three, two, and one before leaping into the air. I felt the ball hit my glove and pinched it tight, stealing the home run away from the opposing team and ending the game.

"Who!" I yelled and met my teammates on the infield for a congratulations handshake. I spotted Jeff, the scout from Toronto, standing off to the side with a pen and notebook in his hand. I liked that he was old school. He made notes about everything I said to him and even smiled when I answered the questions terribly.

He waved me over, and my heart beat hard. Were they really interested in me? Until now, I was going through the motions and hoping I was good enough, but I always wondered if I was fooling myself.

Jogging over, I tried not to show how excited I was that he wanted to speak to me again. For all I knew, he would tell me in person, 'Thanks but no thanks.'

“Mr. Barker,” I said, and he laughed.

“Call me Jeff. Are you still interested in Toronto as one of your destinations?”

“Heck yes.” You couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. “I mean, yes, Sir.”

He let out a barking laugh. “Heck yes, is just fine. We’re considering signing you to a triple A, minor league deal where you can prove yourself and move up. Unless you’d rather wait for another team to make a deal?”

I shook my head no. “Would I be able to finish out my degree here first?”

“Let’s sit down for a few minutes and talk if you have the time?”

“Yes, I have the time.” I followed him to the dugout and kept looking for Kallie, but the stands had cleared out, and all was quiet.



Holy shit, they wanted to fly me to Florida to see the complex and then on to Toronto to catch a game and meet some of the team. I had no idea if this was normal. I’d never talked to players who had been through this kind of thing before.

The locker room was empty except for a couple of guys. I couldn’t see them but heard them as I stripped to shower. I couldn’t wait to tell Kallie. I expected her to show up here as soon as everyone cleared out. Fucking her in the shower had been a fantasy of mine that I would love to come true.

I stroked my cock as I waited for the water to warm up. The showers had a three-quarter wall running all the way around to separate them from the rest of the locker room. The one back at my high school was all open, and it was much harder for the area to heat up. Tilting my head back under the

shower spray, I smiled as a hand touched my cock, but the smile quickly turned to horror as an unfamiliar voice spoke.

“You look like you could use some attention.”

My eyes snapped open to stare into the pretty face of one of the girls on the dance team. She was naked and biting her lip as she stroked me. What the fuck was this? Did I have a sign over my head saying I liked to be assaulted?

“What the fuck are you doing?” I tried to step away from her, but she tightened her grip until it was painful. “Get the fuck off me.”

What the hell? Did I push her? Did I try to pry her hand off my junk? What the fuck does someone do in a situation like this?

“I’ve been watching you for the last two years,” she said.

Great, I had two stalkers in my life. “Yeah, well, I haven’t been watching you. Now let go. You can’t be in here.”

“Come on, I’ll make you feel good.”

“I promise you won’t. Now get dressed and get out of here right now,” I said.

“Why are you being such a jerk?” Her nails dug in. I winced and tried to step away again.

“Let go, or I swear I’ll start screaming rape. I don’t care.”

“Rape? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I really am. Let go of me and get the fuck out. This is your last warning.” I clenched my fists so I didn’t do something like grab her and accidentally bruise her as I tried to get her to let go, but she took it as a threat.

“Are you going to hit me?”

“No, I just want you to go away. I have no interest.” She looked down at my cock in her hand. “It was hard because I was thinking of my girlfriend, which is not you, whom I don’t know, have never met, and certainly never noticed. Is that clear enough for you?”

Her eyes filled with tears as if I assaulted her in the women's bathroom.

"I'm going to get you kicked out. I can't believe you just forced me into the shower with you and tried to have sex with me," she whimpered, and my heart pounded harder. She let go of my cock, and I immediately cupped it and stepped as far back as possible.

Was there something in the water around here that made people crazy? Twice in one month. Was this normal? It didn't seem normal. Maybe I just attracted a type—like that wasn't a terrifying thought all on its own.

"I'm sure the dean will be interested to know his niece narrowly escaped the clutches of one of the school's roided-up jocks." She turned and stomped away but stopped when she reached the shower exit.

She backed up with her hands in the air and a knife to her throat. Kallie stepped into the shower naked, looking completely dangerous. Her blue eyes were focused on her target, her hand steady on the blade as she stepped quietly like a predatory cat. My cock thickened just watching her, even though I knew this girl had lost her window to leave alive.

"You are threatening my boyfriend," Kallie said, her voice low and almost sweet like a song as she forced the girl against the wall.

"No, he invited me here and then got all weird."

I opened my mouth to argue that I didn't, but Kallie smiled wickedly. "You're a terrible liar."

"I'm not, I swear," she said and looked over at me. "Tell her the truth. You wanted me."

My mouth fell open. What was this game? "Not a chance in hell."

"So, here's the thing. I know you're lying because I heard you the entire time and...no one touches what's mine."

"I swear, I didn't—" The girl— I didn't even know her name—stopped arguing, her eyes got wide as a scream ripped

from her throat. I didn't know what she was screaming about until she stumbled back and Kallie followed, stabbing her in the pussy three times before dragging the blade across her throat. She was so fast I wouldn't have known she moved if it wasn't for the blood. I watched as the girl staggered back into the opposite corner, blood streaming down her body and pooling into the drain. She gripped her throat, her mouth opening and closing as if begging for help.

Kallie turned that intense stare on me, then down to my hand, steadily stroking my cock.

“Like what you see, Lover?” She purred at me, making me shiver. I loved it when she called me that.

“I love one thing I see, the other I don't care about,” I said, and she smiled, lighting up the room. Holding her hand out to me, I stepped in close, ignoring the blood swirling around our feet.

“I swear I don't know what the hell is going on,” I said, wrapping my arms around Kallie's waist. “Claire, Mrs. Peterson, the party and now this. It's unbelievable.

“Have you ever looked in a mirror? Seriously, you don't know that you're a hunk of sexy man meat dropped into shark-infested waters, and they all want to tear a limb off for themselves.”

“I know there's a compliment in that analogy somewhere,” I teased and sucked in a breath as Kallie's hand wrapped around my cock. Her fingers slid over my sensitive skin but paused when she felt one of the small nail indents.

“Aww, she hurt you.” She was pouting as she lowered herself down to the tile floor. “I'll kiss it and make it better.”

It was fucking creepy to have the girl—who now looked like a bloody ragdoll—laying there, but everything Kallie did turned me on.

My eyes fluttered closed, and I leaned back against the wall as her tongue licked over the marks left by the girl's nails. My hands slipped into her hair as she sucked me into her hot mouth. She held nothing back as she bobbed her head while

her fingers rubbed an erotic line from my balls to my ass and back again.

She picked up the pace, and my grip tightened. A strange gurgling sound made me glance down at the girl, whose eyes were still open.

“That’s fucked up,” I panted, pointing to the girl. “She’s staring at us.”

“You’re right. That’s very fucking rude of her.” Kallie slid away, and I cringed a little as she stabbed her blade through one eye and then the other. Even though it was probably my imagination, I would’ve sworn there was a pop with each one.

“Don’t you know it’s not nice to stare?” Kallie rose to her feet, cleaned off the knife before placing it on the soap rack, and kicked the girl’s foot away from the drain. “And you’re blocking the drain. Fucking rude people.”

Kallie looked at me and smiled. “Did they offer you a position?” It took me a second to wrap my brain around the question and who we were talking about.

“A minor league deal, yes.”

“Are they going to fly you out?”

“Yes, but I told them I could only come if I had my plus one with me.”

Kallie squealed, and I slammed against the tile as she leaped on me and wrapped her arms and legs around my body.

“Then we have something to celebrate,” she said, nibbling at my lip.

“Yes, we do.”

“Mmm.” She licked at the water running down my neck. “Good, then fuck me. I want you inside of me right now.”

“Right now? With her here.”

Kallie lifted a shoulder and let it drop. The movement was far more innocent looking than what we were talking about. “Why not? She’s not going to interfere anymore.” Kallie

glared down at the girl like she'd said something. "Do it, fuck me now."

"What if someone comes in," I asked, and yet was lifting her ass to slide into her regardless.

"They won't. I locked the door and hung a closed for maintenance sign on the outside." She smirked.

"Oh fuck," I groaned, sliding into her wet pussy. "You devious minx." Kallie wiped whatever worry I had left away as she kissed me and stole the air from my lungs. My pulse ramped up as she pulled my hair and bit my lip so hard I could taste my blood on her lips.

Nothing else mattered other than her. Spinning our bodies around, I pushed her up against the tiles and fucked her as hard as I could. She was growling my name in my ear as her ass smacked into the wall. I knew she came when her nails dug into my shoulders, her pussy squeezing my cock tight as she screamed.

There was no slowing down, and I growled, annoyed that I couldn't get as deep as I wanted. I didn't give a fuck about the body anymore and laid Kallie down on the shower floor.

"Put your arms above your head," I ordered, grabbing her legs and placing them on my shoulders.

"Oh shit, yes," I said, stuffing my cock in so deep that my balls hit with every thrust and added to the intense pleasure that roared through my body.

"Fuck, Carter! Yes, I'm going to come again," Kallie cried out. She tensed and arched as her climax hit, pushing me over the edge. Each thrust was a pleasure so powerful it almost hurt, yet I would do it again and again.

My arms shook as I hovered over her body, and I loved how Kallie lovingly traced the muscles in my arms with her fingers.

She turned her head to the side and stared at the body. "Did you enjoy the show?"

I shook my head. "You're so fucked. I love you."

Pushing herself up on her elbows with a devilish grin, she softly kissed me.

“I love you more,” she said.

But I didn't think that was possible.

Chapter Thirty

KALLIE

SENIOR YEAR DAY 1

I never hated school as much as I did this year. Graduation and prom were the only school events I was looking forward to, especially since Carter didn't get to enjoy his. It would be amazing showing up arm in arm when everyone at our high school thought we were related. The gossip mill would run their mouths faster than a motorboat.

Equally as exciting, Carter and I were flying to Florida just before spring break—when the team wanted him to see the spring training facility and meet the players, trainers, coaches, and physiotherapists—but that was so far away. Dad wasn't thrilled with the idea of me flying. Probably because he couldn't follow me there, but I finally talked him into it. My begging skills had gotten much better and he knew I'm an adult now. He had to let go at some point.

“Why do you look so sad,” Talon asked as we waited for the teacher to show up.

“I'm not sad. I'm annoyed. I just want this year to be over so I can get on with my life.”

It seemed lame sitting in this class when I could teach it. I wanted to start my business and move in with Carter—once he finished college and we knew for sure where he was going. Dunedin Florida sounded amazing, but if he did well then we'd be off to Buffalo for Triple A, or right to Toronto and the big leagues. Carter said that was unlikely, but I knew he would make it. They would see how great he was and if they didn't I'd make sure that they did.

“Oh, I'm excited. This will be an amazing year. I have lots of activities planned.” She made a strange squealy noise, and I stared at my cousin, wondering how the fuck we were related? “I'm signed up for so many things. I have dance, band, yearbook, prom planning...” She smiled, and all I could do was stare.

I had the strangest urge to put her in a glitter-covered unicorn costume. That might come close to what she looked like to me.

“You can’t tell me you’re not excited about anything this year,” she said, and just then, Mrs. Peterson walked into the room.

I sat up a little straighter as I watched her walk across the room her heels annoyingly clicking. Well, hello. I hadn’t forgotten about her, but she’d moved to the back burner with other things taking priority. Now, my semester just got a lot more interesting.

“Yeah, at least one thing excites me,” I said, remembering how she came on to Carter. It was beyond unprofessional.

“See, I knew there had to be one,” Talon said, and I rolled my eyes.

She was clueless, and I would’ve said she was a ditz if she weren’t highly intelligent. Talon was more common sense challenged. She refused to see her family for what we were and never questioned why the pigs stayed fat and happy when we never purchased pig food.

Mrs. Peterson scribbled her name on the whiteboard. “Good morning, Seniors. Please pull out your notebooks. We will be reading and discussing five books this semester.” She pulled papers from her briefcase and laid a page on everyone’s desk as she walked around.

I watched her closely for anything unusual, a lingering stare or flirtatious smile, even a twinkle in her eye, as she looked at one of the guys. Once she finished, we reviewed the syllabus broken down into books, essays, group projects, and what everything would be worth.

“Any questions before we get started?”

Talon’s hand shot up into the air so fast and straight it was like a fucking rocket. She rocked back and forth like she would piss herself from excitement.

“Yes, Ms...” Mrs P looked down at her attendance sheet, but Talon stood up, her hands at her sides and her feet

perfectly side-by-side. Soldiers everywhere would've been impressed.

“Talon Buchanan,” she said.

“Okay, Talon. What's your question?”

“Can I read five different books?”

Mrs. Peterson sat on the corner of her desk, staring at Talon as if she'd asked, ‘Can quantum mechanics and general relativity be realized as a fully consistent theory?’

“These are the books we need to read for the required work. Do you have an issue with the books on the list, Ms. Buchanan?”

Talon giggled, and my eyebrow shot up. Thank whoever that we never had a class together until now because there was a good chance I would've smacked her around trying to knock some sense into her.

“Oh no, no, it's not that. I read these books already and could prepare an essay for each one to hand in by the end of the week. I prefer not to repeat the same information. I'm happy to read whatever you like.”

“What a fucking suck-up,” Lisa, the head cheerleader, mumbled behind Talon. I looked over at her. I didn't have a problem with her until now, but no one picked on or thought about picking on my cousin but me.

Talon smoothed down the front of her t-shirt that was neatly tucked into her ironed jeans. She said ironing relieved stress and made sure her clothes never had a single wrinkle or she wouldn't leave the house.

“Wow, such an achiever. I wish I had more students like you.” Kissing noises erupted around the class. “That's enough of that,” Mrs. Peterson said as she opened her briefcase and looked inside. “I'll find the complete list, and we can look it over to see what five interest you.”

“That's fabulous. Thank you, Mrs. Peterson, and if you ever need any help setting up or cleaning the room, just let me know. I'm always happy to help.” I was pretty sure that Talon

wasn't Mrs. Peterson's first choice when it came to helpers and smirked as I imagined the disappointed look on Talon's face.

Lisa made a gagging noise, and although I agreed with her, I didn't like how she eyed Talon. It was a look that promised pain and humiliation.

"Lisa Stanley, do you have something productive to add to the conversation? Or maybe you'd like to share how far along you are in the first read of the year?"

I still didn't like Mrs. Peterson, but I appreciated that she didn't allow bullying in her class.

"No, I'm good," Lisa answered sweetly, but she was glaring at Talon's back. I wanted to yell, 'Yo bitch she didn't force you to grow up an asshole,' but I kept my mouth shut.

"You can sit down, Talon."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Talon said and sat back in her seat. Even sitting, she looked like she had a broom handle shoved up her ass. Her spine was as straight as a rod, and her hands were flat on the table like she needed to prove she wasn't playing with her phone while her eyes were on the front board.

This was going to be agonizing.



OCTOBER

So far, the best thing about this year was last period. I had it free, meaning I could do what I wanted and leave early. Today, the hallway was eerily silent in this part of the school. The Seniors' lockers were in the furthest corner of the upper floor. Either they were trying to make us late for class, or they just wanted to annoy the hell out of us for fun.

Shrugging on my backpack, I was about to slam my locker with the usual bang when I heard voices. Intrigued, I closed the door silently and snapped my lock together quietly. Tiptoeing toward the noise, I peeked around the corner, and my heart leaped excitedly. Mrs. Peterson had backed Hicks, the captain of the basketball team, up against the lockers and he looked terrified and trapped.

"I don't know," Hicks whispered.

I pulled back to stay hidden but closed my eyes and listened.

"You're failing Hicks, and this is your final year. Your sick mom can't have that. She needs the medication. You can't have bad grades now, can you?"

"No, Ma'am," he said, his voice dejected. Everyone knew Hicks was poor, but by some miracle, he was a freakishly tall and talented basketball player. He was also determined to get drafted. I knew this because I knew things about everyone I thought could be helpful or an issue.

"Please call me Carol," she said, and I couldn't have rolled my eyes any harder. She really needed a new line. "So why don't we find a private spot, and you can have a proper tutoring session?"

"Tutoring? Oh, I'm not sure that's a good idea. I need to get home after school to take care of my mom."

"Who said anything about after school? We could utilize one of these empty rooms right here. You look like you need

to ease some tension.”

He gasped, and I needed to know what happened. It was hard to see from this angle, but I was pretty positive she was rubbing his cock through his jeans. One look at Hick’s face, and I knew he wasn’t into this. He looked like he wanted to jump out the second-floor window rather than stand there or go to a private room with her.

She used the same bullshit wording and ploy on Carter. Carter got lucky because he was never in one of her classes, but Hicks wasn’t so fortunate. Now, I should’ve filed the knowledge away, maybe snapped a picture, and minded my own fucking business. But I just didn’t feel like doing that today. I was annoyed that she abused her powers as a teacher to get what she wanted and gotten away with it this long.

I pulled out my phone and hit record, stuffing it in my pocket as I walked around the corner.

“Hicks, there you are.”

Mrs. Peterson jumped away from Hicks so fast I was surprised she didn’t end up on her ass. Hicks swung his head in my direction, looking mortified and relieved at the same time. We hardly spoke, but as I got closer, he looked ready to go along with whatever I said. It certainly wasn’t the face of a guy enjoying himself.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” He opened his mouth, and I pointed my finger at him. “You left me in the library all alone. Are you standing me up for our tutoring session? You know you have to get your grades up.” I looked at Mrs. Peterson, acting as if I had just noticed her. “Oh, sorry, Mrs. Peterson, I didn’t mean to yell in the hallway.”

“Yes, you will want to keep your voice down. There are classes in session,” she said, and I almost bitch slapped her right there but smiled instead.

“Yes, of course. Did you need to speak to Hicks? I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?”

“We were actually talking about tutoring for Hicks,” she said, and if you didn’t know any better, she seemed invested in

his wellbeing.

“Oh, well then, I guess it’s a good thing I found you. Even Mrs. Peterson thinks you need the extra work.”

“It’s fine, Kallie. You don’t need to help. I appreciate it, but a teacher should handle his tutoring.”

“It’s all good, Mrs. Peterson. Mr. Hicks is paying me to help his son. I need the money and don’t want to disappoint his parents. I mean, what will I say that the teacher decided to help instead?” I smiled.

I could feel Hicks’s eyes going back and forth between us.

“Yeah, that’s what I was trying to say earlier. I already have help,” Hicks said.

“See,” I said, happy Hicks had caught up and didn’t blow this by saying something stupid. “Besides, do you think someone with perfect scores in all classes can’t handle tutoring a fellow student? I’ve cleared this with the principal, but we can talk to him if you want to voice your concerns,” I said, stepping away from the pair.

“No, that’s quite alright. My main concern is that Hicks gets the help he needs, and it looks like you have that covered,” Mrs. Peterson said, her voice dripping with anger as she glared daggers at me. Sorry Mrs. P, no Hicks’ D for you today.

“Great, that’s settled. Come on, Hicks.” He grabbed his tattered backpack off the floor. “I don’t want to have to hunt you down again. You need to take your classes seriously.” I berated him down the hall and around the corner and heard Mrs. Peterson’s heels clicking as she walked away.

Pushing open the door to the stairwell, we stepped inside, and I waited until the door closed before talking.

“You owe me one, and if I were you, I’d keep my distance. She has a type, and you’re definitely on the menu.”

“Yeah,” Hicks said and rubbed the back of his neck. “I gathered that last week when she asked me to stay after class

and sat on my desk with no underwear. If I told my girl, she would've lost her mind."

"I don't blame her. Look, I don't have great tutoring skills, but I do have perfect grades. If you need help, I'll take you on, but that will mean two favors."

"What kind of favors are we talking about?"

I looked him up and down, which was much harder than it seemed, without craning my neck.

"Does it matter at this point? You can tell the principal that Mrs. Peterson came on to you, but this is how that will go. You'll walk into his office and tell him the sob story about failing and possibly getting kicked off the basketball team. Then you'll say that Mrs. Peterson accosted you in the hallway and offered tutoring sessions, but you know she meant more than that. Then he'll ask you, 'Did she come out and say that?'" I did a perfect imitation of our principal. "And you'll say...."

Hicks sighed. "No."

"Then you're going to say, but she touched my cock." Hicks looked down, the embarrassment etched into his features. "He will obviously be concerned and do his due diligence and call Mrs. Peterson into the office, and what do you think she'll say?"

"She was just trying to help and doesn't know or understand what he's talking about. It will end up her word against mine and I'll look like the poor guy trying to get ahead by ruining a teacher's good name." Hicks rubbed his eyes. "So I can either agree to do two favors for you now, or I try to avoid her and get my grades up on my own?"

"Well, you could get someone else to help you, but either way, you still owe me a favor. She looked ready to drag your ass into the janitor's closet." I jogged down the stairs to the next landing and looked up at him while he stood there looking demoralized. "Look, I promise that whatever I ask you to do won't be sexual and I'm pretty confident you'll remain on the basketball team." I shrugged. "Your choice."

“Okay, fine. I’ll take the help.”

My lip curved up. “Then it’s a deal.”

Dad always said favors were your friend and that knowledge was power. In this instance, I had to agree with him. Now, to dig up more dirt on Mrs. Peterson. We were past due for a date.

Chapter Thirty-One

CARTER

THANKSGIVING

I pulled into the farm driveway, and my excitement hit all new heights. I loved everything about Thanksgiving: the food, watching the football games, and relaxing, but now I had another reason to be thankful. Dinner wasn't until tomorrow, and I knew Aspen would have us all over. She always made a great big dinner with more food than we could eat.

"Fuck, I think I'm going to be sick," I mumbled and grabbed my stomach. Being with Kallie was one thing. Being with Kallie and Cain around was another. He would know as soon as he saw us together. She swore she didn't say anything, but this was Cain. There was no keeping secrets from him. He had a superpower when it came to sniffing out bullshit.

As I parked, I looked up at the fully decorated house and knew Kallie was the mastermind. Flags blew in the wind while pumpkins and skulls sat on bales of straw. Little lights wrapped around the railing and pillars on the porch. Colorful leaves blanketed the ground, and it seemed so much homier than the man living inside.

I wiped my hands on my jeans, but you couldn't wipe the smile off my face as Kallie stepped outside onto the porch. Her face lit up, and the sun hitting her made her look ethereal. Fuck I was so in love with her.

She was already running down the stairs and jumped on me before I got my door closed.

"I've missed you so much."

Cain stepped outside, and it took every ounce of my self-control not to shove Kallie off me.

"Your dad is watching," I said under my breath but smiled and waved.

"You're such a worrier."

"It's not you, he'll kill."

“Fine.” She hopped down, and I stuffed my hands in my pockets so I didn’t do something stupid like hold her hand. Yes, at some point, I would have to face the music, whatever that happened to be, but I was putting that off until it was impossible to keep under wraps.

“Carter, you look healthy,” Cain said.

It seemed like an innocent comment, but now I wondered if I should check my food and drink for poison. The only thing that comforted me was that, unlike Kallie, who didn’t care, Cain only killed people he had strapped down on his table.

“Thanks, you as well.” I held out my hand, and it felt like the first time we met all over again.

He cocked a brow at me. “Just wondered if you had any residual effects from the flu you seem to keep getting.”

I had no idea what he was talking about and looked at Kallie.

“Dad, stop giving Carter the third degree. It’s not like he doesn’t live here,” Kallie said and opened the door. “Dinner is going to burn if you keep standing there.”

Cain glanced at me and then at Kallie. He didn’t say another word, and I knew. Cain knew that Kallie had been lying and wanted us to know he knew. Fuck.

“I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you that,” she whispered.

“Well, for the rest of the week, we’re going to pretend things are how they used to be. No holding hands, no kissing, no going out on dates, and definitely no sneaking into one another’s room.”

“Okay, if that’s how you want it, then that’s how we’ll play it,” she said and smiled.

Why was I suddenly more worried than before I said anything?

I sighed in relief when I saw the table set for eight. Everyone would be here, and it would keep the awkward tension to a minimum.

I sat in my old spot, and Kallie sat across from me just as the door opened. She was typing on her phone, and I expected mine to ding, but it didn't. The longer we sat there while she smiled at her phone, the more agitated I became.

"Hey man, how you been," Troy asked as he sat beside me.

Troy helped take my mind off what Kallie was up to as we ate and talked about school and the drafting process. Schools were already scouting him for football, and I wouldn't be surprised to see him on an NFL team one day. I also wouldn't put it past him to kill whoever stood in his way.

"Dad, after dinner, I'm going to the movies," Kallie said, and the fork with the freshly piled piece of blueberry pie froze on its way to my mouth.

"Oh, who are you going with," Talon asked.

"Hicks. He's nice, I've been tutoring him, and we've gotten quite close," she said, smiling.

Talon clapped her hands together and pulled Kallie into a hug. "Oh my god, he is so hot. He's definitely getting drafted. Have you noticed we have a really talented school? It makes you wonder who we'll see on TV one day."

"Huh, I would've sworn the two of you would be bumpin' uglies by now. I guess better luck next time," Bo whispered in my ear and smacked me on the shoulder.

I barely contained the rage burning in my stomach. My hand on the fork was so tight it was shaking. If some other guy touched one fucking hair on her head, it wouldn't be her killing someone. She was doing this to get under my skin after I mentioned acting like old times, and it was fucking working.

"What movie are you going to see," I asked, sitting the fork down before I stabbed the table with it.

"It's that new street racing movie, you know the one. We watched all the others."

Those are our movies. I planned on taking her while I was home for the break.

“That sounds fun. You don’t mind if Troy, Bo, and I come along, do you?”

“Oh...um...it’s kind of a date. Hicks is going to pick me up.”

It felt like everyone was watching a game of ping pong, the way their eyes moved back and forth between us.

I stood from the table and started gathering the dishes. Kallie followed suit until we were in a race to see who could collect the most, the plates clattering together as we went.

“No need for him to drive out here when we’ll all be going,” I said. Bo put his hand up, and I glared at him. “No, you have to go. It’ll be fun.” He slowly lowered his hand.

I’d never loaded a dishwasher so fast or noisily in my life, and no one said a word the entire time. I was losing my mind, and the anger wouldn’t let me think straight.

“I’ll go get changed,” I said.

“You really don’t need to go,” Kallie called after me as I stomped out of the kitchen.

“I really do. Troy, Bo, go get changed,” I yelled as I reached the top of the stairs. I slammed my door and took a couple of deep breaths to keep myself from tearing the room apart. I was the calm one. I shouldn’t be acting like a crazy jealous lover, yet the thought of this guy sharing a popcorn and their fingers brushing as they reached for some at the same time...I cracked my neck and my knuckles. Nope, it wasn’t fucking happening.

I tossed on a nicer hoodie, my good black jeans, and sneakers and purposely put on the cologne I knew Kallie liked. I rubbed at the spot over my heart where I had a permanent tattoo of her name.

The guys, Kallie and Talon, were waiting when I jogged down the stairs. Kallie had her arms crossed and was glaring at me. She could be mad all she wanted. There was no chance in hell I was letting her go on a date alone with some guy, even if it was to piss me off. Who knew what he would try? Then

again, she'd probably cut off his fingers, but that was beside the fucking point.

“Well, isn't this fun,” Talon said as we loaded into the vehicle. Both Kallie and I turned to look at her in the middle of the back seat. She was smiling away, oblivious to the tension that followed us.

I pulled out of the driveway and forced myself not to look over at her or say anything. Even when she put on music she knew I hated. I didn't say a word.

“He's over there,” Kallie said, a little too cheerily for my liking, pointing at a big red truck. I purposely parked as far away as possible, mostly so I didn't accidentally run him over.

We all got out and walked across the parking lot, but Kallie turned around and stared right at me. “You're not planning on hovering, are you?”

Hovering? She hadn't seen hovering yet. “No, of course not.”

I veered toward the front of the movie theater, my teeth grinding so hard I was sure everyone could hear.

“You know she's purposely trying to piss you off, right,” Troy asked.

I looked over my shoulder to see a guy, at least a head taller than me, walk around the front of the truck and smile at Kallie. “Well, it's working.”

“You two confuse me.” Troy shook his head. “Do you want popcorn?”

“Sure. I'll get the tickets.”

By the time we got to our seats, I'd moved from murderous to full-on burn the mother fucking building down furious. We ended up sitting two rows behind them. Thirty minutes into the movie, I couldn't recall anything that happened. If I heard Kallie giggle one more time, I was dragging her ass out of here. I'd toss her over my shoulder if I had to.

She whispered something to Hicks, then stood and slipped out of the seat to head down the stairs. Dropping my bag of popcorn on Troy's lap, I ignored his 'What the fuck?' and followed Kallie out.

Pushing open the door to the theater, I caught a glimpse of her just before she went into the women's bathroom. Any other time, I might have cared, but not tonight. Pulling out my phone, I pretended I was scrolling, and when the guy working the ticket area looked away, I darted into the women's bathroom.

I stomped down the row to the larger stalls, and there she was, smirking at me as she leaned against the wall, twirling her knife. Fuck I was hard instantly.

"I think you're in the wrong bathroom."

I stepped inside and locked the door. "No, I'm definitely in the right fucking bathroom."

She held the knife to my throat as I stepped up to her. "Do it if you want."

"You'd let me?"

"I'd let you do anything except be with another guy." She smirked. "Or girl," I added before she could ask. I stepped closer, forcing her to cut me or remove the blade. Lowering her arm, she slid it up her sleeve, and I spun her around and pushed her up against the wall.

"I'd almost think you're jealous," she purred like the fucking naughty devil she was.

"I don't share. You wanted me. You wanted all of me. Well, you've got it," I whispered against her neck, and she shivered.

Wrapping my hand around her throat, I squeezed just enough to where I knew she liked it, knowing it would make her wet. "Undo your jeans, Trouble."

"You going to punish me?" The question sounded hopeful.

"I'm definitely punishing you."

Kallie pushed her ass back into my cock, and while I was dying to be inside her, I had other ideas. She undid her zipper, wiggling her ass against me as she slid her jeans down below her ass. She was wearing a thong and I bit my lip to stop the groan as she pressed harder into me. If she wanted to play? I was going to play.

Slipping my hand into her underwear, she moaned and trembled with the first touch.

“Whose pussy is this,” I asked, running my tongue up her neck. When she didn’t answer fast enough, I stopped rubbing her clit.

“Yours,” she whimpered and tried to wiggle against my fingers.

“You sure about that? You seem uncertain. Maybe, you want Hicks to stick his long fingers in your pussy instead.” Freaking basketball players and their freakishly long fingers, it wasn’t fair.

“No. I only want you.”

My cock throbbed in time to my fingers and Kallie’s quick breaths. Moving my hand up, I covered her mouth and pinched her nose as I slipped two fingers inside her.

“No one else touches this pussy, do you understand?” She nodded just as someone else came into the bathroom. “Hold your breath while they’re in here,” I breathed in her ear and then pumped my fingers in and out of her hard. She was quaking in my hold, her nails clawing at the dark red tile on the wall.

The sound of a flush was followed by a sink and dryer before the footsteps disappeared. I moved my hand so she could gulp air before I covered her mouth again. Curling my finger, I pressed on her G spot, and she would’ve yelled if I hadn’t held her mouth closed.

“Are you my bad girl?”

I pressed harder into her hot pussy until I couldn’t go any further.

“Mmmhmm,” she mumbled.

“You gonna come for me?”

She moaned and nodded furiously, and I could feel her pussy walls gripping my fingers as she teetered on the edge. I looked down at her face and released her mouth and nose completely. She gasped in a deep breath as I pulled my hand from her jeans and stepped back.

“What...what are you doing?” Kallie panted out.

“You wanted us to belong to each other. You have it, but if that guy out there so much as breathes on your hair one more time, I’ll cut his fucking hand off. Let’s see how well he can play basketball like that.”

“But...what about me?” She pointed to her pussy and the underwear with a visible wet spot.

I wanted to pound into her hard, but this was a far better punishment. “Oh no, I’m done for tonight.”

“But...”

“No buts. If you want to fuck with me, then I’ll fuck with you.” Kallie narrowed her eyes at me, and it was almost as if I knew what she was thinking. “If you rub the rest of the orgasm out right now, the next punishment will be worse.” I had no idea what I would do, but she must have believed me because she pulled up her jeans instead.

“Don’t try to make me jealous again. It scares me how much I want to kill that guy out there. I mean it. He doesn’t touch you.”

“What happened to my sweet and easygoing boyfriend?”

“He’s still here.” Reaching out, I snatched her chin and kissed her hard and fast, my tongue invading her mouth and stealing all her air. “But you make me crazy. Don’t make me hurt that guy to prove a point. Because I will.”

Opening the door, I stared at her as I licked the fingers that were inside her. She glared at me, but it only got me hotter. Later, I would give her what she wanted, what we both wanted, but this was a lesson. I wandered casually to the sink

and washed my hands. Kallie followed me, swearing under her breath as she did the same.

I glanced at her in the massive mirror. It was nice to see her thrown off her game for once. Kallie was mine, crazy, murderous tendencies and all, but I wouldn't stand for her playing me for a fool. There had to be some lines that weren't crossed and Kallie would dance over them all unless I made my point clear.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I hated mornings when Carter wasn't here. The handful of days he was around, even if he was a pill about my dad, were amazing. I didn't realize how quiet and empty the house felt without him.

Getting dressed on autopilot, I ran a brush through my hair and grabbed my bag. All I really wanted was to crawl back underneath the covers and sulk. It would pass. I was always like this when Carter went back to school.

The house was extra quiet this morning. There was coffee, but no sign of my dad. I could never figure out when he got up to make coffee. We didn't have one with a timer, but like magic, there was always a fresh pot day or night. Made me wonder if he ever slept.

I poured a cup for myself and one for Dad, then went hunting.

Nothing had been redecorated or changed in the house since Mom died. The stairs didn't squeak and were in good shape, and there was nothing wrong with the basement, but the colors on the walls were faded, and the television was ancient and hardly worked. The carpet was so threadbare in the living room that it was missing color in places, and every picture on the wall or knickknack that belonged to Mom was still in the same spot. It was as if Dad had frozen time, hanging on to my mom's memory by not touching anything in the house. I hadn't pressed to change it either. It did feel like she was still around and I didn't want to lose that.

Unlocking the heavy security door, I heard a muffled scream. When did he go and get someone? There wasn't anyone as cunning, methodical or skilled as my father. I so wanted to be like him. He could've brought someone home to kill in the middle of the day and no one would see it happen. It was as if he was a ghost.

Stepping inside, I closed the door again and stared at my dad's emotionless expression as he cut a shallow line on the woman's face.

"Yes, Kallie," he said, never lifting his head from his work.

"Who's this?"

I walked closer to the table, and the woman's terrified eyes found mine as she silently begged for help. That wasn't going to happen. Not because I couldn't but because I didn't want to. There was a reason she was on my dad's table. There was always a reason.

I didn't recognize her from any of the photos on the wall. Then again, that list had gotten small. There were only a handful of pictures left.

"This is Sara-Lee," Dad said.

"Like the cake?"

His hand paused as he looked up at me. "Huh, I guess so."

"I brought you a coffee," I said, holding it out to him.

"Thank you, Angel." He didn't call me that much anymore, but hearing it made me feel good.

"So what did Sara-Lee do to end up on your table," I asked, ignoring the muffled begging through a red ball gag.

My dad sipped his coffee and stared at me. He didn't move for so long that I finally looked over my shoulder to see if someone was behind me.

"I'm not sure I should tell you," he said.

I stared at the woman's face and ran through all my memories, but she didn't seem familiar.

“Did she do something to Carter,” I asked. My anger flashed instantly at the thought.

“In essence, she did something to all of us.”

I hated my dad’s riddles. They always sent my brain on a rollercoaster ride with many loops and twists meant to keep you guessing but no end. I shook my head and gulped down another mouthful of coffee. I needed more than one to deal with my dad this morning.

I changed tactics, “Why are you unsure you want to tell me?”

“Because you still have a volatile temper. You killed three people at a party, then another in a men’s shower.”

I swallowed hard. “How do you know that was me?” One eyebrow cocked in a look I knew all too well. “Okay, it was me,” I conceded. “But, they deserved it. That girl at the party roofied Carter and was going to take advantage of him. I needed to get him out of there, and the other girl threatened to go to the Dean and tell a bunch of lies if he didn’t fuck her.”

“The why does not matter. The how does. You’re still careless about where you leave the bodies. I don’t need you tearing off and doing something that I need to clean up after.”

My mouth fell open. “Have you been following me this entire time?”

“No, just enough to ensure you don’t get caught.”

“What does that mean?”

He waved his hand, dismissing the question, which worried me more. “The point is Sara-Lee here will anger you, and you’ve proven unpredictable when you’re—”

I held up my finger. “Don’t you dare say emotional.”

Sara-Lee started mumbling, and we both looked down at her. My dad sighed like he was annoyed with the woman. I thought he might lose his composure and stab her with his scalpel, but he undid the side of the gag and lifted it from her mouth.

“I promise I won’t make you angry. I don’t know why he wants me.”

My dad snatched her chin, and she whimpered as he squeezed hard. “Do not lie to my daughter, or I will call my brother over, and trust me, you do not want his brand of punishment.” He placed the scalpel on her quivering upper lip. “Maybe I should start by cutting off your pretty lips. You can live without those.”

“Dad, what did she do? I don’t care if you kill her, but there is obviously something I need to know.”

He rolled out his shoulders and released Sara-Lee’s head. “Fine, but if you go off...”

“I won’t, I promise.” I held up my hand as he opened his mouth. “Yes, I know. Don’t promise things you cannot guarantee. Fine, I will do my very best not to have a full meltdown. Happy?”

“Not overly comforted, but it will do.”

He wiped his tool off and placed it on his tray of toys, then leaned back on the counter. I wanted to scream as he picked up his coffee and sipped.

“Sara-Lee works for the FBI. More specifically, she was your mother’s assistant.”

I glanced at the table, my heart beating a little faster. Her hazel eyes stared back, filled with tears, but under that was terror and regret. I could see it as easily as a drug dog could sniff out product in a million crates.

“Okay.”

“Do you remember your mother’s death?”

I swallowed. “Not well, but I know she died in the line of duty.”

“Correct. She was chasing down a man like these other men on my board. Serial killers, rapists, pedophiles, you name it. Your mother would bring me the case files that ran cold on leads.” He held his hand out to the board. “She felt my skills were best suited for... bigger and more imposing prey.”

“You told us about the files. I don’t understand what this has to do with her.” I nodded toward the metal slab.

“I’m getting to that. Your mother was after a fugitive, a serial rapist of minors who had served six years of a twenty-five-year sentence. Additional charges and victims were found, and his prison time would be extended, but then he escaped and killed three guards.”

My dad looked down at Sara-Lee, “How am I doing so far?”

The head strap kept her from nodding, but she licked her lips and tried anyway. I’d learned many things about my dad over the years, and one thing was always the same. He was disciplined, and other than creating different images, he kept his killing to the same pattern and tools. As he bent over to look closer at Sara-Lee, I realized he had tools out that I’d never seen him use. There was a shiny hand saw glinting in the lights. Cutters that looked custom-made and could easily take off fingers or toes, even a nose or ear. Not to mention the sharp metal spike that was easily three feet long and shaped like a javelin. It was Uncle Abel who used whatever tool he could find. I’d seen him shove a broken piece of barn board up someone’s ass and then sledgehammered it into place. He once used an ice cream scoop and pliers to cut off a guy’s ball sac and pretended to eat it with chocolate sauce. My uncle was off the wall, but not my dad. What the hell had this woman done to push him so far as to break out Abel-esque tools?

“Good, I’m glad we agree, Sara-Lee,” he said, using the back of his hand to pet her cheek and wipe away the tears. “I wouldn’t want to misrepresent what happened.”

“Dad, what’s going on,” I asked, my anxiety swirling higher with each passing second.

“Darryl Burton is the man that killed your mother,” he said, and hearing that name out loud felt like a punch in the stomach. “Unbeknownst to your mother, Sara-Lee had a fake online profile and corresponded with Burton when he was behind bars. She fancied herself in love with him and him with her.” My heart pounded harder. “So naturally, she helped him

escape and then helped him stay one step ahead of the FBI to avoid capture.”

Dad wandered to the corner and pulled out what looked like black wire. He plugged one end into the wall and fastened it to a loop he had in the ceiling. Pinching open two tiny clamps no bigger than my thumb, he attached each one to Sara-Lee’s nipples, and she screamed as he let go.

“Sara-Lee had been off sick for a few days, and by sick, I mean she left to meet up with Burton and have sex, so she wasn’t in the office when the warrant for his newest hiding spot came through. Of course, she arrived back to work, I’m sure all a glow from her days of getting it on with a child rapist and realized that the FBI was moving in on her lover.”

“Please, stop,” Sara-Lee cried. Her eyes turned in my direction again. “I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt. I swear to you, I didn’t.”

“But someone did, didn’t they?” My dad said as he walked over to the wall again and flicked the switch. Her scream was so loud it flowed over my body like a breeze. More agonizing screams came as she flexed against the tight straps holding her in place. Dad turned the switch off, and drool dripped from her mouth as she whimpered like an animal.

I was pretty sure I knew where this story was going, but I couldn’t stop listening.

“Sara-Lee called her lover and warned him that the FBI was coming. He didn’t have time to run like he had all the other times, but he did set a few traps. The basement had hidden doors and passageways which led like a rat’s maze away from the house.” Dad picked up the cutters, and Sara-Lee screamed louder as he wandered toward her toes. I was impressed that my dad stayed so composed with every action.

“Your mother arrived with the rest of the agents and scoured the house, but Burton had scampered down one of his tunnels just as they broke through the door. Your mother found the tunnel. She radioed for backup and took off after Burton. The tunnel was long and opened into an old barn on the property. Your mother was a fast runner and Burton heard her

coming and decided to wait rather than get in his truck and make a run for it.”

I held up my hand. “Stop. Just stop.” Tears welled in my eyes. It had been so long since I sat down and thought about my mom or what she went through. It wasn’t that I wanted to forget her because I didn’t, but my pain had numbed over time. I was a child when she died, and I faced everything she missed without her. My dad spent the last twelve years alone because of that man.

Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, making cookies together, or picking me up when I fell. She never saw the love Carter and I shared. She wouldn’t see my wedding day or her grandchildren. All of that was ripped away from us. My mom died in a barn, bleeding out alone because of the actions of one man and this woman.

My dad wrapped me in a hug, and I bawled as I held him tight.

“Shh, Angel. I promise they’ll pay.”

The words took a moment to register, and I stepped back, wiping off my face.

“You mean he’s still out there?”

“Yes.”

“You never caught him?”

My dad’s jaw muscle twitched, but he stared at me. “No, I didn’t.”

“But...how? Why? How could you not focus on him instead of all those people?”

I was angry and wanted to lash out.

“Because I had other priorities, and it wasn’t a file your mother ever brought home to me. It took time to gather all the pieces, but I still didn’t know how Burton knew they were coming.”

I stormed away from my dad and stared down at Sara-Lee. “Was my mom ever mean to you?”

“No, she was so nice all the time. I swear I never wanted Kirby to get hurt.”

There was no thought, just a reaction as my fist with the coffee mug slammed across her face. My knuckles cracked painfully, and the cup flew out of my hand, crashing to the floor. It shattered like my heart.

“She wasn’t hurt. He killed her, and you helped him. I hate you.” I raised my arm to hit her again but was picked up from behind and pulled away from Sara-Lee. “Put me down!” I roared. “Put me down.” I was blinded by a rage that consumed every fiber of my being.

My dad put me on my feet, and I screamed, trying to maneuver around him, but he was just as fit, fast, and strong as ever. Grabbing me, he pushed me against the wall and pinned me like a bug on my old board.

“Let me go. I’m going to kill her.”

“Enough, Angel.” His hands tightened on my arms, and unless I wanted to hurt my dad to get free, I needed to calm my ass down. I took a shaky breath in and out, following my dad’s lead as he mimicked my breathing techniques. “I understand your anger, I feel your anger, but I need answers from her before she dies. Burton went underground years ago, and I’ve been trying to get a solid lead on him ever since. We need her to stay alive long enough to help us find him.” He gave me a little shake until I focused on him. “Say you understand?”

My lower lip trembled, and my arms shook from squeezing my fists so tightly, but I nodded.

“She doesn’t get to live. She dies painfully, and I don’t care if she meant to get Mom killed or not. She stole my mom from me. She stole her from you.” Tears streamed down my face.

“Her death will be agonizing when the time comes.”

He let my arms go, and I looked away.

“Were you going to tell me any of this?”

“Of course, when I had more information.”

“You mean when I couldn’t screw something up. Right, Dad?” I asked.

“You do have a habit of jumping before thinking. That is not something I’ve made up.”

I walked to the bottom of the stairs and couldn’t figure out how I felt. Stopping, I couldn’t look at my Dad right now. I was too angry.

“I just wish you had the same faith in me that you do, Troy. Sorry about making another mess for you to clean up.”

Running up the stairs, I slammed the door closed and grabbed my shit to go to school. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but maybe someone like Mrs. Peterson would say something to get themselves killed. That would make today a little more bearable.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Rule number two: *Never make a decision when you're angry.*

My dad made these rules and told us to follow them, and I memorized them like a good student, but I never fully understood the why until today.

I kept my shit together through first and second periods. Then, made it through lunch like the good fucking girl I am. I was impressed with myself for controlling the seething anger...until last period.

Grabbing my backpack, all I wanted to do was get out of here, go home, and see if Dad had gotten Sara-Lee to talk. Darryl Burton needed one of Uncle Abel's spikes shoved up his ass. Then he could be put in with the pigs hung just low enough that they could start by eating off his toes. I wanted to hear him scream and beg for his pathetic life as they slowly ate him alive one mouthful at a time.

So, why the universe chose that moment to test me was beyond my understanding.

"Leave me alone, Lisa," I heard Talon say.

"If you think you're taking my position, think again." Lisa didn't raise her voice, but she sounded pissed. I poked my head around the corner, and she had Talon backed up against the lockers.

My cousin was an oblivious piece of air fluff, but she meant well and never mistreated anyone.

“No that’s not it, I just wanted to practice really hard and had some ideas for the choreography. I didn’t know you designed the routine.”

“Are you saying that my routine is crap? So you go behind my back, show everyone this new routine, get them all excited, and slowly push me out?”

“No, I swear.”

Lisa hit Talon across the face, and the wonderful composure I’d reined in all day broke free of its cage.

“Please, let go of me,” Talon begged as Lisa grabbed her arm and dragged her into the women’s bathroom. “I swear I don’t want to be captain.” I heard Talon say before the door closed.

For whatever reason, I hummed *The Gambler* as I marched for the door. Pushing it open, I watched Lisa hit Talon again as she tried to cover her head. Talon really could’ve used my dad’s self-defense training class.

Lisa was so focused on Talon and her whimpering that she never heard the door close or the lock click shut.

“Psst,” I said as Talon cried out from another slap.

I loved the startled look on Lisa’s face when she looked over her shoulder and saw me standing by the door. My lips curled up in a smile as I slipped my backpack to the floor.

“Can’t you see I’m busy?” Lisa scoffed.

“Thank you, Lisa,” I said, stepping further into the bathroom.

“For what?”

“For being an insufferable person that treats others like crap, and today you chose my cousin. Not a smart idea.” I didn’t have problems with people in school, but that was because I kept my head down, had top grades, and gave off a ‘Don’t fuck with me’ aura. It helped that Carter was still a local celebrity, and everyone remembered him beating Taylor and then his sudden disappearance.

Not that anyone accused Carter, but everyone remembered the fight.

“Your cousin....”

“Did nothing wrong other than make you look like an idiot for not being as good as she is and coming up with what I’m sure is a kickass routine. If you weren’t a jealous cunt, you could’ve praised her and made her a co-captain. Knowing Talon, she would’ve given you all her ideas because she...” I held up my finger. “Is a people pleaser. She just can’t help herself.” Lisa looked at Talon and then at me. “Instead, you attacked her verbally and physically as you tried to intimidate her into dropping out of cheerleading and maybe even the school altogether because your ego just can’t handle a bit of competition.”

I stopped when I was within lunging distance and put my hands on my hips. “The issue is that I saw you, and you really couldn’t have picked a worse day to piss me off.”

She turned to face me, crossing her arms over her chest as she gave me her best intimidating stare. “What are you going to do now that you don’t have your big brother here to save you?”

“Carter is not my brother, which is good since I’m fucking him.” Lisa’s and Talon’s mouths dropped open at the same time. “Secondly, I don’t need his help.”

“Spare me.” Lisa rolled her eyes and made the grave error of trying to push me out of the way to walk past.

Grabbing her wrist, I twisted it around, and she screamed as the delicate joints popped out of place.

“Ah! My wrist,” she cried out, her knees buckling as I held her at the odd position with little effort. Some days I really loved my dad, other days not so much. Today was a conflicting day all around.

“Kallie, you really don’t have to do this,” Talon tried to reason with me, but I turned my glare on her.

“Don’t even start. You’re so fucking oblivious I’m not even sure how you manage to make it through a day without

being hit by a bus.”

“But...”

I ignored the rest of what she said and let the fury that had been poking at me all day loose on Lisa. Grabbing her long ponytail with my other hand, I rammed her face into the white sink.

“Oh my god,” Talon said, her hands covering her mouth as blood splattered the white porcelain.

Lisa shrieked and started to cry as more blood dripped onto the floor from her nose. Not wasting a second, I hauled her ass into one of the stalls and shoved her face into the toilet water.

“Kallie, let her go. You’re going to kill her.”

“That’s kind of the point, cuz. Welcome to the reality of our family. If you got your nose out of your books and projects, you might notice what’s really going on around you.”

Lisa’s gargled screams were more frantic as she tried to push herself away from the toilet. Lifting my boot, I hit the flush, and the water swirled around her head.

“Kallie, seriously, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’ll kill her. Let her go.”

“She was bullying you, Talon. She was smacking you around, and she had no right to touch you.” I snarled, still not loosening my hold. I flushed the toilet again, and Lisa’s struggles lessened.

“I know, but killing her is not the answer. Oh my god, we’ll go to prison.”

“No, we won’t,” I said flatly and stared at my cousin’s horrified face as she stared at Lisa. She didn’t seem as terrified of the situation as I figured she would be, giving me a glimmer of hope for her.

When Lisa finally fell still, I kept her head in the toilet and let my heart rate settle from the thrill of the kill. Fuck that felt good. I really needed that today.

Using my toe, I lifted the seat and positioned Lisa so she was over the bowl like she'd been puking, and put her other arm so it rested on the handle.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god. Is she dead?”

“No, she just decided to hang out with her face in the toilet for a good time.”

I really shouldn't be a sarcastic jerk to Talon. It wasn't her fault her parents elected to keep her in the dark. “Actually, she's not dead...yet, but she is close to death.” There was a distinction, and I needed her heart beating.

Walking over to my backpack, I pulled out my black gloves, a pen, and a piece of paper. I quickly wrote, ‘I'm sorry,’ before pulling out a black case that looked like it would hold pens. Talon was just standing there, seemingly in shock.

“I can't believe you did this.”

“Would it shock you more or less to find out that not only is she, not my first kill, but your father is a serial killer?”

Her face blanched, and I thought for sure she would pass out as her eyes lifted to mine.

“You're lying.”

“Am I? So is your brother and Bo and my dad. You fucking live with multiple serial killers and never had a clue. Where do you think Troy and Bo go with your dad every weekend? I hope you don't think they were playing *Brokeback Mountain*.”

“No, I don't believe you.”

“You don't have to believe me. Go home and ask for yourself. It's time you knew the truth of who you are.” Unzipping the pouch, I pulled out a loaded syringe of heroin. It was a lethal dose I kept on hand for emergencies.

“What is that?”

“Heroin.”

“You carry heroin around with you at school?”

“Why not? It would be a pain in the ass to need it and not have it on me.” Squatting down, used her hand to put finger prints on the needle, I tied off her arm, inserted the needle, and pushed the plunger. I left her just like that and put the case away before grabbing my cleaning supplies.

Talon watched me as I cleaned every surface that either she or I touched.

“Okay, done. You ready to go?”

She pointed to Lisa. “You’re just going to leave her like that?”

“I was planning on taking her out for a burger and fries, but the bitch is rude and won’t answer me.” Talon crossed her arms. “Of course, I’m leaving her like that. It’s called staging. By the time someone finds her, her hair will be dry, and they will think she overdosed.”

I tossed everything into my backpack and pulled out an ‘Out of order’ sign before zipping it up. Then, I slipped the chain with the school’s master key over my head. I always wore it, just in case.

“We need to go. You can talk to your parents when you get home and struggle with your morals later.”

She closed her eyes and covered her mouth. I wasn’t sure if she was going to cry or puke.

“Don’t you dare. You can breakdown later, but right now, you’re going to put a fucking smile on your face and walk out of this school with me like it is any other day. Do you understand?”

She nodded and wiped her eyes with her sweater. “Good.”

Unlocking the door, I peeked into the hallway, and all was clear. We stepped out, and I used the key to lock the bathroom door.

“You have a key to the bathroom,” Talon asked.

“I have a key to every room. *Rule number three: Always be prepared for the anything.*”

I was starting to wonder why that rule wasn't number one. Before walking away, I slapped the sign on the door, peeled off my gloves, and tucked them in the bag. With my pack on my shoulder, I grabbed Talon's hand and walked for the exit.

She was definitely in shock. Maybe this wasn't the best way to tell her, but oh well. What was done was done.

"My life is a lie...all this time, they lied to me," she said as we stepped outside into the cold air.

"Yup."

"Why?"

"That is a question for your parents."

"I don't know if I can walk into the school again," she said as we got into my car.

I looked over at her and felt a little bit sorry for her. I would hate to learn that I have been lied to my whole life. My dad didn't lie to me, but he held back information, which hurt. What would it be like to find out that everything you thought you knew was a lie?

"I'm sorry you found out that way." I placed my hand on her shoulder and was surprised she didn't jump away. She looked at me, her eyes filled with tears. "But you should know we have a family motto, 'No one hurts our family, no one.' Lisa brought this on herself. We may not be close, but you're my family."

I squeezed her shoulder and started the car.

"Kallie, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Are you really sleeping with Carter, and what's it like?" Her face was red, and her voice soft.

"Out of everything that just happened, that's what you want to know?" She lifted a shoulder and let it drop. I smiled. "You know, cuz, maybe we can find something in common after all."

Chapter Thirty-Four

CARTER

DECEMBER

I was one of those lucky people who had all my exams in two days, and I decided to come home for the semester break. They'd canceled camp because the indoor facility was triple booked and last added, first kicked out.

To be honest, I was happy. I hadn't seen Kallie since Thanksgiving, and she'd been quiet on the phone whenever we talked. There was a burning in my gut that told me something was wrong, and she didn't want to say anything. My overactive worrying skills kicked in, and all I could think was that she wanted to end things.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel as my heart beat out of control. For so long, I held back how I truly felt, and now that it was out of the box, I couldn't put it back. I wouldn't put it back.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled into the driveway and parked the car. If she wanted to end things, I would find a way to make her see we were meant to be together. Pushing open the door, I heard the shouting right away.

"What the fuck?" Cain rarely yelled. It was probably rarer than a blue moon.

I only reached the bottom step when the front door flew open with a bang, and Kallie stormed out.

"This is not fair," she yelled.

"Life isn't fair," Cain yelled from inside.

Kallie glanced at me as she stomped away, and I followed, doing a one-eighty, catching up in a few strides. She was practically growling under her breath, her hands balled at her sides and her eyes wild. It was probably stupid to follow her when she was this enraged, but I trusted that she wouldn't hurt me.

Not even the large barn door was safe as she shoved it open, and the metal banged and echoed. Closing the door, I

followed her to a stack of hay, where I sat on a bale and let her pace and fume.

Like a deadly magic trick, she pulled a knife out of her sleeve and, with a roar, threw it at one of the wooden posts. It stuck perfectly into the wood.

“Remind me not to challenge you to axe throwing,” I said, and she finally turned and looked at me.

“Not funny.”

“It kinda is.”

I walked over and wrapped her up in my arms. Burying my nose in her hair, I breathed in the cinnamon scent I loved so much. She was a walking ball of chaos, but she was my serenity in the world. I’d lost my parents and then Kirby, but she was why I never gave up on life or my dreams. No matter what, my heart was forever tethered to her.

“I’m happy you’re here. I’ve missed you,” Kallie mumbled into my chest, and the vice of worry wrapped around my heart eased.

“Then what’s going on?”

Sighing, she stepped back and rubbed at her face. “Did you know that my dad never killed the man that murdered my mother?”

I shoved my hands in my pockets and thought before shaking my head. “No, I don’t think it ever came up. I don’t even remember overhearing your dad and Abel talking about it.”

Nodding, she continued, “Apparently, he’s been hunting him and found the woman who was his girlfriend then. She worked as my mom’s assistant, and she warned him.”

“Oh shit.”

“He never told me any of this. Worse than that, he says he had other priorities, and that’s why he didn’t find and kill this guy years ago. Nothing could be as important as that. Anyway, I got pissed and wanted to kill her and may have blown up. I

killed the head cheerleader at school, but in all fairness, she was bullying Talon and had it coming.”

“This is a lot.”

“Right. So now the school is closed for three weeks so the detectives can search and collect evidence, and my dad is trying to ground me like I’m some child all because I want to help hunt this man down. He needs to die.” Her face darkened, and her eyes were fierce.

“So, can I speak freely?”

She walked away and pulled her knife from the wood. “Ugh, does that mean you’re going to try and talk some logic into me?”

“Maybe.”

Kallie leaned against the post and could’ve posed for any cowgirl photoshoot. She looked so sexy with the hay backdrop.

“Fine, I guess.”

“I get why your dad didn’t chase this guy down, and before you throw your knife at me, let me explain. You were six, and I was nine. If something happened to him, we would’ve been without both of them. Kallie, I’d already lost my parents in a car crash. I barely remember them, but I remember the pain of that loss. I remember my mom’s perfume and my dad’s laugh. They are wisps in the wind now, but I still miss them every time I think about them, as I know you do when you think about your mom.”

It was so rare that I thought about the life I may have had if they lived, and I always felt guilty when I thought about how I would never take back meeting Kallie. I never wanted them to die, but if they hadn’t...it left my gut twisted in knots.

“I know you think your dad is Superman, and in many ways, he is, but the reality is that he’s a man. Just like everyone else, he can bleed, and he can die. He might have found and killed this guy with no problem, but what if he didn’t? What if something happened? What if he was too emotional to handle it then? He may not feel like we do, but he

feels rage and loss, and he loved your mom. You have to see that to this day.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“If I lost you...I would be a basket case. I wouldn't be able to think straight. You being an adult is why I think he's hunting him now. He knows you'll be okay if something happens to him.”

“So, you're saying instead of not trusting me, it's cause he does trust me that he's now hunting him?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn't pretend to know the inner workings of your dad's mind, but it would be my theory. Living with him for so many years, your dad shows distinct patterns in behavior and what drives him. I also understand why he doesn't want you to help track the man down. I mean, for all his inability to love speeches, you are the most important thing in his life. If something happened to you, I'm not sure he'd survive.”

“Why do you always have to be logical?”

“It's what I do best.” I smiled as she stepped into me and hugged me.

“There's something else you do extremely well.” Her voice switched to devious as she rubbed herself against my body. It amazed me how she could seamlessly switch from one emotion to another.

“We better not. What if your dad comes looking for us?”

“Fine, but I need your help with something.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me.” She walked over to the far end of the barn and a long line of rope lying on the ground. “Dad says I need to work on three knots because I'm not doing them right. If I could figure them out, I would feel like I've accomplished something.”

Of all the things I thought she would ask, this was not it, but it was also something I was very good at and happy to

help. I would do anything to keep that beautiful smile on her face.

“You’ve got it.”

She pulled over a couple of old crates and flipped them over for us to sit on. We were at it for about twenty minutes. Kallie was still having issues with one of the knots, and I could tell she was getting frustrated.

“I give up,” she growled, and I grabbed her hand.

“Here, try tying it on me instead. It’s so much easier than not wrapping the rope around anything.”

“This is stupid. It won’t help,” she said and crossed her arms.

“Just try it. Besides, you always say how much fun it would be to tie me up.” She smirked at that.

“Okay, I’ll try.”

Holding out my wrist, she wrapped the ends around. I corrected the direction to put the loop through, but a few minutes later, she had it and clapped her hands.

“Okay, the other one before I forget how I did it.” She grabbed a second rope lying on the ground, and this time, she was quicker. Jumping up with a cheer, she kissed me hard, and I groaned as I finally got to taste her again after what felt like forever.

“Wait right there,” she said and nibbled my bottom lip.

Maybe if I hadn’t been so keen to make her happy and forget about the argument between her and her dad, I would’ve seen this for what it was. I might have noticed she was playing me like a damn fiddle, and I let her.

I looked over my shoulder at the sound of a click and then looked up as the pullies above my head activated.

“Oh shit.” Within seconds, the slack on the rope pulled tight and yanked me to my feet, with just my toes touching the floor and my arms above my head. I looked like a pig hung up after slaughter.

“Trouble, what the hell are you doing?”

“Are you in pain?”

What kind of question was that? “Well, no, but that’s beside the point.”

“No, it really isn’t.” She walked around me, and her smile was devious. Lips curled up in a grin she used whenever she was doing something naughty, and her eyes glittered in the poor lighting of the barn. This was not good.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I really should've seen this coming. Kallie was freaking trouble.

"Let me down, Trouble," I said, turning a little to try and keep my eye on her as she walked around me.

"Or what? Are you going to spank me? Teach the bad girl a lesson?" She pouted. "You know, like how you taught me a lesson at the movie theater?"

"Is that what this is about?" Her nails ran across my stomach, just under my jacket, and I shivered.

"A little, but mostly, I knew you'd try to go the entire time you're home and not touch me, and I'm just not putting up with that this time. We're adults, and we can do what we want when we want." I gave up trying to turn with her. "You're wearing too many clothes. We need to rectify that."

"Trouble, stop, I mean it."

"No, I don't think I will." I glanced toward the door as she put the knife between her teeth which was fucking sexy. She kept her eyes on mine as she slowly pulled down the zipper on my jacket, then my hoodie, and cut through my t-shirt. I shivered as the cold air hit my skin. She ran her fingers over her name on my chest and smiled.

"I fucking love that you put my real name over your heart," she said as she traced the lines.

"You have always been my heart, it's where it belonged."

The blush on her cheeks and shy smile was stunning. It was rare to get that look, and I fucking loved it.

“Look at these nipples. Are they cold?” She pinched my nipple, and I bit my cheek to keep from groaning. “I know how to warm them up.” I lost the battle as she sucked my other nipple into her hot mouth. Fuck.

“You really need to stop.”

She shook her head, no, and her tongue flicked over the sensitive skin. I was already so fucking hard. My cock was a traitor, and that was all there was to it. Kallie drew a wet line down my abs, nipping at the muscles and making me squirm like a worm on her hook.

“Stop worrying so much,” she said, her hands working fast to undo my belt and zipper on my jeans. “You’re the one that’s supposed to be relaxed and calm.”

“I can’t be relaxed and calm when your dad, Abel, or anyone else could come walking in at any minute...Oh fuck,” I shuddered as she pulled my jeans and boxers down below my cock, and the cold air that should’ve made it shrivel up and disappear only made it throb harder.

“At least part of you is game,” Kallie whispered as her hand stroked my shaft.

“Trust me, he’s always game, but we shouldn’t.”

“I know. Isn’t it fun?”

“No, no, not fun,” I argued, groaning like an animal as she bent over and slipped me into her mouth. “Oh, fuck me.”

“Tell me I’m your little slut. Tell me you want me to suck your hard cock.” I ground my teeth, trying to keep my restraint but losing the battle. “Tell me to get down on my knees and finger my pussy as you come down my throat.”

“Geez us fuck, Trouble. Stop.” My cock had a fucking mind of its own and kicked in her hand, begging for more even as my mind knew this was a terrible idea.

“Still not having fun?” Her tongue swirled around the tip. “Because you taste like you are.” My mind was fuzzy with the building desire taking over all the logical parts of my brain. Picking up the pace, she sucked hard and took as much of me

as she could into her mouth and throat, making my head fall back in ecstasy.

One of Abel's dogs barked outside, and fear trickled down my spine. "Stop it, Trouble. Seriously, someone could walk in any second."

"Let them. You're mine and it's time everyone knew."

"I don't feel like being skinned alive today," I argued, but she wasn't listening to reason. It was like the talk earlier had used up all her quota for the day. A harsh breeze blew through the creaky boards of the old barn, and I shivered but loved it hitting my heated skin at the same time.

Her hand slipped into my jeans and cupped my balls, rolling them in her hand and driving me wild. My ass began flexing, and I rocked my hips harder toward her mouth.

"You seem to be enjoying it now," she said, then sucked me into her mouth again. How could I not love it?

The barn creaked as the wind blew harder, and I could picture the door opening and someone walking in and seeing this, but the sounds didn't bother Kallie.

"Jesus, fuck. Trouble, please stop. We'll find a way to be together while I'm home, but we can't do this." I licked my lips. "I could take you for a drive in the truck and find a place to park, we've never done that."

"I do love that idea." For a brief moment, I thought I'd gotten through to her as she let me go and walked away. Instead, she grabbed a few square bales of straw, sat them down across from me, and began to strip.

I looked at the door. "No, Trouble, no. Stop. It's bad enough my dick is hanging out, but you naked?"

Kallie smiled and pulled her sweatshirt off over her head. "What? I'm hot."

She sure the fuck was. I could come just from watching her. My mouth fell open as the sweatshirt dropped to the straw bales, and she turned to face me, showing off the tattoos across

her chest and shoulders. They looked badass and sexy as hell, not that she needed any help in that department.

“You like?”

“I fucking love them.” They were new and this was the first time I’d seen them in person. My eyes traced the intricate designs but didn’t see my name, and even though it was stupid, my heart sank a little.

“I have one more,” she said, kicking off her sneakers and pushing down her jeans. My mouth was watering, and the fear of being caught moved further from my mind.

“Oh yeah?”

Kallie hopped up on the straw. I growled at her and tried pulling on the rope as she drew her knees up and spread them wide so I was staring at her pussy. Using my hand while I stared at her picture was nowhere near the real thing.

“Do you see it?”

“Hmm? See what,” I asked, my eyes glued to her fingers as she played with herself. I licked my lips, knowing what she would taste like and wanting every last drop.

Stretching out her leg a little more, she pointed. I blinked as I stared at the dark mark, unsure what I saw.

“It’s your name,” she finally said.

“You tattooed your pussy with my name?”

“I did. Do you like it?”

My already racing heart began pounding out of my chest. “Fuck yeah, I love it, except that some fucking asshole had their fingers on your pussy,” I growled, pissed off by the thought. All I could picture was some horny guy with his fingers on her taking his sweet fucking time to finish the piece.

She slid a finger inside and moaned. It was like ringing a dinner bell, and a raw need to bury my cock inside her washed away the anger.

“Relax, I went to a female artist, and no, she’s not into girls.”

“She better not have enjoyed it at all,” I said. “You’re mine, your pussy is mine and only mine.”

“Only yours,” she said. “Forever.”

“Yes.” I couldn’t peel my eyes away from her pleasuring herself. Her fingers slid in and back out.

“Mmm, this feels so good.” In and out. I could see her pussy getting wetter and the glistening on her fingers as she pulled them out to rub her clit. “I wish this was your cock instead.” I licked my lips and pulled on the rope again, even though it was useless. She shoved her fingers back into her pussy, and I ached so badly that the precum was forming in little droplets and falling to the floor. “Oh yes, Carter. Shove that big cock in me. Oh, I’m so close to coming all over you.”

“Untie me,” I growled, the need like a fire spreading through my body and making everything ache.

“Why? So you can stuff your cock in me?”

“Yes,” I groaned as she continued to pump her fingers. She was up to three, her hips bucked to meet her hand, and her moans filled my ears. “Carter, yes, oh yes, right there. Fuck me harder,” she wailed and then screamed, her back arching as she came.

A small squirt of come shot from my cock, from just watching the show, but it wasn’t enough to ease the aching and throbbing.

Standing, she looked at me and smiled. It was as if an angel had birthed her, but she was all devil under the sweet surface. Her hips swayed as she walked toward me and rubbed the juices on her fingers all over my cock.

“Ah,” I cried out with the extreme pleasure one little touch caused.

“Do you want to fuck me now? I can let you loose, and you can bend me over the bales, take me from behind, and spank me like the bad girl I am.”

“Yes, fucking let me go. I’m going to pummel that pussy of yours.”

“You don’t care who could come walking in?” Her thumb circled the head of my cock. Kallie could be over the top and dramatic when she wanted to be, and when it came to teasing the fuck out of me, she was the queen. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and moaned.

“No, I don’t care,” I said, just as my worst nightmare happened. The door opened, and Cain stepped into the doorway. Even facing away from him, I knew who it was by the shadow on the wall. It was as if I’d just been dumped in the middle of, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. This was it and I thought I knew terror, but nothing compared to this moment. My cock had never shriveled up and tried to hide so fast.

“Oh shit,” Kallie and I said at the same time as she jumped behind my swinging body so she was out of sight and started quickly getting dressed.

I looked over my shoulder, and my breath froze in my chest. My eyes locked on Cain, her father, the serial killer who would end my life for touching his daughter. No logical words came to me as he marched closer. My heart pumped faster with each step he took. The fear was so strong that there was a good chance I would pass the fuck out. That would be better. At least then, I wouldn’t feel him killing me.

“Carter, Kallie,” he said, and it was so hard to tell if he was angry or just so beyond angry that he had zero emotion as he spoke.

“Sir,” I said and nodded as he came to stand beside me. There truly couldn’t have been a more awkward and horrifying moment.

“Don’t be mad at Kallie. It’s all my fault,” I blurted out as he stared up at me. He looked me up and down and then peered around my body to Kallie, who’d turned a bright red. She was chewing on her bottom lip, and I would’ve said she was adorable as fuck under any other scenario.

“Hey, Dad, it’s not Carter’s fault...um...I can explain. I know what it looks like and....”

“No, it’s my fault. I told Kallie to tie me up,” I said, and his eyebrow raised along with my blood pressure.

Cain’s eyes roamed over my torn shirt, then my open jeans with my now limp and terrified cock hanging out.

Why I felt compelled to say anything was beyond me, but I opened my mouth.

“It’s cold,” I said.

Cain smirked and pointedly glanced down again. “I sure hope that’s the reason,” he said, and I wanted to punch myself in the face. Did he just cock shame me? What the hell was happening right now?

“Dad,” Kallie growled. “Seriously?”

Cain shook his head, cutting off whatever complaint Kallie had.

He pushed my swinging body out of the way and reached for the bench. There was a hammer, a drill, and a saw sitting out, and he grabbed the drill. I held my breath to see if he would use that on me. I wasn’t sure which would be worse and immediately pictured him shoving the drill tip up my cock and turning it on.

He let my body swing back into position and stared up at me, his brows pulled tight in concentration, and it was as if both Kallie and I were holding our breath to see what would happen next.

“Those are good knots, great work,” he said.

“Thanks...Dad,” Kallie said, holding her jacket closed over her body.

My mouth fell open as he turned and walked away. What the fuck?

Cain stopped when he reached the barn door and looked back. “Are you planning on marrying my daughter?”

Using my toes, I spun myself around to face him.

“Yes, Sir. I’m in love with Kallie. She has my whole heart. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for her. She is part of my soul.”

This was not how I imagined this talk happening. Not in a million years could I have predicted this, and I would've lost a bet if I'd taken one.

“Okay.”

Just like that, the door closed, and he was gone. What in the ever-loving fucking shit was that? Had I passed out from the cold and woke up in an alternate reality? Okay? Just Okay? I'd spent my entire life being terrified of hugging her, and all he had to say was okay.

“I wasn't expecting that,” Kallie said, and I swung around to stare at her. Shrugging, she looked up at me and smiled. “I prefer black diamonds.”

“What the fuck,” were the only words I could think to say.

Chapter Thirty-Six

KALLIE

SPRING BREAK

Nothing could ruin my mood. I'd taken a few days off to go with Carter to see the complex in Florida, and we'd made the most of the time alone. Now we got to spend another week together. Thinking of moving away from the farm and my dad hurt because I didn't want him to be alone, but I also needed to live my own life. Yet, I couldn't help feeling like I was abandoning him after graduation.

I thought that after what happened in the barn, Carter would get in his car and drive far away, but I was wrong. After the initial shock, he seemed more relaxed than ever.

He was back at the farm studying while I went on my little mission. I told him it would be better if he didn't know all the details. He looked like he was going to argue until he found out Troy was coming with me.

I glanced at Troy as we drove down the dark back country road. He looked so eerily like my dad, right down to his tight jaw. This had to be what my dad looked like at eighteen.

"Thank you for helping me," I said, and Troy turned his head to look at me. "Once I realized it was her and her husband in on it, I knew I couldn't do it alone."

"You didn't have to follow her around for months. I could've told you exactly what Mrs. Peterson does."

"Do I want to know how you know?"

"I fucked her while her husband wasn't home. The third time, he showed up and caught us, but it seemed...staged. He was ranting and raving and said he would ruin my football career if I didn't pay them money. He said he suspected the affair and had cameras installed. He even played some of the footage. Honestly, it was a terrible angle. I fuck much better than the camera showed." I bit my tongue to keep myself from laughing or gagging. I couldn't decide which one I wanted to do more. "Anyway, I noticed Carol kept looking at the camera with tears running down her cheeks like she was in pain. It

was then that I realized it wasn't just the blackmailing scheme right now. It was a two-parter."

"How so?"

"She looked like I was forcing her to have sex. She would turn her head away and yell to spank her, so I did, but the tears started when she turned back toward the camera."

"Fuck, that's devious. Then she could blackmail you for rape when you were making millions."

"That's my assumption."

"So what did you do?"

"I pretended to cry and told them I didn't want my future ruined. I've been paying five hundred a month since."

My mouth hung open. "What? Why would you pay them?"

"Why not? While there, I gathered more information on other students, teachers, famous athletes, and others from the area. The more you know...."

"The more power you have," I finished for him.

"Exactly. Besides, I always planned on killing them and taking everything, but I was biding my time. You wanting to kill her pushed up my timeline," Troy said but didn't seem angry.

"You don't care that I'm ruining your plans?"

Troy looked over at me and lifted his eyebrow, just like my dad. I wanted to smack the look right off his face. Fucking replica.

Sucking in a deep breath, I decided to say something I never thought I would have the guts to voice. "I've hated you most of my life," I said, and Troy's placid expression didn't change.

"I know you don't care, just like my dad wouldn't care, but I needed you to know. I hate that you're so much like him. I hate looking into your eyes, seeing him, and knowing I'll never compare or match up. I hate that I've competed against you my entire life, and whatever I do, you find a way to do it

better. Even tonight. I've been watching and stalking this teacher for over a year, and you were already in her house, literally in her pussy." I shook my head. "I've just decided I can't hate you anymore. I've accepted that I can't be like you or my dad because I need to be me, even if I never stack up to you."

I turned and looked out the window and watched as a couple of vehicles passed, their headlights illuminating the car yet doing nothing to brighten my mood. There was no telling when I came to this realization. I needed to be okay with it, or I would go insane.

"May I give you a piece of advice?"

My jaw twitched, and my inner rage that I kept a tight hold on was ready for whatever he happened to say to make me feel worse.

"Sure."

"When you live in a house of flies, be the spider." I wasn't expecting that. I looked at his profile, and he darted his gaze at me. "Do you understand?"

"No."

"What you fail to understand, cousin, is that I'm jealous of you." Confusion ignited inside of me. How, why, and when had Troy ever been jealous of me? He always seemed unaffected by everything.

"What you deem to be a power of strength in your father and me is actually a weakness."

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"Kallie, I will never truly know love like you or Carter. The passion you share is a mystery to me. The affectionate touches, tears of joy, jealousy, and even the true longing of prolonged separation, none of it affects me or your father the same way. We will never feel so passionately or with burning emotion about anything. I will not weep at my mother's grave. I will not sing or feel enlightenment. I will not stand in the sun and appreciate the day like you. We control, plan, and

manipulate because the power and certainty for the outcome we desire is what matters most.”

“But the two of you always seem content, in control, and pleased with your accomplishments. I’ve also seen my dad cry over my mom’s death.”

“Does he cry over her death and feel it like you do?”

I bit my lip, wanting to say yes, yet knowing that if he couldn’t love me the same way, he couldn’t feel sadness the same way.

“Do not paint us with the brush of what you feel. Your father believes that most people with emotions end up sheep, and he is right, but you break that mold. You walk your own path, feel what you want, and make no apologies for it. You take what you want and aren’t callous in your decisions. You’re the best of all of us, cousin. You feel everything this world has to offer with all you have. You fight for those you love. You may not crave to kill in the same way your dad and I do, but you have found a path far more noble. Never be jealous of a fly when you’re already the spider. Spin your web and own being the queen of what you are and all you can become.”

I choked back the tears and couldn’t stop staring at him. In every conversation I had over the years with my dad, I never saw or understood what he was telling me. He saw me and wanted me to be the best version of myself. Flashes of training sessions came at me, and words of wisdom that I thought were spoken for Troy but were aimed at me.

“Feel it all, Angel. Feel the anger burning in your chest and control it.”

Why didn’t I recognize this before? Was I so wrapped up in my insecurities that I couldn’t see the truth right before my eyes?

We drove in silence until I couldn’t take it anymore and needed to say something. “You think the Petersons killed anyone?”

Troy shrugged. Like the emotional speech he'd just given me never happened, he answered flatly, "I guess we'll find out. Do you want to kill them both or torture them and leave them alive?"

Tapping my knife off my knee, I smiled. "Let's play it by ear."

He smirked at me. "Or cut off an ear."

"I do like your style, cuz." I smiled. This was the first time I felt like we were truly family. We might actually connect and bond over something, at least as much as Troy could bond. Living on the same property, growing up together, being homeschooled, and training together yet feeling so disjointed from everyone around you was odd.

I sat up a little straighter. Was that how my dad felt trying to understand me? Oh my god, was that how Carter felt living with all of us? I hated feeling like Carter was one step away from sprinting for the door. He hadn't given me any reason to feel that way...yet.

"We're here," Troy said, breaking my spiraling thoughts. I peered through the trees and saw lights shining through the branches still missing their leaves. Another month, and I wouldn't have been able to see the house at all.

"Do they have cameras outside?"

"Yes."

"So what's the plan? I'm sure you have one?"

Troy smiled wide. "Of course I do."

"Always have a plan," we said together, and I burst out laughing.

"Okay, let's hear it."

"Simple. I have an in and an itch to scratch if you get my drift." His lip curled up. "I also have this compliments of Carter." Troy held up a small device that looked like a garage opener.

"What does that do?"

“As soon as I get close enough to the door, it will read the security panel code and, more importantly, relay it to you once I push this button.”

“Why didn’t he give me the cool toy,” I asked, then blushed, realizing how that must sound.

“Did you try asking him? It’s a long-lost concept, but it works.”

I’d never seen Troy this saucy, and I loved it. He did have a point, though. Carter was amazing with any electronic or computer. I was positive he could turn the toaster into a rocket if he wanted to.

“What you’re telling me is that you plan to walk through the front door?”

“Yeah, I am. I didn’t fuck Carol for my health. Now get in the back and lay down out of sight until the code comes through.”

No forced entry, no alarms, and an entire week before she would be missed at school, crawling over the seat to the back, I had to give Troy props. This was genius.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“**T**hree blind mice, three blind mice. See how they run, see how they run. They all ran after the farmer’s wife. She cut off their tails with a carving knife. Did you ever see such a sight in your life as three blind mice?”

I yelled the nursery rhyme as Troy taunted Mr. Peterson, also known as Hank, to cut off one of Carol’s fingers with gardening shears.

She was screaming at her husband not to do it, her eyes wide with terror as her body shook, but she wouldn’t earn any sympathy from us.

“Do it, Hank,” Troy said, his voice so soft and calm that I shivered. I could see the glimmer in his eye. He hoped Hank couldn’t go through with it. I recognized it because my eyes glimmered with the same excitement when I glanced at the mirror over the fireplace.

“Please, no more. We’ve learned our lesson. Let us go, and we’ll disappear,” he said, blubbering.

I’d never known anyone to blubber like that other than a small child. Then again, I guess being tied to a chair with the tip of your cock stretched out as far as it could go and then a little more and pinched in a vice would do that to you. Troy held the cheese grater over Hank’s exposed cock, just out of reach from a strike if Hank was stupid enough to attempt it.

I forced Carol’s head back, my knife at her throat to ensure she didn’t curl her fingers into a fist.

“Does it look like we want to stop Hank?”

“I can’t do it. I can’t,” he said. Troy pulled one little metal hook of the grater across his cock and peeled it open in a perfect line. “Ahh! Ahh! Ahh!” Hank screamed as he stared at the hole created and the blood dripping on the floor.

“Troy, didn’t you say that Hank likes cigars?”

“Yes, I did,” Troy answered, far calmer than the situation dictated.

“Don’t cigars have an end clipper thing? You know to cut the tip off a cigar?”

He placed the grater on the ground. “You’re right. This would be far more entertaining if I just snipped off the end of his cock and then each of his fingers and toes.”

Troy stood, and suddenly Hank yelled ‘No’ and squeezed his hand holding the garden shears. With a snap and a scream that could wake the dead, Carol’s pinky finger separated from her hand and fell to the floor.

“Hickory dickory dock. The mouse went up the clock. The clock struck one. The mouse went down. Hickory dickory dock,” I whispered in her ear.

“Please,” she said.

Grabbing one of the thick folders bursting at the seams with pictures, payments, and digital files, I held it up for her to see. She whimpered as I waved it like a fan.

“To date, three hundred thousand dollars from Jodie Jackson, fifty thousand from Kyle Thompson, a half a million from Chris Devers, I could go on. You have lured young men into your home, assaulted them, blackmailed them, and extorted them. You would’ve done it to Carter, too, given the chance. Give me one reason why you should be free to do it again?”

She licked her lips, her eyes telling me that no matter what words came out of her mouth, they would be a lie. While she was crying and trying to think of what to say, I looked around the large home. They were smart in purchasing a house outside of town. They could hide the cars bought with blackmail in the garage and didn’t decorate with lavish items. Troy got Carol to

open their vault before she was tied up, and not only were all the files in there but so were bags of expensive jewelry and bars of gold like they were fucking modern-day pirates.

“Will you answer me, or is Hank cutting off another finger?”

“We won’t do it again. Please, I swear we won’t. Please pack my finger in ice so it can be saved. No harm, no foul.”

I smirked. Carol still thought she had power or leverage. Grabbing my bag, I stuffed it with all the items from the safe, including the files.

“I really enjoy whistling, don’t you?”

“What,” Carol asked, confusion written into every feature.

“You know whistling?” I demonstrated this by whistling the song *Whistle While You Work*.

“I guess so,” Carol said.

“What about you, Hank,” Troy asked, giving Hank a nudge now that he’d finally stopped screaming. The couple looked at one another, and I could almost see the wheels spinning.

“I’m not a big whistler,” he said.

“That’s a shame. It can be very therapeutic,” I said.

“And it’s great for calling animals,” Troy added.

“Or getting someone’s attention,” I said.

“Don’t forget it can show appreciation.”

“Ohh, good one, Troy.”

“Please, my finger,” Carol whined, and I was getting really sick of listening to her. I flicked my knife, and the sharp blade cut through Carol’s ear like butter without her realizing it. The flesh rolled down her naked chest and onto her lap.

The wild shrieking that came from her was sweet music, but I wanted more. She needed to realize that no matter what she said or did, we held her life in our hands and wanted her dead. I picked up the ear and slapped her back and forth across the face with it, leaving smears of blood on her cheeks.

Her eyes were wide as she wailed. I'd listened to her hysterical ass long enough, so I stuffed the ear into her gapping hole and held her mouth closed.

"Shut up, or I'll put your finger in your mouth as well," I said. She surprisingly quieted to a reasonable level, and I pinched her lips together into a pout. "Now, don't spit that out." I spun my knife in front of her face. "Or your nose is next." She nodded slightly, and I smiled. "You know what nursery rhyme this reminds me of?" She shook her head, tears shimmering on her cheeks and in her puffy, bloodshot eyes. "Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again."

"I thought I was fucked, cousin, but you have a flare I really enjoy," Troy said.

"If you like that, then you'll love this." I grabbed the sharp knitting needle from my bag and a ball of yarn. I'd enjoyed using it so much before that I now kept some in my go bag. Pinching Carol's lips again she tried to pull her head away.

"Keep it up Carol and I will stab you in the eye instead. It makes a great pop sound." She instantly froze and I pushed the needle through her bottom lip and then the top one. Her whimpers reminded me of sweet gumdrops on my tongue. "I don't know what you're freaking out about, Carol. This is going to look great. Red really is your color," I said, creating a crossstich pattern.

Stepping back I smiled at my work. "There all done. What do you think Troy?"

"Excellent skill, you could've been a surgeon." Our mouths curved up at the same time.

I glanced at Hank who had resumed screaming, but that was probably because he was staring at his cock that was turning a violent shade of purple. He couldn't feel his cock in the vice. Oops, it just might fall off. Oh well.

"Hank, did you know that the key to whistling is your tongue," I asked. The screaming became muted as he pressed

his lips tightly together like that would stop Troy from cutting his tongue out of his head.

“Troy, would you like to do the honors?” The sinister smile that crossed his lips was one I knew well. It held no remorse.

“I’m going to take this out to the car before it gets blood on it,” I said, heaving the massive bag filled with all the blackmail onto my shoulder. Troy nodded as he moved in on Hank. I walked outside and stopped dead in my tracks. My dad was leaning against the hood of our car.

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

He pushed off the car, and even at eighteen, he still made me feel like I was six without saying a single word. He glanced at the house when the muffled screams reached us as Troy got to work.

“Do you still not trust me?”

“Why do you always think the reason I’m around is a lack of trust?” He crossed his arms as his hard stare penetrated me to my core.

“Because that’s what it feels like. If that’s not the case, then why are you here?”

“Troy invited me to help with clean up. He said there would be quite a mess.” I nodded as more screams and the sound of the electric saw got louder. I should’ve known. Troy really had thought of everything. I waited to feel the annoyance that usually rose like a beast inside me, but it remained dormant.

“Dad, can I ask you something?”

“You never need to ask if you can ask me a question,” he said, and my cheeks warmed.

“Why did you not care about me and Carter? Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy that you’re not upset, but...I’m just curious.”

“Why would I be upset about something I nurtured since you were six?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“We live a very different lifestyle. I was fortunate to meet your mother, and I’ll never meet someone like her again. Nor do I want to, but that doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t need someone like your mother in your life.”

Utter confusion, that was all I felt. My face must have conveyed that since he continued.

“I don’t mean Carter is to become your mother. I mean, Carter is to you what your mom was to me.”

I set the heavy bag down and rubbed my face as I tried to process this information.

“So, you’re saying you manipulated Carter and me together? That he feels compelled to love me because of you? Is what we have even real?”

“Don’t be foolish. I cannot govern your emotions, although sometimes it would be helpful. I simply laid the groundwork, opportunity, and encouragement at the right moments for the two of you to find your balance.”

All that sounded like to me was, ‘Yes, I did,’ just so subtly that you never noticed.

“I can’t believe this.”

“What can’t you believe? It’s normal for a father to want someone for their daughter who will be good to them, is it not?”

“How is it that I want to say yes and no at the same time? Most kids don’t have a father threatening the boy they like from the time they are young. Did you tell him to fall in love with me?”

He shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I only told him to keep an eye out for you and to protect you.”

“Protect me?” The simmering anger flared brighter.

“Yes, if there were a threat to you, he would step in. Like that Taylor at school who hit you.” I distinctly remembered the

look on Carter's face as his fists rained down on Taylor and how his eyes burned with anger when they pulled him off.

"Geez us dad. You warped and molded him into something, not in his nature." All the prickling fears that poked at the back of my brain, saying that Carter and I were too different and it would all blow up, just smacked me across the face.

"You are taking this far too personally," he said, and I glared at my dad. "Would Troy not look out for his sister? Would Troy not look out for you? Would Bo not step in and protect Talon? What is the difference? Understand this, if nothing else. Carter came to your mom and me when his parents died. He was so innocent and sweet that he wouldn't have lasted a single day in our world unless I prepared him. He would've always been a threat and I would've been forced to decide if I should kill him. Carter's personality leaned toward being a hero, and he needed a mission. I gave him one."

"Me? I was his mission?"

"Yes."

I couldn't breathe. What was true, and what was a lie? What else had my dad set into motion that I didn't know about?

"But...I love Carter."

"Of course you do, and he loves you. That was the point."

I stared dumbfounded at my dad. He did this from his warped sense of parental concern, but I couldn't guess what repercussions occurred because he meddled. He created an arranged marriage and poked us at just the right times for us to fall into the trap he set.

The door opened behind me, and Hank was crying and begging for mercy. I was missing all the fun.

"Good, you're here. Carol passed out. Hank is conscious but won't be alive much longer. Do we want to take the bodies with us?"

“Yes, it will be easier to dispose of them. Did you use a cucumber by chance?”

“No, how would I use a cucumber,” Troy asked, and my dad’s lip curled up as he walked around me, our conversation over.

“Oh, and Kallie,” my dad said. I looked over my shoulder at him. “I have a new lead on Darryl. Thought you would like to know.”

That was amazing news, and I should’ve been ecstatic, yet all I felt was numb as Troy’s words bounced around in my skull. *We control, plan, and manipulate because the power and certainty for the outcome we desire is what matters most.*

I’d felt sorry for Talon for being in the dark, but maybe I was no better than she was.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Stepping out of the shower, I rubbed my shorter hair and wrapped a towel around my body. When we got home, needing a change, I cut it to my chin. It felt strange not to have long hair anymore, and I hoped Carter liked it.

Thinking of him made me turn right instead of left when I walked out of the bathroom. Stepping into his room, I closed the door and watched him sleep. The slow rise and fall of his chest, with his arm draped over his eyes, was mesmerizing. I could see my tattooed name with the blankets thrown off his body. I needed to know if any of this was real.

Why it was suddenly bothering me, I couldn't guess. Maybe it was because things had changed. I wasn't stalking him to ensure other women didn't touch him. I would still cut off a bitch's fingers, but we were different now. My feelings were in his hands, and that left me vulnerable. He wasn't just the boy I grew up with. He was so much more.

Walking to the end of the bed, I smiled as he murmured my name in his sleep. Fuck he was sexy. He was wearing the black, satin boxers I'd picked up for him on a whim. My eyes traced every feature and line of his body, right down to the outline of his cock. He had no idea how incredible he was, which was part of his charm and why he needed someone like me to watch his back. My dad said that Carter was in my life to protect me, but he was wrong. I was in Carter's life to protect him while he calmed the crazy in my mind.

His hand resting on his stomach reached down and rubbed his cock before falling off his stomach again. How was a girl

to resist that? I mean, it was a blatant invitation if I ever saw one.

Crawling between his spread legs, I softly traced the outline of his semi-hard cock and loved that it twitched under my finger. I quickly unbuttoned the material with minimal maneuvering and slipped him out of his boxers. I waited to see if he would wake up, but his breathing never changed as his eyes darted back and forth under his eyelids.

This was gonna be the best dream he ever had. I licked every square inch of him and loved that he grew harder with each swirl of my tongue. I would never grow tired of this. It didn't take long before he was fully hard, and I moaned as I wrapped my hand around his shaft and took him into my mouth.

The muffled groan he made was a drug to my senses. I glanced up, and he was biting his lip, but there was no other sign that he was waking up. This was way too much fun. Grabbing my towel, I tossed it on the floor and resumed sucking as I slipped a finger into my pussy. I was so ready for him, and all I could picture was riding him until he woke up.

My walls tightened around my finger with just the thought. Carter mumbled my name, and I glanced up again, but he was still out cold. He'd always been a heavy sleeper. I could vacuum around him, and he would look around in wonder when he woke up. Crazy. I heard any creak out in the hall or a cupboard closing downstairs.

He pushed up with his hips, a deep guttural sound coming from him.

“Don't you fucking come until I say you can,” I ordered softly and squeezed his cock tighter at the base. “Do you understand?”

“Mmm,” was the only response I got, but that was close enough.

I licked him all over and teased the tip of his cock, stealing all the groans and growling noises from him. He looked like he was in pain, but I knew it was pure pleasure. Carter licked

his lips, repeating my name, and a thrill shot right through me down between my legs to where my fingers were still working.

I couldn't take it anymore and gently crawled over his body to straddle him. I sucked in a ragged breath as I lowered myself onto his cock. I didn't think I would ever get used to that first push and how he stretched me. Carter growled, his body shaking as his hands found my hips and pulled me down hard.

"Fuck," I said through gritted teeth as he bottomed out. Not even the sweetest of kills compared to how he made me feel. Leaning forward, I whispered in his ear. "Am I your naughty girl?" He nodded, his hips bucking up, trying to get me to move. "You want me to ride your hard cock?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

Slipping my hand between our bodies, I slid a finger in with his cock and moaned. Pulling it out, I touched the finger to his lips.

"Lick me," I ordered, and his mouth parted slightly. It wasn't much, but just enough to slide my finger into his mouth. He sucked on my finger, and pleasure coursed through my body. I slowly raised myself up on his cock. It was already pulsing inside of me with every beat of his heart.

I picked up the pace, and he growled low, the sound rumbling in his chest.

"That's it, I'm you're a naughty girl. Make me come all over you cock, Carter."

His fingers gripped my hips hard enough that I knew there would be bruises as he pumped into me. Nothing turned me on more than knowing he would leave marks on me. He was thrusting so hard and filling me so full that I was on the brink of pain and pleasure.

Grabbing his wrist, I pulled his hand up and put it around my throat. Breath play was dangerous when he was asleep, but the risk made a mini orgasm ignite inside me.

Bracing myself on his chest, I let him hammer into my body with such force that even without his hand around my

throat, it was hard to breathe. His hand tightened and an euphoric sensation spread throughout my body, making me lightheaded. I pressed harder into his hand as spots formed behind my eyes.

“Geezus fuck, Trouble, what are you doing?” Carter scolded as his eyes snapped open. He released my neck, which I knew he needed to do before I passed out, yet I missed the feel of his hand. “Shit, you feel like heaven.” He rolled us over with a thrust, and I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“Harder,” I whimpered as the burning pleasure in my gut rose higher with my orgasm so close.

“Fuck you’re naughty.” Carter pulled up, and I let go of his neck. “I’m going to spank your fucking ass, Trouble.”

“Yes, do it,” I purred, then squealed as he flipped me over like I weighed nothing and pulled my ass up.

“You’re such a bad girl,” he growled.

Crack. The sound echoed, and the sharp pain radiated through my body. My orgasm crested just before he shoved his cock back into me.

I bit the pillow and yelled as he slammed into me like a man possessed. Carter’s hand smacked my ass again, and that one would leave a mark.

“I could’ve killed you.”

“I knew you wouldn’t,” I gasped, then bit the pillow again to muffle my scream as I came hard. Carter was unrelenting, and the sound of our skin slapping grew louder. If it weren’t for his hands holding my hips up, I would’ve collapsed from the intense climax that left me feeling weightless.

“You’re going to do it again, aren’t you,” he asked, rubbing my ass. I couldn’t stop the smirk from forming.

“Yes,” I said and moaned as he hit me again.

“Wrong answer, Trouble,” he said, and I wiggled.

“Say you won’t do it again.”

“No.”

“Say it, or I will start wearing a chastity belt.”

I laughed at the image, then moaned and gripped the pillow hard as he picked up his pace.

“Okay, I won’t,” I said, but I had my fingers crossed.

His hand cracked down hard on my ass, and I jerked forward, but Carter pulled me back into his body. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Fuck, I’m gonna come,” he growled, and I looked over my shoulder to see his face. His head was back, his muscles flexing and shimmering with sweat while the tattoos on his arms stood out against his skin. “Fuck,” he said and slammed into me, holding still as he came.

His orgasm sent me over the edge again, and I yelled and squeezed the pillow as my body trembled from the explosion that rocked me to my core.

Carter wrapped an arm around my waist to hold me up even though the arm supporting us was shaking. He panted hard, and with each breath, he nudged deep inside of me. I never wanted him to move.

I winced as he slowly pulled out, and I grabbed his hand as he stood from the bed.

“I’m going to get something for your ass cheek to ease the sting.”

“No, leave it. I’m fine.”

“You sure? It’ll just take a second.”

I tugged on his hand. “Lay down with me.”

Sliding over, I grabbed the blanket and lifted it to let him in beside me. He gave me that inquisitive look he got when we were kids, and he knew something was off.

I tossed the blanket over us when he laid down, scooted into his body, and closed my eyes. The thought that my dad manipulated or threatened Carter into this hurt my heart. Was he even really mine?

“What’s going on, Trouble?” He kissed the top of my head and held me tighter. I didn’t want to get emotional but quickly wiped away a tear. I wasn’t the crying type. I could count the times I cried with the fingers on one hand.

“Will you answer something truthfully, even if you’re scared to answer?”

I felt his head lift, but I wouldn’t look at him. “I always answer you truthfully. What’s going on?”

“When you said you loved me and wanted to be with me forever, was that because you meant it or because you’re conditioned to look after me?”

“What?”

Sighing, I pushed myself onto my arm and stared into his green eyes. They had never dulled and were the same spring color they always were. Reaching out, he ran his knuckles down my cheek. It was a small gesture, but the lump in my throat only made me want to cry more.

“Why would you ever think that?”

“I had a conversation with my dad tonight. I needed to know why he wasn’t upset by our relationship and finding us in the barn. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want him to be pissed, but you’re right. It’s odd.”

“Okay, and what did he say?” Carter rolled onto his side to face me and pushed himself into the same position.

“He said, and I’m paraphrasing, ‘Why would I be mad when this was what I wanted from the beginning,’ and he made taking care of me your mission.” I wiped a tear from my cheek, hating my sudden insecurity. “Did he really do that to you?”

Carter smirked. “Yeah, he did, but...that’s not why I’m with you now. It’s not even why I wasn’t involved with you any earlier than now.” He cupped my cheek, and I leaned into his touch. “Kallie, you’ve always been my heart.”

“But how do you know it’s real?”

“Let me ask you this. How do you know it’s real?” I glared at him, hating that he turned this around on me. “I’m being serious. How do you know you love me?”

I chewed my bottom lip as I thought about the answer. “Because I just do...I feel it in my bones and can’t picture being with anyone else. You’re all I’ve ever wanted, but I’m not all you’ve ever wanted. You dated a ton of people, and you’re not like the rest of us. This...” I spun my finger around to indicate the room. “Is not who you are.”

“Wow, there is a lot to unpack, but I’ll try. Yes, your father threatened me, but I’m pretty positive he just wanted me not to say anything about what he did. He saw that I was already protective of you and gave me a real mission, as he put it. I felt powerful and important that he made me your protector. He once said I was your Kirby, but I didn’t take it as your lover. I took it that I was the person who helped you see reason or protected you if you were ever in danger.”

Leaning in, he kissed my nose. I knew I couldn’t let him go, even if he was forced. He was woven too tightly into the fabric of my soul.

“And the thing is, it wouldn’t have mattered if he manipulated us to hang out more or whatever it is you think he did. His threats terrified me. I couldn’t touch you or hang out with you aside from school or go to a store. If anything, it had the opposite effect as far as that goes, but I was already lost. When I was old enough to see a girl as desirable, I fell in love with you, and it never changed.”

“But what about...” He touched a finger to my lips, and I nipped at it, but he didn’t move, and I ended up sucking his finger into my mouth.

“Mmm, don’t do that if you want to talk, ‘cause I’m more than ready to take you all over again.”

Smiling, I reached under the blanket to check. Carter sucked in a shuddering breath as my hand wrapped around his cock. He was indeed already hard again. That was a record even for him and his stamina.

“If you want me to get this out, stop stroking me. My brain can’t think straight.”

I laughed and let him go for now, but I was ready to fuck him again.

“As I was saying, I had reasons for dating a lot. The first was that, as far as I was concerned, you were forbidden. I genuinely thought your dad would cut me into a million little pieces if I went anywhere near you.”

“So you never wanted anything long-term with any of them? Not even the ones better suited for you?”

Carter’s face darkened, and I looked away from his intense stare. “Who says you’re not suited for me?”

“I just mean someone normal and not a killer. That has to be a heavy burden to carry. I never really thought about how much you were keeping secrets and watching what you said. It might make you want a different life.”

He placed a finger under my chin and forced me to look at him. “I would rather be fucking crazy anywhere on this planet with you than normal with anyone else.”

He kissed me hard, and I leaned back on the bed as he attacked my mouth. “You’re right, you and this family are nuts, but you, Kallie Buchanan are my kind of nuts. I need you like I need air to breathe, so don’t you dare think you’re getting rid of me. If I have to stalk you, I will.” Carter smiled, and all the insecurity I’d been collecting and dragging around faded away.

Carter nipped my lip as he broke the kiss. “I need you to know something else. Kallie, it doesn’t matter how we ended up coming together. I would’ve fallen for you regardless of your dad. Do you know why?”

“No, why?”

“Because I’ve only ever felt complete when I’m with you. You’re my soulmate, and nothing would ever change that.”

“I love you, Carter. As wild as I can get, that is the only thing that has never changed,” I said, kissing his lips softly.

“And I love you, never doubt that not even for a second.” He kissed me again, and I knew we would be alright. We shared a bond that couldn’t be explained with words.

He slipped between my thighs, never breaking the kiss, and I spread wider to accommodate him.

“I’m going to fuck this sweet pussy of yours again.” He kissed my neck, and my heartbeat jumped wildly in my chest. “You’re mine, Kallie. You always have been and always will be,” he said, his breath fanning my ear and making me shiver under him even as my body heated. “Every last inch of your sexy body, intelligent mind, and beautifully twisted soul is mine, and I’m not going anywhere.” He slid my arms above my head and gripped my hands. “Unless you take your knife and kill me yourself.”

“That won’t happen,” I said as he kissed the corner of my mouth.

“It doesn’t matter. I would rather die by your hand and in your arms than live without you.”

My heart swelled, and tears pricked my eyes with the emotion consuming me. Before I could even say I love you, Carter kissed me and claimed my body, thrusting into me. My brain emptied of all thoughts except the knowledge that I would die to save him.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I was disappointed when no one said anything about Mrs. Peterson's absence. There was no announcement or even student gossip. Not a single word was spoken.

Then again, the house looked like a horror movie had been filmed inside when we left. Troy wiped the security feed, and there were no bodies to find. The police were probably keeping a tight lid on that information. I knew they wouldn't find anything. My dad had even used the shop vac after we did a thorough cleaning, vacuuming every last tiny bit of evidence before he took it with us with the bodies.

The marching band played their final note, and I jerked out of my thoughts as the football team ran onto the field.

I usually skipped the Jubilee since I wasn't really into football, but I felt like Troy and I were in a much better space since our chat. I guess the cousins that kill together....

The air was still cool, with patches of lingering snow in the shade. The sky was bright blue with wispy white clouds. Our red and white school colors were draped over everything. It looked like the mascot threw up everywhere, and I was no exception.

Talon had insisted I wear the school football sweatshirt and scarf, but I refused the pompoms she tried to make me take to the stands as she ran onto the field to cheer. I didn't understand all the hype. The Jubilee was our team divided into two playing to celebrate the coming season, but the screams and cheers were so loud that you would've thought it was a championship.

I was sitting with Alex, which turned out to be a mistake. She was standing and screaming her head off as she jumped around and almost hit me in the face with each thrust of her arms into the air. I was the one who needed a football helmet, not the players. I knew she was an avid football fan and had seen fans get wild, but the game hadn't even started.

I shook my head and mumbled a few swear words as some of her popcorn dropped out of the bag and landed in my hair.

“Unbelievable.”

I picked out the buttery pieces and wondered if I could sneak out at halftime. Alex had changed so much this last year. I wasn't sure when my loud-mouthed, punk friend disappeared. She transformed over the summer, and I did not doubt that if I let her, she would try to dress me up like Barbie. Complete with makeup, nails, and hair before she dragged me from one social event to another.

In a strange turn of events, Alex and Talon had grown so close that I rarely saw her anymore. They had diaries full of nothing but social events and volunteer activities. I was horrified watching them squeal as Talon showed off her new sparkly book tabs. What the heck was so exciting about sparkly tape? They were both so over the top that they made Mary Fucking Poppins seem like a lazy bitch. That shit took effort.

The mascot ran around doing cartwheels and then jumped into the middle of the next cheer, and he could move. The cheerleaders had divided to support each side playing.

“Oh my god, aren't you excited,” Alex asked as she finally sat down beside me, out of breath.

“Not really, it's just a football game.”

Alex nudged my shoulder with hers as she laughed. “You haven't changed a bit,” she said, smiling, but it felt like an insult.

The question died in my throat as Alex jumped to her feet like her ass had been electrocuted. I was one of the few who knew what that looked like.

“Let’s go, wolf pack, let’s go,” was chanted around me, my ass vibrating with the stomping feet and clapping hands that drowned out the last of my intelligent thoughts.

Alex grabbed my arm and dragged me to my feet. I glared at her, and if I didn’t like her, I would’ve cut her fingers off.

“Come on, Kallie, cheer with us,” she said, smiling. “Don’t you cheer for Carter when you watch his games?”

She had a point, I did, but that was different. I didn’t care about baseball. I was only there because of Carter. I watched Troy run down the field, and even though he would never know if I was cheering, I couldn’t find a reason to disagree with Alex.

Cupping my mouth, I whistled loudly when his side got the ball and ran down the field for a touchdown. The guys treated this game like a regular season game as they danced in and celebrated.

They set the scrimmage line, and I was impressed with myself for knowing what that meant. Troy’s team was in the offensive position, and I picked him out of the crowd.

“What is Troy’s position called again?”

“He’s a running back,” Alex said, smiling.

“What does that mean?”

“Basically, they want him to reset the down. He will get the ball and run until he’s tackled.”

“So he’s not throwing it?”

Alex laughed. “Noooo, that’s only the quarterback.”

“This game confuses me,” I said, turning back.

There was a pause, and then the guys collided, sounding like a herd of elephants if they were stomping on cars. I spotted Troy, and just like Alex said, he had the ball and was darting between guys and avoided having his leg grabbed before everyone piled on top of him.

They all got up, and I found myself getting into the excitement.

“Will they do it again?”

“Looks like that’s the play,” Alex said, and I wasn’t sure what that meant, but didn’t bother to ask.

“Go, Troy!” I screamed as they reset, and as Alex predicted, he took off with the ball. He went farther this time before getting slammed into from the side and taken down with a hit you could shockingly hear in the stands. Troy disappeared under the sea of bodies as he became a human pancake.

The pile moved, and I was chanting with Alex when I realized someone was still lying on the field. I couldn’t tell who was on the ground with so many people gathered. They were obviously injured, but I knew when I saw the ball tucked under his left arm.

The coaching staff ran onto the field, and all the guys but one backed up and knelt as the coach reached Troy. No one made a sound. It was as if we’d all sucked in a collective gasp and held it to see what happened. The soft breeze carried the noise of the coach snapping his fingers in front of Troy’s helmet, and my heart pounded harder.

“Get the stretcher,” the coach yelled, even as two men ran across the field with a stretcher and medical bags slung over their arms.

Everything slowed down. Talon burst away from the group of cheerleaders and ran to her brother.

“Troy! Wake up, Troy! Don’t you dare leave me! I didn’t mean it! Troy!”

Pushing past Alex, I ran down the stairs toward the field and got to the edge just as Talon began to wail. The pain in her voice rocked me and felt like a stab to my heart. I knew without anyone saying anything that he was dead. The look on the paramedic’s faces said it all. Them loading him on a stretcher didn’t mean anything. It was what they weren’t doing that told the story.

“Let me go! No, I have to go with him. He’s my brother! Troy! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean what I said!” Talon wailed as

the football captain tried to get her to let go of Troy's hand.

Bo was quicker than I was, and he reached Talon, who'd resorted to punching at the captain. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her away. Tears ran down my cheeks as I watched them take my cousin off the field.

The initial shock was wearing off, and images of my mother's funeral were storming to the surface. The engulfing sense of loss and sadness quickly took its place. The memory of my dad sitting alone as he stared at a picture of my mom filled me, and I felt like it had just happened. Gripping my stomach, I doubled over, trying to ward off the devastating feelings that would consume me if I couldn't stop them.

Pulling out my phone, my hands shook as I dialed my dad.

"Kallie, what is it? What's wrong," he asked. "Is that Talon screaming?"

"Dad, it's Troy," I said before the weight of the past and present colliding became too much, and I dropped to my knees. "I didn't mean it. I never wanted him to die," I said as guilt poked at me.

How many times had I wished he would just go away? Leave forever or die? The jealousy ran so deep that I never fully understood him until recently. All that time was lost.

"I'm on my way," I heard my dad say, and then let myself be pulled into Alex's hug as she wrapped her arm around my shoulder.

Did a serial killer weep? The answer was yes.

Chapter Forty

Way too many people had already died in my twenty-one years. I was up to four family members, and the irrational fear that this was somehow my fault pricked the back of my brain. I considered it childhood trauma that I should really one day deal with..

I knew I wasn't a jinx. It was ridiculous to feel that way for a single moment, yet the feeling plagued me. I was only two when my parents went out for a date night, and a drunk driver hit them. The man who killed Kirby and Troy's heart condition had nothing to do with me.

Troy playing football created the perfect storm for his heart to stop. The doctor said it could've happened any time, but being tackled constantly was like playing Russian roulette.

Shattered was the only way to describe Aspen and Talon. Abel was hitting the alcohol hard and screaming things that didn't make sense to me, but Cain was watching over him. Bo was staying with Aspen and Talon for now, and Kallie was curled up next to me as we stared at the bonfire I'd made. She couldn't take everyone crying or yelling anymore, so I brought her out where it was quiet.

"How are you," I asked, kissing the top of her head.

"I'm angry." Her eyes lifted to mine, and behind the deep-rooted sadness was a staggering rage. "How are you handling this so well? I kill people. I should be fine, but you're the one who looks unaffected while I'm a wreck."

"I don't know. I liked Troy, and we always got along. He was family, but we weren't close like him and Bo. Honestly, I

think I'm in shock and terrified to think too hard about it because my mind runs down the rabbit hole, and all I can picture is losing you, and I can't." I pulled her tighter into my side, and she wrapped her arm around my waist.

"Yeah, I've had that happen." Pushing away from me, Kallie stood up. "Will you come with me to my mom's grave?"

"You don't need to ask me that. The answer is always yes." I stood and wrapped my arm around her shoulders. My heart raced if she got more than ten feet away from me. I could still hear her panicked voice and feel the terror that had ripped through my body. I made it here in record time and was shocked not to get pulled over.

We stood quietly when we reached the grave as the leaves rustled in the nearby trees, and a dog from a neighboring farm barked at some yippy coyotes. It was an eerie night, and if you could feel death in the air, I felt it.

"I need to find him," Kallie said, startling me.

"Find who?"

"Darryl Burton."

"The guy that killed your mother," I asked, and although I shouldn't be shocked, I was.

"Yes." She pulled away and began to pace. "It's been long enough. My dad has had since Christmas to find him and still hasn't. He says he has a new lead, but we never discussed it."

"Okay, then why not just leave him to your dad?"

She stopped pacing and stared at me like I'd sprouted horns. "Because he hasn't found him yet, and I think I can. I've been practicing my skills, honing my abilities, and I have a superpower my dad doesn't have."

I cocked an eyebrow at her. "And that is?"

"You."

"Me?"

“Yes, you.” I wasn’t sure what scared me more: Kallie screaming and threatening to kill everyone or when she was calm with an evil glint in her eye.

I wasn’t going to like this. I could already tell. “How so?”

She walked toward me like a lioness on the prowl. “Because you have the computer skills I need. If I give you information, you could run it down for me. If I need you to get into a phone, that may or may not be mine....” She smirked. “You could do it for me, and if I need you to cover for me, I know you will.”

I stepped back as she went to touch me. “No,” I said and waited for the explosion. Her eyes narrowed into the scariest glare I’d ever seen, and considering I grew up with her father, that said something.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re asking me to help you hunt down the man who murdered your mother in cold blood. She wore a bulletproof vest, had a gun, a taser, and could fight her ass off. Do you really think I’ll give you information that will send you into danger all alone?”

“Who said anything about alone? I’ll take Tro—” She stopped as she caught herself and looked down. “You don’t understand. I can’t explain why I need to do this, but he needs to die. I have to finish what my mom started.”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled and rubbed my face. This was a terrible fucking idea.

“Carter, this will happen with or without your help. I’m positive I can find him without you. It will just be easier with, and this way, you won’t wonder what I’m doing or when.”

It was my turn to pace, and I almost felt Kirby’s dead eyes staring at me from her grave. Was the weight of her presence encouraging me to help her daughter or telling me to keep her the fuck away from it? The problem was that Kallie would do whatever she wanted, no matter what. She was right about knowing where she was. It didn’t comfort me much, but it was the best I would get unless....

“I will help you under one condition and one condition only,” I said, deciding to hedge my only leverage.

“You want me to tell my father, don’t you?”

“Take it or leave it?”

She stomped away but stopped when she reached the forest’s edge and let out a frustrated scream. “Fine. Fine, I’ll tell him,” she growled.

Her tone was angry, and I didn’t know where it was suddenly coming from, but I got what I wanted other than her not going at all. This compromise was the next best thing.

“Good. Then I’ll help you.” I introduced the rock to the hard place. “Come on, we better go in. We have the service tomorrow and should get some sleep.”

Kallie was complicated, and as much as I knew she loved me, I also knew she wouldn’t keep her word. She probably crossed every finger and toe as she agreed to my demand. If I wanted her to stay alive, I would have to be one step ahead of her.

Chapter Forty-One

I looked over my shoulder at my dad as he hummed *You Are My Sunshine* for the millionth time. I was about to tell him to hum anything else—including the Barney song, if he wanted—but the look on his face made me pause. He was staring off into space as he cleaned his tools from the latest kill, and an old memory clawed its way to the surface of my mind.

“Good morning, Sweetheart,” my mom said, sweetly smiling as my dad stepped into the kitchen.

“Hello, Sunshine.” He kissed her, and I shoved my bowl of cereal away. Yuck. I made a gagging noise when it looked like they would never stop, making my mom laugh. My dad held my mom closer, his arms wrapped around her waist as they looked at me.

“If I didn’t hold your mom like this, we never would’ve had you,” Dad said, and my mom swatted his arm.

“She’s three. Way too early for the birds and bees,” Mom said, but she was wrong. I liked birds and bees.

“I’m three and a half,” I said, crossing my arms.

“What your dad is trying to say is that when you love someone like we love each other, you want to show them affection.”

“Nope, boys are icky.”

“I’m not icky,” Carter said from across the table.

“Yes, you are.” I stuck out my tongue.

“No, I’m not.”

Getting up from the table, I ran for the stairs. “Yes, you are. Icky, icky, icky,” I yelled, and Carter chased after me.

“What are you smiling about,” Carter asked, and I jerked as he yanked me out of the memory.

“Just something from when we were kids.” Carter looked behind us at my dad and shrugged.

“Understandable with that song.”

“They really were special, weren’t they? They were so in love.”

Carter set his notebook and pen down and shocked me as he pulled me into his arms and kissed the side of my neck.

“Just like we are,” he whispered into my ear, making me want to kick my dad out of the room.

“Mmm, I’d like to drag you upstairs, but we have work to do before you head back to college.” Letting go of his body was a chore, but I uncurled my fingers from his T-shirt, which emphasized every dip and curve. He was a walking sex icon. I could imagine the line that would form trying to get into his pants when he made it to the big leagues.

“I’m not sure by the look on your face if you’re thinking about sex or killing someone,” Carter teased as he stepped back.

“Why can’t it be both?” I loved that he blushed a bright red and turned back to the pinboard.

All of Darryl Burton’s information was on display. My dad was nothing if not efficient. Everything was there, from baby photos to who his parents, brothers, cousins, and all extended family were, right to pictures of Sara-Lee. I’d never seen my dad so creative with a kill. I would’ve thought Abel was involved, but I knew my dad wouldn’t let him in on the fun. Sara-Lee was hung from meat hooks we used for the pigs. The extremely sharp metal was embedded in her armpits. Dad had tied her hair back, forcing her to look at the ceiling while the other rope was attached to her feet. He’d gone so far as to

insert a line into her arm, slowly draining her blood. The line had been looped up to the ceiling, so the blood dripped onto her face. He was far more creative than I was, but he inspired me to try harder.

There were so many pictures, notes, and pinned comments that I almost missed the printed text messages. I stepped closer and read the text.

C: You stole my Sunshine, so I stole yours.

D: Whoever this is, you're a dead man!

My blood ran ice cold. There was no way my dad was communicating with this piece of shit. Was he?

C: Come and get me if you dare.

D: What's the address?

C: Do your homework, Darryl Burton, born January 18th in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to Bob and Susan. Such a shame your old man was a drinker, and your mom worked so hard to support him. Is that why you raped your sister first? Was it passion or convenience?

D: Whatever fucker, I'm not falling for your shit. Any of that information is available in the records.

My heart rate increased with every word I read, each one another cut to my soul. I bit my lip hard to keep the volcanic emotions from erupting.

C: This is true. Old MacDonald had a farm. Ee i ee i o. And on his farm, he had some cows. Ee i ee i oh. With a moo-moo here, and a moo-moo there, here a moo, there a moo, everywhere a moo-moo. Old MacDonald had a farm. Ee i ee i o.

D: What the fuck? Are you crazy?

C: Your sweet old Grand Mammie taught me that song just before she died.

D: You're lying.

C: Am I? Have you checked on her recently? I bet you haven't, with that pesky FBI warrant hanging over your head.

D: Fuck you, asshole, you're a dead man!

C: Oh no, Darryl, you have that all wrong. You are the dead man. But before I come for you, I will destroy everything and everyone you care about. No one takes my Sunshine and lives.

D: I swear to God if you hurt my Grand Mammie.

C: Too late.

There was an image that followed, and it was so brutal that I could hardly make out that it was a person, let alone a woman.

C: Shouldn't Sara-Lee be home from the grocery store by now? I hope nothing serious has happened.

The rest of the messages were from Darryl as he swore and cursed my dad, but he never responded again. I snatched the image off the wall and turned to face my father, who was testing the bindings on his table to make sure they were perfect.

“Dad, what the fuck?”

I was transported back in time as he answered but never lifted his head.

“I've warned you about your tone with me before, Angel. I would prefer we not discuss it again.” A shiver raced up and down my spine as he glanced at me.

Carter placed his hand on my shoulder, and I knew he was silently telling me to take a breath. It was so hard to stay calm when pure rage stormed through my body.

“Why didn't you tell me you were communicating with this asshole? And if you're talking to him, why is he not

already on your table? Does being what you are mean you care so little about mom's memory?" I stepped back as he turned and focused on me, murder in his eyes.

"If I were you, daughter, I'd watch what you say about my feelings for your mother."

Dad's hands were in fists, and suddenly, Carter stepped in front of me. He held out his arms and stepped back to trap me between him and the wall. I could've gotten loose if I wanted to hurt him, but he was wagering that I wouldn't, and I didn't.

"Don't, Cain, you'll regret it. Both of you will regret it," he said, looking over his shoulder at me. "The two of you need a fucking timeout from this guy, he's tearing you two apart."

"I need to know why he's not dead already." My anger was still burning bright, and I wanted to argue.

"Because we haven't been able to trace it," Carter said, and my mouth fell open.

"You knew?" He stepped away and turned around to look at me and then my dad.

"I thought you knew," Carter said.

"Why would I question this?" I held up the paper, shaking it. "If I knew."

"I mean before right this moment. That was a few weeks ago now. A lot has happened and..." Carter glanced at my dad, and I felt cut out of something important.

"Why were you hiding this from me?"

My dad shook his head and walked across the room toward me. "Do you remember the night Troy invited me to help the two of you, and I told you I had a new lead?"

Oh shit, I felt the noose wrap around my neck and crossed my arms. "Yes."

"Do you remember how you never came to talk to me even though I reminded you?"

And there it was, the noose tightened, and I felt like a child in one of my lessons. I didn't want to say yes, but he calmly

stared at me, just waiting to pounce, and I knew he would stand there all day.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Next time, instead of thinking I’m hiding things from you and insulting me and your mother’s memory, you will remember.” He turned to walk away but stopped and looked back, his eyes angry even though this voice never changed. “You keep telling me you’re all grown up, and I should trust you. Start giving me a reason to.” My face flamed hot with the embarrassment of being called out, especially in front of Carter. “And don’t ever question what your mother meant to me again, not ever.”

He walked out, and I turned, pulled down a bunch of the pictures, and tore them up as I screamed out my frustration. I grabbed more, including the photo of the man who killed my mother. Carter grabbed me from behind and held me tight before I could rip them apart. His voice was soft and soothing to the flames inside me that felt hot enough to melt my bones.

“We’ll get him,” Carter whispered.

“He’s roamed around free for twelve years. Even one more day is too many,” I said. I stopped struggling, and Carter let me go as I took a deep breath. “My prom is tomorrow. Mom was supposed to be here.” I marched away from Carter and back again. “We would’ve gone dress and shoe shopping, but I had to go with Talon. I thought I might kill her if she forced me to try on something pink one more time. Mom would’ve cried and taken pictures of us and...just so many things that won’t happen because of him.” I looked down at the photo still in my hands and then up at Carter.

“He needs to die.”

“And he will. He can’t stay hidden with both you and your dad looking for him. No one is safe from that duo.” I gave him a half-hearted smirk, but he wasn’t wrong. “I know it’s not the same, but I’ll be there with you.”

A wide smile spread across my face as I thought about the looks we would get as Carter and I walked in together. They

still thought we were brother and sister, and I couldn't wait to make them faint.

“Now that is a smile I know and love. Why don't you grab the binder you made, and we can continue searching for clues while we eat?”

“Food and research, are you trying to seduce me?”

Carter laughed. “Only if it's working.”

“Oh, it's definitely working.”

“I think dinner needs to happen in bed,” he said, grabbing the thick binder and looping his arm through mine.

I stopped him when we got to the door, looked back at my dad's killing room, and switched off the light.

I would get him.

Chapter Forty-Two

Who would have thought my dad would go full paparazzi? Most of the time, I took pictures for birthdays or holidays. He just didn't care the way I did, but tonight, he was everywhere.

He insisted that we get pictures: inside on the stairs, outside on the porch, Carter putting the corsage on my wrist, the two of us kissing. It felt like we were doing a photoshoot for some prom dress magazine.

It almost made me feel bad for what I was planning later. As I read over the binder last night, something Sara-Lee mumbled before she died triggered a memory. My dad had transcribed every word she said, and she kept repeating, no more poop, no more poop, and fucker coop. He looked into every possible combination of fucker, poop, and coop for names, and it was a dead end, but that was when it hit me.

There was a dilapidated, weather-worn sign painted with a giant chicken head and the name Rutledge Cluckers Coop about forty-five minutes from here. We had passed it on our way to a field trip once. I remembered it because it was massive, like a highway billboard. The closed gates said repossessed, and you could just make out the abandoned buildings. Even four years ago, it made me shiver.

That had to be the place Sara-Lee mentioned, it would be the perfect spot for someone to hideout. With a quick internet search, I zoomed in on the property and printed an aerial view to memorize. A farmhouse at the back wasn't visible from the road. It was supposedly abandoned, but a pickup truck was in the driveway.

I almost told Carter what I found but decided to keep quiet. He would only try to stop me or want me to take my dad, and I wanted to do this on my own.

Not only did I want to show my dad I could do it and take down someone he'd been after for years, I wanted to prove it to myself. I always felt my mom's presence, and if she watched us from some ghost world, I wanted her to be proud of me.

"You sure you have everything," Aspen asked us again for the millionth time. There was a choir of yeses. I don't know how she could see to take photos because she hadn't stopped crying the entire time. Some of the tears were happy, and the rest were sad for Troy.

It was strange, the four of us here without him. We may not have been super close, but we always did things as a family. I saw him every day, and whether I realized it or not, he was a big part of my life. I'd spent too much of that time loathing him for how similar he was to my dad. I rubbed the T on the charm bracelet Carter gave me as a graduation gift. Troy taught me to see myself through a different lens, and I would always be grateful to him for that.

I looked down at the pretty piece of jewelry. Carter had added charms for me: a little knife, everyone's initials, and a small ring with a black stone. He said he would get me a real one, but this was a promise to marry me. I also figured he promised to track me. The clasp was a little larger than a normal one. It could've just been the style, but I knew him, and he knew me, which meant he had a good idea of what I planned. There was no way I was letting him get involved, though. This battle was mine and I couldn't let him get hurt.

I insisted we take a car rather than pile into the limo with Bo and Talon. When Carter asked why, I told him I couldn't handle watching Talon cry anymore. I didn't blame her, but it was me she grabbed every time. Tonight, she would have to use Bo. He wanted her to use him. The guy salivated for any scrap of attention he got from her.

“Are you okay,” Carter asked after he helped me get into the car and hopped in beside me.

I smiled wide. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I could feel the weight of my knives and what I planned to do under the dress.

“You just don’t seem yourself. Like you don’t really want to go tonight,” Carter said as we pulled out of the driveway just ahead of the limo.

I looked out the window at the trees passing by and shrugged. “I hate that Troy isn’t here and that I spent most of my life annoyed or hating him.”

It was true, just not the whole truth. I hated lying to Carter. I knew he would follow me into the bowels of hell and back, but if he died because of me...that was something I wouldn’t let happen. That would kill me.

He grabbed my hand and brought it to his mouth. “Have I told you how beautiful you are?” I smoothed the dark blue fabric that matched my eyes. “And this new hairstyle is sexy.” He wiggled in his seat, making my mouth curl up.

“Your pants are looking a little tighter.”

“Oh they feel tighter.”

“I’m sure we can find a way to rectify that after freaking everyone out.” Carter laughed.

“You don’t care if they talk, do you?”

“No. Not even if someone wanted to try and sell the story one day when I’m all rich and famous.” He smirked, and his dimple showed. I wanted to jump across the seat, say, ‘Screw the prom,’ and have him right now in the car. “I’ll just produce my birth certificate and prove them all wrong. Then the person will look like a money-grabbing liar, and that will be that. But, as far as them staring and gossiping, I couldn’t care less. I love you. That’s what matters.”

I squeezed his hand tighter and fought the urge to rub the spot over my heart. The guilt was eating at me, and if I opened my mouth, I would blurt out my plan. Now, I understood where my dad’s superpower had come from. His ability to stay

focused on the kill and not let emotions cloud his judgment was unparalleled, which was why Darryl still being alive confused me.

Limos and fancy cars obviously belonging to ‘Daddy’ were lined up around the school as we pulled up. Carter ignored the long line and headed for the parking lot instead of the drop-off. We got a spot not far from the door, and now that we were here, an electrical charge of excitement rippled up my spine. I knew I looked incredible, and my date was the definition of walking sex. Even though I never wished to be popular, I wanted everyone’s eyes on us tonight.

Carter opened my door and held out his hand for me, and the little gesture made my heart race. Taking it, I stood and opened my clutch.

“You might as well put the keys in here,” I said, and he dropped them in. Once more, nagging guilt ate at my stomach.

With my head held high, I slipped my arm through his as we walked to the front door. The first group of girls we passed stopped talking and stared, and I knew it had nothing to do with me.

“Isn’t that her brother,” I heard one of them ask, but I didn’t bother glancing her way.

The theme for tonight was *A Night in Italy*, and I had to give Talon and her Pussybots some credit. They did a great job with the decorations. Black and gold balloons filled every corner while images of Italy were plastered on the walls. We walked over a small wooden bridge built over a fake canal and waited in line for photos. Someone had taken a large canoe, cut out wood shaped like a gondola, and painted it to look like the real thing. As we stepped behind, I couldn’t help but smile.

I’d changed and grown so much in the four years I spent here. Even though I never wanted to return after graduation, there was a finality to the night that felt like a door closing. Troy would’ve hated tonight, yet I could picture him smiling for the cameras with some hot girl on his arm while fantasizing about killing them all. I really missed him.

“Good, you two are beautiful. Now wrap your arms around her waist,” the photographer said, and I smirked at a few shocked expressions as Carter did just that. Turning in his arms, I wrapped my hands behind his neck, and the photographer cheered us on as Carter leaned in for a kiss.

The click of the shutter on the camera floated away, and so did the gasps of those waiting in line. Carter filled my world as he always had. I had many hopes and dreams and things I wanted to do and see, but none of them seemed important without Carter by my side.

Carter kissed me on the nose, then ushered me into the main hall. Lights were flashing in time to the loud music from the DJ. People danced while others took photos with the decorations spread around. There was a long table piled high with desserts, and I had no idea where they found it, but there was a Leaning Tower of Pisa that looked just like the mural painted on the wall. This was a perfect celebration of us leaving high school and moving on with our lives.

“This theme is much better than the one they did for you,” I said as we neared the dessert table.

“How the heck would you know that?”

“You don’t really think I let you go to prom with a girl I hated and didn’t follow you, did you?”

Carter stared at me and then shook his head. “You’re the reason Amanda left early. She said she felt sick after going to the bathroom.”

“I may or may not have had something to do with that.” I teased him as I picked up a chocolate-covered strawberry. Putting it in my mouth, I took a bite and moaned as the sweet flavor hit my tongue. The heat in Carter’s eyes was instant. Holding the other half up to him, he bit into it, and a little bit of the juice dribbled down his chin. I leaned in and licked it off before he could grab a napkin.

“Do you mind that I chased her off,” I asked, kissing his cheek and leaving behind a light imprint of my lips.

“Not really. I only went with her because she asked me to go.” He picked a bite-sized brownie off the table and took a bite before offering me the other half. “Do I want to know how often you follow me out that I don’t know about?”

“No, probably not, but someone needed to keep an eye on you. You had deplorable taste in women, me excluded, of course.”

“Why yes of course.”

Glancing around, I spotted Talon and Bo walking in, and she dragged him straight to the dance floor.

As I slipped my hand into Carter’s, he stole another square off the table before I pulled him to the dance floor. For the first time, I felt like I was a normal girl, doing normal girl things. I didn’t want to fit in, not really. But I wondered what it was like to worry about the color of my nails instead of if blood was left under them and wearing what was in fashion instead of what would conceal my knives.

“Have I told you lately how fucking sexy you are,” Carter asked as he twirled me out and back into his body.

“Yes, but I love hearing you say it.”

His hands circled my waist and pulled me flush against him. “The principal looks like he’s going to have a heart attack,” Carter said, and I glanced over to see the man staring and holding his chest. He actually looked like he was in the middle of one.

“Wanna give him an extra show?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” I said and moaned as Carter dropped his lips to mine. This was no sweet peck on the lips. It was a battle as I tasted the sweet chocolate flavor left on his tongue. I would’ve stood like that with him all night, but he broke away, and I could feel the horrified expressions from the people around us.

“I think your plan to freak everyone out is working,” he whispered as we swayed on the dance floor.

“I wonder if I should get on my knees and pull your cock out.” Carter sucked in a sharp breath as I rubbed myself against his body.

“Okay, that may get us arrested, which will give your father a coronary, but...” Carter looked around. “I have an idea.”

I laughed as Carter gripped my hand, and we weaved through all the disgusted stares. We stepped out front, and the photographer was gone, most likely inside, taking photos of everyone dancing. He dragged me to the coat room and peered inside. The girl working it earlier was gone, at least for now. Carter pulled me inside and locked the door, then pulled down on the metal grate and locked it into place before turning to gaze at me.

My pulse skyrocketed to the moon with his attention focused on me. Grabbing a coat from the rack, he threw it on the ground.

“Pull your dress up,” Carter ordered.

I loved this side of his personality, and I’d been waiting for him to let it out. Slowly, I pulled the hem up, and Carter glanced at the knives strapped to my legs but said nothing.

“That’s my Trouble,” he praised, and I knew without touching myself that he was already making me wet.

“Unzip my pants and pull my cock out,” he said. Salivating to have him in my mouth, I moved as fast as I could to release him from the confines of his pants. “Ah, ah, ah, don’t stroke me. I didn’t give you permission.” I grudgingly let go. It was so fucking tempting to bend over and slip him into my mouth.

Carter nodded to the back of the room. “Go sit in the chair.”

I glanced back at him as I walked to the chair and sat down. He followed but stayed out of reach. It was annoying and yet wise. I really wanted to touch the large cock sticking out of his pants. My eyes were glued to it, and my kitty flexed with the thought of him thrusting into me.

“Good, now feet up and spread your legs. I want to watch you finger my pussy.”

Scotting down in the chair, I lifted my legs and spread them in a wide V before pulling the thin string of my thong aside to show him what he wanted.

“So fucking beautiful,” he growled, his hand wrapped around his shaft and slowly stroked. I could come just watching him get off. Sucking on two of my fingers, I got them good and wet before slipping them between my widely spread thighs.

“You like watching?”

“Yes.”

“So do I,” I said and couldn’t take my eyes off his hand as it traveled up and down his hard length. He squeezed at the end, and a drop of precum formed. I licked my lips, wanting it to be in my mouth instead.

“Yeah, that’s it. Stuff those fingers in there, my naughty girl. Who owns that pussy?”

“You do.” I was breathing heavily, the orgasm already starting to build. I could fuck him all day and night, and it never felt like enough.

“You sure about that? No other guys you want to fuck?”

“What would you do if I said yes?”

“I’d tie you up and fuck you until my name was the only one you could remember, and then I’d have to find him and kill him,” Carter said very matter of fact, and my mouth dropped open.

“You’d kill to keep my pussy all to yourself?”

“Yes, now move your hand,” he growled and knelt between my legs. Gripping my inner thighs, he opened them wider and ran his tongue along my sensitive lips. “Keep that thong out of my way,” Carter ordered.

His tongue was so incredibly talented, and I was panting hard and running my other hand through his hair as the orgasm

raced for completion. I pressed his face harder into my needy pussy, his tongue driving deep into me, but just when I knew I would crest over that peak, he pulled back.

“No, please don’t stop,” I begged, my ass wiggling on the seat.

“Get up, naughty girl.”

I was aching, my entire body throbbing with the need to release, and watching him undo his suit jacket and dress shirt was a slow, torturous striptease that I could watch all night long. My body shuddered when Carter popped that last button, and the material parted. All I could see was his hard abs and chest, with *Kal* peeking out.

“Good, now walk to the door,” he said, sitting on the chair I’d just occupied.

I didn’t know what he was up to, but I would do whatever he said as long as he didn’t unlock the door like at the damn movie theater.

“Get down on your knees and crawl to me.” I cocked a brow. “Down on your knees, or I’ll come all over the floor right now, and you can lick it up from there if you want it.”

Holy hell, I didn’t know when this dirty streak had taken over my sweet Carter, but I would’ve crawled over sharp stone or broken glass to get to him. Pulling random coats off the rack, I tossed them on the ground in a line and shrugged.

“It’s dirty,” I said, and the corner of his mouth turned up.

“Crawl, now.”

Fucking hell, I was wetter by the second. I got down on the hard floor and loved the feel of my naked ass in the air. I almost wished we hadn’t locked the door so someone could come in and see this. I kept my eyes on his but saw his hand moving on his cock as I moved across the floor to him.

“Such a naughty girl. You like it dirty, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I rubbed my cheek on his leg like a cat and didn’t give a fuck if I walked out of here with my makeup smeared down the side of my face.

“Open your mouth and stick out your tongue.”

I got as close to him as possible and opened my mouth like a good girl. Anticipation of what came next was a drug in my veins. He was a drug, and I wanted that next hit.

“Is this what you want, naughty girl?”

He teased me with the tip of his cock on my tongue, but no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't fast enough to wrap my lips around him before he pulled away.

“Is it? Tell me you want my cock. Tell me how bad you want me to stuff your pussy full of my cock and make you come while screaming my name.”

“I want it. I want it bad.” Talking was difficult, but I tried.

“Then beg for it,” he ordered and put his dick on my tongue. I didn't think the man could turn me on any more than he already did, but I was dead wrong. When I tried to lick him instead, he pulled my treat away. “What did I say?”

“To beg for it.”

“And why would I want you to beg for me?”

“Because I love it.”

“And?”

I ran my tongue up the inside of his thigh, but I was good and didn't go near my prize.

“Because it makes me hot and wet.”

He grabbed my chin, and I shivered. Carter's eyes held a fire that I didn't see often, but I knew a bit of the devil lived in his soul. Maybe I'd infected him like a poison, spreading throughout his body until he could no longer resist. He sucked my lower lip into his mouth, and I would pass out if my pulse rose any higher.

“You want to cut me,” he asked. I moaned and nodded. “You want to lick the blood and come from my body?” I nodded again and swayed on my knees.

“Later.” He dropped my chin and sat back. “Suck it and get it wet, then get on my lap and fuck me,” he said, letting go of his cock so it bobbed against his abs. As soon as I reached for it, he shook his head. “No hands. Put them behind your back.”

“Tease.” I purred at him but rose up on my knees with my hands behind my back. “You’ll be lucky if I don’t bite you instead.”

He shrugged. “Do it if that’s what you want. Just be sure you’re okay with the consequences.”

He would let me do it, and I knew it would only piss him off and take him out of commission. I didn’t want any of that. Even with his cock pulsing, I managed to get my mouth around him on the first try and moaned, sucking on him as hard as I could.

“Fuck, Trouble,” he growled and grabbed my hair, forcing my head further down his thick shaft until he hit the back of my throat. His hands didn’t relent as he fucked my mouth hard and fast. “You have the sweetest mouth.”

Pulling up on my head, I glared up at him. “I better be the only mouth on you from now on.” Carter smiled and laughed hard. I had no idea why what I said was so funny, but I would cut a bitch.

“Get on my lap. I have a secret to tell you,” he said.

Standing, I straddled his legs and moaned as I impaled myself on his cock. Carter’s head fell back, his hands tightening on my hips with each inch I sank lower. As many times as we’d been together, it always took a few minutes to adjust to his size. He ran his thumbs over my nipples and softly tugged on the material until my boobs popped out of the satiny bra cup.

“What did you want to tell me,” I asked, and it was my turn to grip his hair as he sucked my nipple into his mouth. My hands roamed over his body, taking in the feel of him under my fingertips.

“Patience is a virtue,” he said, flicking his tongue over my sensitive little bud.

“Maybe, but sinners have more fun.” I lifted my ass and brought it down hard. Carter groaned, his chest muscles flexing. “Now tell me, who do I need to make bleed?”

Kissing me hard, he cleared my mind of all other thoughts and made me scream into his mouth as he lifted my ass and pulled me down on him. Growling like an animal, he stood and pushed me through the coats until we were in a little cave of jackets.

Someone chose that moment to try to open the door, but Carter ignored it and focused on thrusting into me. He swallowed down every scream. I ran my nails down his chest, and he took me harder until my head was light, and the denied orgasm from earlier ripped through my body. As soon as I came, Carter picked up the pace, pressing me harder into the wall of coats. He pulled away from my mouth and bit the side of my neck hard. I came again as he released with a deep groan that vibrated through my body. I could feel him twitching and flexing inside my body, and I was growing as addicted to that as everything else about him.

Carter nipped at my earlobe and whispered, “I was a virgin until you took advantage of me. While I was roofied, I might add.”

“What?” I was shocked. Pulling out of the coats, he sat me down on my feet and helped get my dress back into place. “How is that possible? You even said we couldn’t be together because you wanted to have sex.”

I helped him do up the buttons on his shirt as he tucked himself back into his pants.

“I had to say something to get you to stop pushing. I wanted you so bad and felt like such a perv for it. Ever wonder why I took ten showers a day? I’m a guy, but I’m not that dirty. Well, I was dirty in there thinking about you,” he said.

“Wait...you...you waited for me?”

“You’re the only one I’ve ever wanted. I dated lots as a cover, but I got rid of them before they expected sex, or you killed them.” He cupped my face and kissed me slowly. It was

the sweetest kiss we'd ever shared. "I keep telling you, I've always been yours."

I laid my hand over his heart. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yes. Why?"

I smiled, the guilt making me sick to my stomach. "I just want to make sure you know that you're the light that burns bright in my darkened heart."

"I don't see you like that," he said.

"I know, that's what I love the most about you."

"Why do I feel like you're trying to say something else?" His intelligent eyes searched my face.

Grabbing his hand, I laughed like he was ridiculous.

"We better get back," I said, unlocking the door. Some things just had to be done, and I hoped Carter forgave me.

Chapter Forty-Three

My suspicion grew the longer we were here. Kallie was not the type to take crazy pictures, but she dragged me to each photo op and took a bunch. Then we danced with Talon, Bo, her friend Alex, and her date until we were all out of breath. Something was off.

But what really struck me as strange was when a girl named Tracy got bold enough to turn in our direction and sneer.

“Disgusting,” she said, her judgemental stare darting between me and Kallie. “I always knew there was something wrong with you.”

“Don’t you dare to speak to her like that,” I growled. Her date stepped back as I glared at him, but Kallie grabbed my hand.

“It’s fine. Let them think what they want. Who cares, this was the reaction I was after,” she said and smiled.

The couple wandered off, and I looked down at Kallie. “You planning to...you know, later?”

“No, I knew that is what people would think.” She shrugged, and red flags waved high in the air.

“Attention, everyone,” the principal said as the music quieted. “We will now bring up those nominated for Prom Queen and King.” He held up cards like this was an awards show. “The first person I’d like to ask to make their way backstage is Talon Buchanan.”

Talon squealed and dashed backstage. There was nothing about that choice that surprised me.

“Next up is Alexandra Thomas.” We clapped as Kallie’s friend waved and made her way backstage. “Lastly, I’d like to call up Kallie Buchanan.”

My mouth fell open, and I looked down at Kallie as she gave a little cheer. She kissed me before picking up her dress and jogging for the door like this was the most exciting news she’d ever heard. She hated anything to do with Prom Queen and King. I couldn’t remember how many times she ranted about how horrible it was and all the whys.

The principal called out the names of three male seniors, and I remembered well how I was one of the names for my senior year. It felt hollow and fake, not being with who I really wanted.

“Who do you think is going to win,” Bo asked.

“Talon,” I said, not missing a beat. Unless Kallie had decided she wanted to win for some strange reason and fixed the votes. If she set her mind to it, anything was possible.

“Can I have all the contestants come out onto the stage? Everyone give our finalists a round of applause.”

I clapped along with everyone else until only two girls appeared on stage. I craned my neck to see more of the stage like she was hiding behind the heavy curtain.

“Oh, we seem to be missing someone. Kallie Buchanan, can you come out on stage please.”

I didn’t wait another second and pushed through the crowd. Adrenaline fueled me, my heart pounding hard. I knew Kallie would try something like this. She was so determined to go after Darryl herself.

Pushing through the backstage door, I didn’t see her and pulled out my phone as I poked my head into the first dressing room. I was about to move on when a small pile of glittery blue caught my eye. Running over, I looked down at Kallie’s dress and the bracelet I’d given her as a gift. There was a small note on top.

Carter,

*I'm sorry. You're my heart, but I
have to do this.*

LV Trouble

“Oh fuck, no, you don’t,” I mumbled and picked up all her stuff before heading for the door. Bursting outside, I skidded to a stop as I stared at the empty parking spot.

“Shit, the keys. That was stupid. Of course, she took the car.” I hit Cain’s number and put him on speaker as I pulled up my tracking app.

I pressed the code to Cain’s workroom and took a deep breath when the door hissed as it unlocked. I always felt like I was opening the door to some spaceship, and a creature would be waiting for me on the other side. Technically, I guess there was.

The door opened, and I cringed as the woman lying on Cain’s table screamed. Sometimes I just didn’t want to know.

“Is this a bad time? I can come back.” I couldn’t unsee the gore. Even standing by the door, I saw bone and muscles showing down the side of her body and legs. My stomach churned. I was used to it and still found it difficult to watch. That was what made me different from almost everyone else who lived here.

“Now is fine. Just make sure the door is locked,” Cain said. He spoke softly like we were in a library, not a torture chamber. Closing the door, I hit the lock, and the thud of the large metal bolts clicking into place sent a shiver racing down my spine.

Braving the sound of the crying and begging, I stopped a few feet away from the work table and waited for Cain to address me again.

“Help, help, help, help.” The woman’s voice was hoarse, her eyes wide and feral from pain and fear.

“Are you not going to ask who this is?”

I was curious but shook my head no. “I figure if you want me to know, you’ll tell me,” I said.

Cain looked up from the incision he was making and smirked.

“Help me, please,” the woman said, but I kept my eyes on Cain. I’d lost count of how many people had begged me to help them, but there was no saving them from the jaws of hell.

Cain grabbed the roll of wide surgical tape and tore off a large piece, slapping it on the woman’s mouth.

“There, much better.” He shook his head. “So annoying when they beg my guests for help.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from showing any emotion. “Would you like me to ask who she is?”

Cain shrugged and leaned on the table, staring at me. It never got easier to look him in the eyes when he gave me his full attention. This was what it would be like to stare down the jaws of a giant great white. Whether I breathed another day was always his decision.

“This is Jessica. She says, hi.” His voice was void of emotion, and I couldn’t tell if he was joking.

“Hi,” I said and lifted my hand to wave. Yup, that felt stupid.

Cain snorted out a laugh. “Jessica is Darryl’s sister.” He looked down at her. Upon closer inspection, it looked like he’d been auditioning for Frankenstein.

Jessica had been cut open and re-sown in multiple places, and he didn’t use nice thin thread. Cain had used something that looked like shoelaces. Only then did I realize he had removed her hands and replaced them with a rotting pair. I covered my mouth as the maggots moved around. I could feel the bile rising and was suddenly fucking happy I hadn’t eaten anything.

“She claimed she didn’t know where her brother was.”

“Oh yeah?” I said and looked away before I threw up.

“Still can’t handle the gore?” Cain called me out. “How will you handle being with my daughter for the rest of your life if you can’t deal with a little blood?”

“This is more than a little blood, this is...I don’t know what this is. It’s something closer to what Abel would do.”

Cain lifted a brow. “Very observant. He did do this, or at least it was his idea. I didn’t trust him to make the incisions. He tends to go overboard.” That was a fucking ironic statement if I’d ever heard one.

“Do I want to know whose hands those are?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, I guess it doesn’t. Is all this worth it?” I held out my hand to the woman who had become a science experiment.

“Yes, it’s funny what people reveal when you start cutting parts off their body. My brother does have a knack for getting loved ones to turn on each other.”

“Does she know where he is?”

“She says no, and I’m inclined to believe her, but she also refuses to give me the passwords to her computer so I can verify.”

“You know I could get you in her computer, right?” I said and glanced at the laptop on his worktable. He was no longer worried about being traced here. I’d installed enough scramblers to shut down everything incoming years ago.

“Of course, but this is far more entertaining.”

Cain straightened and walked to the end of the table with a shiny silver handsaw. I took a step back. “You want to do the honors?”

Jessica screamed under the tape as she watched Cain, her nose flaring and chest heaving as what I was sure was another round of panic set in. I could feel the energy coming off the

table, and when he laid the sharp saw on her foot, her eyes rolled back in her head, and she passed out.

“Pathetic,” Cain grumbled, annoyed, and thankfully put the saw down. I let out the breath I held, my morals screaming as they ran around in my head.

“Can I just talk to you for a minute without...this happening,” I said, pointing to Jessica.

“Sure, she won’t wake up for a few minutes.”

I licked my lips. “I think Kallie is going after Darryl.”

“I know.”

My mouth fell open. “What do you mean you know? And if you know, why aren’t you stopping her?” Anger gripped my heart, thinking he would let her go after the man who killed her mother alone.

“I know because she’s my daughter, and I know her. Of course, she will try. I don’t have to have confirmation from her lips to know the look in her eyes.” He leaned back against his counter and crossed his arms. “Who said I was going to let her go alone?”

“I’m lost. Wait...are you using Kallie as bait to draw this guy out?”

Cain’s brow lifted. “No, but not a bad idea.”

I wanted to smack myself in the face. “Then what do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m tracking her phone.”

“And what if she doesn’t take her phone? Kallie is smart.”

He tapped his chin. “True. What do you have in mind?”

“I want to put tracers on her. Multiple tracers.” I crossed my arms, mimicking his position.

“Okay, but I suggest making one obvious and the others not so obvious.”

I nodded, liking that. It was a bait and switch. I should feel like the worst fucking boyfriend for doing this, but I knew she

would try something. She was so fucking brave and stubborn, and I wasn't letting anything happen to her. Not ever.

Cain turned, opened a drawer, and pulled out a small box. He stared at it before walking around the table and holding it out to me. Taking the offering, I opened the lid to see Kirby's wedding ring. I would recognize it anywhere.

"We may not always understand one another, but I trust you will love and protect my daughter. When you're ready, this ring is for her. Kirby would've wanted her to have it." Closing the lid, I looked into Cain's eyes. It was the first time I could see the depth of his love. The emotion was vivid, something I'd never seen before. I couldn't imagine what it was like for him to lose her.

"Thank you, she'll love this, and thank you for trusting me."

"Yes, I guess it's a good thing Kirby made me promise not to kill you," he said, his lip curled up in a sinister smile that stopped my heart but made my pulse race. He gripped my shoulder and leaned in like he'd done when I was a child. I swallowed hard, the hair rising on the back of my neck. "But if you break her heart, nothing will save you from me finding you and skinning you alive. Do you understand me, son?"

How was it that this was the first time he'd called me son, and I was just as terrified before he said it that he would reach into my chest and rip out my beating heart?

I straightened my spine and turned to look him in the eyes, mere inches from my face. "If I ever hurt Kallie or fail her, you won't have to find me. I'll hand myself over for you to do your worst. She is my life. I will die for her."

"No, stay at the school. I'll pick you up from there," Cain said.

"Too late, I'm already jogging north on Banker's Way," I said and heard him curse in the phone.

"What part of do not draw attention to yourself do you not understand?" I could hear doors bang and Abel yell that he

was coming in the background.

“I couldn’t do nothing.”

“So wearing yourself out was your next best option? Unbelievable. Where is she heading?”

“I’m not telling you that. You need to pick me up first. I’ll stop at Cedar Creek Elementary. It’s a quarter mile up the road.” I didn’t trust him not to pull the same thing Kallie did and take off without me, and I was getting to her one way or another.

“Fuck,” he growled. “Fine.” The call ended.

With each footfall, the panic rose higher in my body. Kallie was getting further away by the second. Running into the school’s parking lot, I paced and waited for Cain and Abel. Putting my hand in my pocket, I gripped her bracelet.

“I’m not losing you, Kallie. Do you hear me?”

I looked up at the night sky, closed my eyes, and did something I hadn’t done since before my parents died. “Mom, Dad, Aunt Kirby, Troy, if you can hear me...I need your help. Keep Kallie safe til we get there. Please, I’m begging you.”

I begged over and over until headlights pulled into the parking lot, and I ran for the truck, hopping in the back seat.

“Let’s go.” Abel smacked his hand on the dash. Cain looked at his brother but didn’t say anything. I’d never seen Abel so serious and certainly never thought I would be happy to be in a car with two serial killers, but the world worked in mysterious ways.

“Where to,” Cain asked as he pulled out on the road, and I handed him my phone with the tracking app open.

“Huh, smart girl. That was obvious. I should’ve thought of that,” Cain said, handing the phone back.

The dot was still moving but had slowed down. “Where is she going?”

“Chicken farm. I know a shortcut, but you’ll want to fasten your seatbelt. This is going to be a rough ride.”

I should've known he wasn't fucking joking, it wasn't really a Cain trait. He wheeled the truck onto a narrow ATV trail with large bumps and ruts and loose gravel that pinged the undercarriage. I gripped the door and still hit my head off the ceiling multiple times, but Cain never slowed. He flew so fast along the narrow path, cutting cross country, that all the trees and farms we passed were a blur.

"Faster," Abel growled out.

"Shut up, I need to focus," Cain said.

"Troy just died. We're not losing Kallie too," Abel said, his eyes wild and his motivation clear. The pain of Troy's death was riding him like a demon on his back. There was no way to save Troy, but that didn't matter. Just like it didn't matter to Cain how many people he had to torture to get the information he wanted about Darryl.

I gasped as we burst out of the trail, crossed a two-lane road—thank fuck no cars were coming—and then sailed over a small hill to continue on our course. Slowing down, Cain turned right onto a path I never would've seen and pulled into a farmer's field. He cut the lights and drove along the edge in the dark. There was a copse of trees and a wooden fence, and just beyond were three barns and a house that looked ready to fall over with the next strong wind.

"He'll be in that one or the house," Cain said, pointing to the only two buildings with a soft glow from a window.

"I don't see Kallie's car," I said, and Cain hopped out. "You won't. She will have snuck on like we are." Jumping out, I looked at Cain just in time to be sucker punched in the face so hard that I was on my ass, flipped over onto my stomach, and had my hands tied before I even knew that the fuck was happening.

"What the hell are you doing?" I spit out blood pouring from my nose into my mouth.

"This is not a job for you," Cain said as Abel walked around the truck.

"Like fuck, it's not. Untie me."

“No.” Cain and Abel picked me up, and I struggled in their arms. They weren’t keeping me from helping Kallie. “You’re wasting time. Do you want her to get killed because of you?”

“Because of me? I’m her fiancé. I love her.”

“Yes, but there are some things that only a father can do.”

He sat me upright in the back of the truck, and I glared at him, rage filling my body. He tricked me, and now I was useless. I didn’t think I could hate anyone until this moment. Cain gripped the door, but paused before closing it.

“We both know you’re not cut out for what might happen in there or what might have already happened.” I swallowed hard. “I’m doing this to protect you as much as to save my daughter. For the two of you to have the future you want, your hands must always remain clean.”

And just like that, he said something that stunned me into silence.

He closed the door, and I watched them leap over the fence and disappear among the shadows while I sat with dark thoughts of what could be happening inside those walls.

Chapter Forty-Four

I felt death in the air the moment I stepped on the property. There was a sensation around places where many have died. My dad didn't believe in ghosts, an afterlife, heaven, or hell. He thought we were born and died, and that was it. I didn't really know, and it wasn't like I'd seen any of those things to know for sure. What I did know was that a stillness accompanied death. It hung in the air and blanketed everything like a warning to the living that something terrible happened there.

I'd prepped the car before we left with my go bag. My extra knives, black clothing, and a burner phone so my dad couldn't track me. I glanced down at my empty wrist and felt terrible for taking my bracelet off and leaving it behind, but I knew Carter had a tracer in it.

Most girls would've been mad, but I thought it was sweet, if not misguided. He wasn't the killer I was, but I knew his worry ran as deep as a cavern and just as wide.

Pulling my hood up, I slipped under the fence and ran across the open to the shadow of the first barn. My feet never made a sound, another lesson my dad taught me. I stopped to listen as I neared the barn door, but nothing moved or even creaked. It was like the buildings were scared to make noise.

Rounding the corner, I looked up at the next barn, and it was also dark, so I slipped along the end to the third one. There was nothing. Not a stray cat or rustle of leaves, and all my senses were on high alert for any sign of Darryl Burton, the man who took my mom from me.

A soft thud of metal hitting metal made me jump along with my adrenaline. Crouching low, I stalked closer as I heard a scraping sound. Peeking around the corner to the house, I spotted my prey, and the sounds made sense. He was standing at a barbeque, using a brush to clean the metal grate. The glow from the window bathed him in light.

The moment felt surreal as I watched him work. I couldn't see his face, but I still had it committed to memory from the pictures on my dad's wall. Tonight, I would put an X through his face once and for all. He closed the lid and walked inside. When the screen door banged shut, I ran for the front of the house.

I made it to my new hiding spot just as the door opened again. The hinges were quiet, which told me all I needed to know. He didn't want to be seen or heard and definitely didn't want to be found. It was why he parked behind the house. It was why no obvious lights could be seen from the road and why a massive padlock on the gate at the end of the driveway looked like it hadn't been opened in years. He had to have another way onto the property, but I wasn't worried about him escaping. He was never leaving here alive again.

Sizzling reached my ears, along with the smell of grilled steak. It was late for dinner, so either Darryl worked a job where he didn't get home until late, or it was so people didn't see him outside. Turning my camera on, I slipped the lens around the side of the house. He was sitting on the single porch step, drinking a beer.

I needed another way in. Wandering quietly from one window to the next, I tugged at them to see if they were unlocked or rotten enough that the lock would slide, but no dice. There was a storm cellar door, and it was a fifty-fifty shot if it also had access from the inside. As I got closer, I saw it was chained with a numeric lock. Annoyed, I pulled my knife and rounded the back of the house. Closing in the corner, I stepped away enough to see the little bit of light shining, but there was no shadow of someone sitting on the ground. Something wasn't right, and the hair stood on the back of my neck, but I couldn't see anything move in the darkness.

Cocking my head, I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing and the sounds around me. The barbecue was off, but nothing cooked that fast. I heard the soft rustle of feet and let my training guide me. Dropping low, I rolled away and heard something smash against the side of the house.

Darryl was shaking out his fist, which was the size of my face. “Bitch,” he snarled, his head turning my way. “Who are you, and what the fuck do you want?”

I pulled my second knife, and Darryl eyed them as they spun in my hands. “What? You on some vigilante mission? You one of the girls I fucked and back for revenge? I have news for you, you liked it. Probably, begged for more.” He grabbed his crotch, but I kept my eyes on his face.

I wouldn’t let him goad me, a priceless lesson my dad taught me. He wanted me to make the first move. The challenging look in his narrowed eyes and snarl lifting his lip told me everything I needed to know.

“Speak up bitch, why are you on my property?”

“It’s not yours. The bank owns this place,” I said. “I have as much right to be here as you do.”

“Is that what you’re looking for, a free meal and a place to sleep?” He looked me up and down. The man was vile. I’d read his extensive file and knew why my mom had insisted on bringing this guy in. I also knew that twelve years free was a long time to do a lot more damage.

“Maybe I am,” I said.

“If that’s the case, I’m happy to open my home to you, but you’ll have to suck my cock as payment.” He snorted and laughed, his muscles relaxing slightly. “Get it? Cock, and this is a chicken farm?”

“I wouldn’t give up your day job.”

“Shut up, you’re the one that’s at my home.” I didn’t bother to reiterate that he didn’t have the right to be here. He brushed that off the first time around. “We gotta deal?”

“Deal.” I made a show of putting my knives away.

“That’s pretty fancy, all ninja styles. Where did you learn that,” he asked, holding out his arm for me to follow him.

“My dad. He loves his knives.”

“Strange thing to love. Did he ever use them on you? You’re not all mutilated and shit, are you?” He opened the screen door, but there was no way I was walking ahead of him.

“Does it matter? I’m only sucking your cock, right?” I crossed my arms, but every muscle was ready to act if he moved.

“I guess so.”

“You can go ahead.”

“A skittish one. You’ve been around the block a few times.” I was looking forward to cutting his tongue right out of his head.

“How did you know I was here? I was planning on stealing your steak when you went back inside,” I lied smoothly.

“Camera,” was all he said, but my eyes flicked around looking for the hidden piece. I hadn’t thought about him having cameras with the electricity cut off to the property. That was a mistake I wouldn’t make again.

Darryl stepped through the door into the kitchen, and he had a revolver sitting on the table. I couldn’t chance him reaching it, so I pulled my knife and threw it at his back. Even with the short distance, my aim was strong and true.

“Fuck!” Darryl roared as the metal sank midway up his back, just under his ribcage. I pulled out my second knife as he spun around, trying to reach the blade.

“Bitch, we had a deal,” he growled as I ran forward and landed a jump kick to his gut. He grunted and stumbled back, hitting the table and sending it and the gun flying across the small room. But he didn’t go down like I hoped. Diving in low, I aimed for his knee and the pressure point that would cripple him, but for a man built like a bear, he moved fast and stepped out of the way, catching me in the face with his boot.

Pain ripped through my jaw and down my neck as I fell onto my side with a thump. I was used to taking hits to the face with the defense training, so thankfully, despite the pain, my eyes didn't fill up with tears, and I saw his foot coming for my head. I rolled out of the way and pushed myself up.

Darryl crashed into the wall, and the force shook the entire house. I coughed as little pieces of the ceiling broke away and fell on my face and in my eyes.

“Shit.” I stumbled back, trying to get some distance as I wiped the crap away. Darryl yelled like a madman, and I avoided his fist but wasn't so lucky with the knee to the gut that drove the air from my lungs or the punch that gott me square in the ribs. The pain was instant and sharp. He filled the entrance like a looming shadow, and despite the lack of oxygen and pain , I landed a kidney shot and an uppercut to his jaw that forced him back. I still couldn't catch my breath. My only choice was to get back outside and put some space between us.

“You're dead. I'm going to fuck you, then kill you.”

Running for the door, I burst outside and down the step, but Darryl was after me like a train. I turned and ran for the barn as fast as I could. Wheeze in, wheeze out, why couldn't I catch my breath? I was a good runner, but it was like someone stabbing me in the lungs with every intake of air. Wrapping my arm around myself, I quickly felt for a broken rib but couldn't tell. I remembered seeing a spade shovel by the door of the closest barn and aimed for it.

I wrapped my hand around the handle just as Darryl grabbed the back of my sweater and jerked me off my feet, slamming me into the barn wall. All I could think was that I had a collapsed lung as the pain in my chest got worse.

“Ah,” I cried as he forced my arms against the barn.

“You're no runaway. Who the fuck are you?”

I spit in his face. “Fuck you,” I said with short breaths. I knew release moves, but the slightest movement was paralyzing with the pain in my side and chest. He slammed me

into the wall again, but I brought my knee up, and his momentum drove it into his crotch and doubled him over.

“Jesus fucking...,” he swore but didn’t let go of my arms. I lunged for the side of his face, prepared to bite his cheek off, but he pulled back just enough that my teeth only grazed the skin. “What the fuck?”

His meaty hands gripped my arms tighter as he shook me like a doll. “What the hell is that,” Darryl asked as he stared at my arm. “Why the hell do you have that tattoo?”

I knew which one he saw. In tiny scroll, I had ‘Sunshine’ in honor of my mom. It might have been my dad’s nickname for her, but she’d been the sweet smile in the morning and the storyteller at night. She made muffins on her days off and let me fall asleep in her lap watching television. I loved my mom, and he stole her from me.

“Answer me, why do you have this?”

“You know why.” His eyes narrowed.

He had me pinned, so I fought through the pain, brought my feet up, and kicked out hard. Darryl groaned and bent over, his left hand slipping from my arm. He wasn’t going to get away with what he did. Sheer determination alone, I took advantage of his position, wrapped my arm around his neck, and yanked him off his feet.

He crashed hard on his side, and I pulled my other knife to finish the job. The blade slashed his cheek as he pulled away at the last second. I swiped at his legs as I tried to stand, my side screaming at me with every breath.

“Ah!” I screamed as he jumped on top of me, his knee pressed into my stomach. The knife fell from my hand, and stars exploded behind my eyes with the excruciating agony that stole more air from my lungs.

“I don’t know who you are, but before the night is through, you’re going to tell me,” he said, standing. Reaching around, he growled as he pulled the second knife from his back and dropped it on the ground. “You need more than that to kill me,” he sneered.

I reached for the knife, brushing the handle, but he plucked it from my hand and looked at the blade. Darryl grabbed a handful of my hair and dragged me across the ground. I tried to cry out, but whatever was wrong was much worse, and all that came out were little squeaks.

“I’ll fuck you dead or alive, I don’t care. Then I’ll toss you in the hole with the rest.” I heard him, and panic started to set in, but my dad’s calm voice came to me. *Rule number one: Never panic.* If you don’t panic, you always have a chance.

Remembering my other knife, I managed to pull it free and sliced his arm to the bone before he knew I had another weapon. If he hadn’t been dragging me behind him, I might have been able to get a better spot, but it was the best I could do.

“Fucking bitch! Fuck it!”

Darryl tossed me down on the ground with a thud, and I cut him three more times before he got the blade away from me.

“I’m going to kill you right now.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Was this a dream? I lifted my head, and there was my dad. I’d never been so happy to see that look in my entire life.

“Who the fuck are you?”

My dad stepped forward. “Hello, Darryl. I’d say it was nice to meet you formally, but that would be a lie.”

There was a distinct shift in Darryl’s energy, and I could feel the uncertainty rolling off him now. He knew he was no longer the meanest predator in the waters. I smiled, then coughed and gripped at the dirt as I took a strangled breath.

“That doesn’t answer my fucking question.”

“Maybe this will. You took my sunshine, so I took yours.” Darryl stepped back as my dad advanced on him with the massive hunting knife he used, glinting in the barn light. “You never should’ve taken my sunshine, Darryl. Bad things

happen,” his voice was threatening like everything else on this property.

Darryl’s hand shook a little as my dad took another step, his lip curling up in a snarl that made him look like an animal. The bloody knife Darryl pulled from his back was just out of reach, but I pushed myself back one inch at a time until he noticed me.

“This is your kid?” My dad didn’t answer. “Stay back, or I’ll kill her.”

“That’s not how this game will be played, Darryl. Your soul belongs to the devil, and I’m here to collect.”

My hand wrapped around the handle when Darryl suddenly dropped. I screamed and arched off the ground as he sunk my knife deep into my lower abdomen. I swung my arm, and Darryl yelled as I stabbed the other knife into his calf, but that was all I had, and I flopped back, staring up at the night sky.

There was a loud commotion after that. Darryl took off, and my dad knelt by my side. I whimpered when he lifted me to wrap something around my wound and screamed as he tightened it.

“Dad...”

“Yeah, Angel, I’ve got you.”

I touched the blade still in my abs, but my dad moved my hand away. “Don’t touch it. If it hit an artery, you’ll bleed out in minutes.”

“Don’t let....” I licked my lips. “Him get away.”

“He won’t.”

“Dad.” I reached for his hand and gripped it tight. “I’m... sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Angel, try to relax. I need to get the truck.” He looked down, and his eyes were reassuring. “You’re going to be okay.”

“I...can’t...breathe.” I gasped in short wheezes.

“Remember rule number one, never panic. Be Calm, Angel.” He smoothed back my hair. “Be calm. I’ll be right back.” I couldn’t help but smile as a tear trickled down my cheek.

“I. Love. You,” I said, and the world went dark.

Chapter Forty-Five

The ropes were looser, and my thumb was out. I had to dislocate it, but it was out. Biting back the pain, I wiggled my hands until the first rope dropped. It all unraveled from there. Fuck, my arms were tingly and floppy. Shaking them out, I grunted as I reset my thumb. I quickly untied my legs, hopped out of the truck, and jumped into the driver's seat.

I'd seen Cain and Abel reappear around the side of a building, and I knew Cain had spotted something from the way he was acting. I wasn't sitting here. I didn't care what he said. He wasn't keeping me from Kallie.

Starting the truck, I backed it up before putting it in drive and flooring it. The back end fishtailed, but I got righted before slamming through the wooden fence. Racing down the short hill and across the open field, the bright headlights illuminated the barns and house, but I didn't see any movement. That scared me more than if all hell had broken loose.

I aimed for where Cain disappeared, slamming on the brakes and cranking the wheel as the truck skidded around the corner. The headlights revealed two stories. I didn't care that Abel carried an unconscious man on his back. Kallie, on the ground with a knife in her gut, made my blood turn to ice.

Throwing the truck in park, I jumped out and ran for Kallie. Nothing else mattered more than getting her to a hospital.

“Help me carry her,” Cain said when I got closer. My hands shook as I lifted her legs, and he picked her up under the arms, but she never moved, and panic, the likes of which I never knew, flooded my system.

I hopped in the backseat with her and laid her head on my lap. I didn't care what Abel did with the man. I just wanted to get going.

“Let's go!” I yelled. The truck shook as Abel tossed the guy in the truckbed and hopped in with him while Cain got in the driver's seat. I felt for a pulse but couldn't tell with my hands shaking so badly. Instead, I grabbed her hand, hating that it was so cold. I watched her chest and she was definitely breathing but her breaths were short and fast, and that wasn't normal.

“Come on, Trouble, open your eyes for me. I need to see those beautiful blue eyes,” I said as I smoothed back Kallie's hair and ran my thumb along her cheek. “This world is not worth living in without you. Please open your eyes. Please look at me.”

Her eyes fluttered and opened a crack. “Car...”

“Shh, don't try to talk,” I said, smiling down at her. Her lip curved up, and I'd never been more relieved. “I love you. You're not allowed to leave me.” Her eyebrows rose slightly. “Yeah, I said it. I'm ordering you not to leave me. I won't live without you. You hear me. You stay with me.” Her hand tightened on mine before she passed back out. “No, no, no. Keep looking at me. Trouble?” Shit. “How much further?”

“Five minutes,” Cain answered as we flew down the quiet streets. I almost hoped to come across a cop so we could follow him.

I saw the glowing red emergency symbol, and as soon as Cain pulled up in front, I opened my door.

“Don't move her. I'll get a gurney.” Cain jumped out, ran inside, and came back a moment later with a couple of nurses, a doctor, and the gurney. My brain whirred, unable to put any cohesive thoughts together as the doctor gave instructions.

Two nurses hopped in like I wasn't in the truck and helped the doctor and Cain get Kallie out of the back seat.

I followed them through the doors, and the bright white lights felt blinding, adding to the building pressure in my head. We were stopped at a set of double doors with a security guard. The doctor said we couldn't come any further before he disappeared down another hall. My entire body shook as panic gripped my throat, choking me.

Someone wrapped their arm around my shoulder and guided me outside. I bent over, bracing myself on my knees, and tried not to think about the worst possible scenario. Anger rose to match the terror, and I looked up to see Cain beside me.

Standing straight, I glared at the man who raised me, the only father I'd known since I was two. Whether he saw me that way or not didn't matter. I trusted him, and he betrayed me.

My right hook caught him in the jaw, and Cain staggered back from the blow. Those piercing blue eyes found mine, and for the first time I wasn't scared. I got nose-to-nose with the man who terrified me my entire life.

"Don't ever do that to me again. I've earned the right to have your respect, and you betrayed me. I don't give a fuck if you're Kallie's father or if you threaten me. If you ever try to keep me from her again, I will come for you." My rage made me brave or stupid or both, but instead of fighting, the corner of his mouth lifted in a smile.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

I stepped back in shock and looked him up and down, unsure who'd replaced Cain.

"I needed to know that this man was inside of you." He gripped my shoulder. "It won't happen again. She will be okay. I know wounds and what the human body can suffer and still survive. Besides, she is a fighter and always has been."

"She is."

I ran my hand through my hair. My heart still raced, but something about Cain's reassurance tamed the dread that I'd seen Kallie for the last time.

"But to play devil's advocate, it would've taken longer to get here if I hadn't left you in the truck."

"Fuck that, you didn't know I would get free."

"True. How did you?"

"I dislocated my thumb like you showed us. Luckily, the person tying me was in a rush," I said, crossing my arms.

"Psst, I hate to break up this sweet family moment, but we need to go before he wakes up," Abel said. I only saw the top of his black hoodie and eyes peering over the truckbed before he disappeared again.

I forgot he was back there at all.

"I'll make our guest comfortable before cleaning up any evidence connected to Kallie and whatever else I find. Then I'll be back with clothes for you and Kallie," Cain said.

"You think there's something to find?"

"I guarantee it, but do I want to involve myself in that?" Cain took a step and I grabbed his arm.

"Kirby wanted that piece of shit caught for what he did. It meant something to her to put him behind bars for his victims. If she were here, what would she want you to do?"

Cain said nothing, and his eyes never changed, yet it felt like what I said hit for him. When I let go of his arm, he got in the driver's seat of the truck and drove away.

"Mr. Kohlmann?" I turned at the sound of my name.

"Yes?"

"We need to take care of some paperwork for your wife, and the police will be here soon to take your statement." The nurse held out a clipboard for me. "The system is down. I'm sorry."

“No, it’s fine.” I took the papers and almost told her Kallie wasn’t my wife—at least not yet—but I kept my mouth shut as I saw the driver’s license clipped to the top. Kallie Kohlmann was already on the card. I looked back at the truck driving off. I didn’t know how he did this, but I knew it was him.

“Come on inside, I’ll get you some coffee. You look pretty shaken up,” the nurse said, and I nodded.

“Thank you.”



Four hours and thirty-one minutes had passed since they rushed Kallie into surgery, and I now understood why they removed clocks from schools. I hadn’t taken my eyes off the large clock across from me. The second hand continuously lapped the minute hand, and each tick was another minute until the hour hand moved. It was painful sitting alone, waiting to hear any information.

My leg bounced, and the coffee cup swung from my fingertips, cold and forgotten. I played over everything again. Prom seemed like weeks ago, but people were probably still at afterparties or sleeping off the alcohol while others passed out face-first on a bathroom floor. Some were fucking in places with people they would regret in the morning, and all of it seemed like a movie clip from someone else’s life. Had the coat room really happened?

“Mr. Kohlmann?” I jumped up, staring in horror at the doctor’s face. I must have looked like I would pass out because he grabbed me and held my shoulders steady. “It’s good news, you can breathe.”

Not caring if it was appropriate, I hugged the doctor. “Thank you, oh god, thank you.”

“Do you want to see your wife? She’s medicated but asking for you,” he said.

“Yes, of course.” I let him go. “Sorry, I’m just relieved.”

The doctor grinned. “That’s okay. I’m glad I could bring you good news. Do you want to hear about the injuries?”

I nodded, and he explained how part of her rib had broken and pierced her lung. The knife wound was deep, but by some miracle, it hadn’t hit a major artery. I heard him, but this was one of those rare moments when I really wished Cain was here. He knew what questions to ask.

“Here you are.” He stopped by an open door. “I will be by again shortly to check in.”

“Thank you.” Slipping into the room, I closed the door and grabbed the large chair in the corner to sit beside her.

“No,” Kallie said softly, and I froze. “Lay...” she licked her lips, and I grabbed the plastic cup of water and held the straw to her mouth. She took a little, and her face turned up to mine. “Lay with me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She pointed to her right side. “Don’t touch there.”

Kicking off my shoes and peeling off my suit jacket, I got on the bed beside her and kissed the top of her head as she turned her face into my chest.

“Shh, don’t cry,” I mumbled into her hair as her body shook with the tears. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I’m so sorry. How are you not furious with me?”

“Oh, I am,” I said, and she chuckled softly.

“You going to spank me?”

“You better fucking believe I am multiple times.”

“It’s not really a threat, you know?” Kallie turned her head, and I kissed her while beating back my emotions, a volatile mix of relief and knowledge that I almost lost her.

“I know.”

“I am sorry. I thought I was strong enough to take him on my own. I was so determined to prove to my dad that I could be like him. I screwed up and almost lost everything.”

Running my thumb over her bottom lip, I stared into her remorseful eyes and hated that her confidence was shattered. Kallie was who she was because of her unyielding determination to stand on her own.

“You are strong enough, but asking for help is not a crime. No one, and I mean no one, will think you’re weak for using backup.”

“I know, but...”

“There are no buts. Not all of us can be notorious serial killers by the age of eighteen. Your dad is unique. That shit normally takes time.” I said, and she laughed then winced.

“Oh god, don’t make me laugh.”

“I’m serious. You need to be you and not your dad. If being you means you don’t go after a six-six, two hundred fifty-pound serial rapist by yourself, then you don’t.”

“He was pretty big, wasn’t he?”

“He was a fucking giant. You should’ve seen Abel carrying him to the truck. He looked like he was being swallowed alive.”

She laughed again and held her side. “Okay, stop, please, you’re killing me.”

It was so good to see her smile. Digging into my pocket, I pulled out the charm bracelet and undid the clasp. Kallie lifted her arm, and I put it back where it belonged.

“How did my dad find me? I know you had a tracker in this. It’s why I took it off.” I smirked.

“To outwit the fox, you must become the fox. You had a few more on you.”

“What?”

“Yup, I sewed one into all your bras, shoes and yoga pants.” I smiled at her.

“I should be mad, but I’m impressed. I never would’ve thought to check those.”

I cocked my brow at her. “And how about if I hadn’t, we wouldn’t be talking right now.”

She cupped my cheek. “It won’t happen again.”

“That is a record. I need to go by a lottery ticket. I got two Buchanans to agree not to do something again on the same night. It’s a miracle.” She smiled as I kissed her palm.

“That is a miracle. Go for three, and you get a trifecta bonus. Now, kiss me before I pass out. I’m tired.”

I kissed her softly until I felt her falling asleep, then cuddled her as much as I dared to my chest.

“I love you,” Kallie mumbled, her voice wispy with sleep.

“I might be your heart, but you’re my soul. I love you, Kallie Kohlmann.”

Chapter Forty-Six

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are gray
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away.*

“**W**hat? What is happening,” Darryl asked as his eyes fluttered open. “What the fuck is that song?”

I leaned against the counter and watched him squirm in the bindings, saying nothing in the dark room. The night vision goggles turned him green, which made him look better than usual. Not much could dress up that face, but it was worth the effort.

*I'll always love you and make you happy,
If you will only say the same.
But if you leave me and love another,
You'll regret it all someday.*

“Where the fuck are you?”

He jerked on the three-inch-wide leather straps I upgraded to hold the bear of a man. I wasn't sure why Sara-Lee died for him. He had a meager worm for a dick, but I guess there was no accounting for taste.

“Show yourself, you pussy!”

I never understood why men chose that as their insult. It took far longer to make a woman scream. They healed faster from wounds, and their pussies were quite incredible with how they stretched and re-formed. The overall strength was far superior to the cock between men's legs. But I figured it was the easiest thing to refer to, especially when he didn't have the vocabulary to insult anyone older than four.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine

You make me happy when skies are gray

You'll never know, dear, how much I love you

Please don't take my sunshine away.

“Shut that shit off! Ah!” Darryl roared as he sat up as much as the chest straps would allow and pulled on the leather. His arms flexed, and his chest bulged like the Hulk trying to bust the leather with sheer will alone. Unfortunately for him, this was not a movie, and he was not the monster in the room. I was.

I hit play on the remote in my hand.

“Are you afraid of the dark?” My voice flowed through the speakers.

Darryl stopped thrashing and looked around, his eyes wide as his pupils tried to find and use any little bit of light to see.

“Tell me, Darryl, did the little girls you took cry? Are you going to cry like they did?” His head twisted from side to side as I slowly walked around his body, not making a sound.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Did they?” My voice echoed before the music started to play again.

“You're the fuck I was texting with, right? That bitch from earlier was your kid? She looked good to eat. I would've had her too if you hadn't broken up the party, but you should know she came to me. She wanted my cock. Sorry Daddy-O, your girl is a nasty whore.”

I hit the next recording, and Darryl's body jerked as Sara-Lee's screams filled the room. His breathing quickened, and the pulse jumped at the side of his neck. The screams got louder as she called out Darryl's name and begged me to stop. I recorded the entire session and especially loved the part where I turned on the saw.

"Sara! Sara! Let her go! Sara, I'm coming for you," he yelled, and I smirked. Such chivalry. Who said it was dead?

"Sara-Lee cannot speak at this time. Unfortunately, she's already dead."

"You fucker!"

Darryl hadn't seen anything yet. I was just getting warmed up.

The music stopped, and the room filled with only his heavy breathing. I walked across the room and sat down in my chair to watch the show.

When I hit play, the tiny projector installed at the head of the bed flicked on, showing the video of me destroying everything Darryl held dear. The beauty of being me was that I didn't care who I hurt to get what I wanted, and I wanted Darryl to live through the same pain I did when he took my Sunshine.

As many people and as long as it took, I would break him mentally before I started on his body. My voice came on before the first image.

"I'd like to take a moment to introduce myself. My name is Cain Buchanan, but you would know me as The Chameleon. Yes, I know you've heard of me. I saw the clippings in your binders. The trophies of those you desired to become but were always just shy. You would never beat me."

Darryl's eyes were transfixed as footage of all those he idolized played on the screen. They had shared the same fate, strapped to my table, screaming for mercy. They begged a god they'd shunned or didn't believe in as a last-ditch effort to be set free or saved. None of that happened. No savior ran through the door, no lightning bolt struck me dead, and each

screamed as they drifted off into the nothingness that took them.

The first part of the film stopped, and Darryl's heart was pounding hard. I could hear it across the room. He'd been right to be afraid at the farm. He knew that death had found him and that his reckoning was coming.

"I'm sorry," he blurted like an idiot. That took less time than I thought. He unimpressed me further, which I hadn't thought possible. "Did I kill your kid?" He looked around in the dark. "Answer me, did I?"

You told me once, dear, you really loved me

And no one else could come between.

But now you've left me and love another;

You have shattered all of my dreams:

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine

You make me happy when skies are gray

You'll never know, dear, how much I love you

Please don't take my sunshine away.

Standing, I opened the door wide, letting the light from the room beyond bathe me, making me look like the shadow I now knew he feared.

I turned to stare at him, his shit-brown eyes reflected in the light that reached the table.

"Tell me please, did I?"

"No, you took my Sunshine, and now you'll know the darkness I've known since."

"What the hell does that mean?" I backed out of the room. "Tell me what that means." The door locked with a thud.

Walking over to the television I hadn't used since I'd taken Kirby, I sat down. Turning on the camera, I peeled off the night vision and hit play on my homemade movie for Darryl. First up was his sweet Grand Mammie, but since then, I'd found six other people Darryl loved or cared for, and each one

had died on my table. Now, he would spend his days for however long I chose, reliving those deaths, just as I relived Kirby's in my mind every night since he took her from me.

His screaming started almost instantly, and it was music to my tortured mind. If he thought this was rough, wait until we got to round two.



THREE WEEKS LATER

“Are you ready for this?”

Carter nodded, his face blank of all emotion. In the last year, he'd grown into the man I hoped he would, and asking to be in the room for this proved that.

“I will not hold back for your sake.”

Carter rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, looking me in the eye. “He deserves whatever you choose to do and more. He can never pay enough.”

“Very well.”

Pushing open the door, Darryl lay on the table, reduced to soft, continuous sobbing. I came each day and tightened the straps on his weakening body, changed out the line of nutrients running directly into his stomach so he couldn't starve to death, and ensured that the catheter to his cock and the intrarectal catheter line to his ass weren't plugged. I tortured him with something new every single day and when I knew his mind was on the brink of breaking I'd pull back just enough that he didn't fully slip to a place I couldn't reach him.

I had one particularly amusing day when Abel joined me and Darryl kept blinking and yelling there are two.

As soon as I stepped into the room, his horrified expression and terror-filled eyes found mine.

“Good morning, Darryl,” I said as I walked to the table and looked down at the man who was a shadow of who he was before.

“Please, no more, please,” he blubbered.

I gently ran my gloved finger down his arm, and he screamed like I was cutting him with a knife.

“Tell me, Darryl, doesn't Sara-Lee look stunning?” I pointed to the mangled flesh preserved inside a clear box. It

was the perfect way to watch the decaying process and an excellent gift for her lover.

He glanced at the box and looked away, closing his eyes. Grabbing his jaw, I squeezed hard until I heard the soft crack. He cried out, and his eyes opened to stare into mine. The predator he had been was long gone. All that was left was prey.

“It’s not nice to be rude to a lady, Darryl. Tsk, tsk. Didn’t your father teach you any manners?” He trembled in my grasp but didn’t answer. “Tell her she looks beautiful.”

“You look beautiful, Sara,” he mumbled through my grip.

“Very good.”

“Darryl, I would like to introduce you to someone.” I stepped out of the way so that Carter was visible. “This is my son-in-law, Carter. You remember my daughter, don’t you? You know, the one you tried to kill and threatened to rip her open with your big cock first.” I pointedly looked down at the cock in question with the tube stuck inside, and I would’ve sworn it shrunk a little more. “That was pretty big talk and very rude of you, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Darryl agreed immediately, like a good puppy.

“Carter asked to be here for today’s session.”

Darryl whimpered, his eyes filling with tears. “Please kill me. Please.”

I patted his cheek. “Don’t worry, I will kill you.” His face relaxed. “Just not until I’m ready.” The fear returned to his eyes. “You know, Darryl, I’ve been thinking about this. I think prisons should hire me.” I walked around the table and felt his eyes following me. “I know it sounds crazy, right? Here’s what I’ve realized since I started hunting down those on my board over there. The system is too soft. If people like you had to face someone like me to teach you a lesson on the inside, well...I think there would be a lot less people getting into trouble.” I picked up a scalpel. “I mean wouldn’t you have thought twice before you touched those girls?”

“Yes,” he said again, but it came out a whimper.

“They will never go for it, though, but that’s okay because I must say I have enjoyed my time hunting the hunters. I have creative freedom this way.”

I turned around with the scalpel in my hand and looked at Carter. His features were still blank, his eyes dark as he stared at Darryl. Flipping the blade around, I held it out to Carter.

“Would you like to do the honors?”

The corner of his mouth turned up. “I’d love to.”

“Then feel free. Just cut where the lines are and a solid inch deep. I’ll get the test subjects.”

Darryl whimpered and tried to watch where I was going, even as Carter made the first cut.

I carried out the first tank, and Darryl screamed. I’m sure he would’ve thrashed around if he had the strength to do so. Returning to my storage area, I carried out the second container covered with a black cloth so he couldn’t see inside.

Carter was quick and efficient. His hand never wavered with any cut around Darryl’s body. Each one was perfect and precisely placed to cause pain but not hit anything serious.

“Ready,” I asked Carter as he finished and wiped off the tool, cleaning it as I would.

“Ready.” Carter helped me carry in the massive custom Plexi glass piece I’d made to spec, and we lifted it onto the table and lowered it so Darryl was in the bottom of a clear tank.

“No, no, no. Please, no. I’ll do anything. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

I held up my finger and got low. “You will tell me anything I want to know?”

“Yes, anything.” He nodded.

“Very well. You’ve repeatedly asked me who Sunshine is. Sunshine was my wife. She was also the FBI agent you killed. You stabbed her three times and left her to bleed out. You may not have known the fork in the road you chose to go down that

day, but from the moment you made the first cut you were destined to be on this table. You need to understand that you did this to yourself. Now, tell me. Do you remember her?”

Darryl swallowed hard, his now very noticeable Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Ah you do remember her. Good. I want to know if she said anything to you before you killed her.”

Darryl looked down at his body and then at me. “Will you kill me? Will you kill me instead of doing whatever this is?”

I stood up straight and looked at Carter. He didn’t budge or try to influence me in any way. I was enjoying having him in here.

“Fine. I will kill you and put you out of your misery.”

Tears of relief ran down his face. “She said I was a dead man, and he’d come for me.”

I smiled wide. That sounded like Kirby. It warmed the coldest reaches of my heart to know that in those final moments, she knew her killer would be found and meet his end. Even with her last breath, she trusted me and thought of me.

“Thank you, Darryl, but unfortunately for you, I will still continue my torture.”

“But you promised. You promised me,” he cried out.

“I’m sorry, you mistake me for someone with honor. I have none. I do not care about your feelings, a moral code, or what is ethically right.” I leaned down and smiled at him. “You’re going to like this next one. I know all your fears. I think you will scream louder than anyone who has ever been on my table. I have faith in you, Darryl.”

I unlatched the special opening on the top of the case and brought over the container he could see into.

“Don’t be afraid. These Dubia roaches are perfectly harmless. They don’t bite at all, and if you feel a pinch, it will be because of the little barbs on their feet. I’m sure it will feel

more painful with all those fresh cuts oozing blood, but you will survive, I assure you.”

He whimpered, then screamed like a little child as I poured hundreds of roaches on top of him.

“Ah! Get them off, get them off of me. Ah!”

“I thought I would be nice to you, Darryl, and help you out with that, and got Lady J here. But then I learned that you’re afraid of spiders. Isn’t that right, Darryl? Especially, big furry ones?” Darryl stopped screaming long enough for me to unveil the second container with a Goliath Birdeater tarantula inside. They were a beast of a spider, and this one was over six inches long, larger than most, but harmless to humans...unless you were an arachnophobe trapped in a small box in the dark.

“Isn’t she a beauty?”

Darryl went from deathly still to freaking out like this was his first day in the bindings.

“Now, don’t be like that. Lady J is very friendly and loves Dubia roaches to eat. So, she will help you eliminate all those painful roaches crawling all over your body and in your wounds. Just remember, she won’t bite you unless she feels you’re a threat. So, I’d be nice.”

I opened the lid and helped Lady J into her much larger tank, watching as she instantly jumped on one of the roaches. The sound of the little bug’s hard shell crunching as she bit it was only matched by the high-pitched screams of Darryl as he stared at the massive spider on his chest.

Closing the lid, Carter helped me clean up, and then we walked out the door and switched off the light. I was already planning the next torture as long as Darryl didn’t give himself a heart attack. No matter what I did it would never be enough, but I would do it anyway. I would do it until Darryl was as broken as me.

Epilogue

Carter helped me out to the truck with all my gear and clothes.

“That’s the last of it,” Carter said.

Kallie had her arms crossed as she leaned against the truck and stared at her feet. It reminded me of when she was a little girl and wanted something she couldn’t have. Kirby would say she had the cutest pout.

Reaching out, I lifted her chin and forced her to look at me. “What is it? Why are you so sad?”

“You don’t have to leave Dad. I said I was sorry.”

I smiled at her. “I’m not leaving because of you, not in the way you think. I’m leaving because you’ve proven you no longer need me.”

“No, I haven’t. I almost got myself killed and....”

“And you recognizing that and being safer and smarter in the future tells me you’re ready to fly on your own.” I pulled her into a hug, and she gripped me tight.

“I’m worried about you out there all alone,” she said, and once more, she amazed me with her heart.

“You are more like your mother than you realize, and I never want you to lose that Angel. Your mom would’ve been very proud of you and the woman you’ve become.” Pulling back, she looked up at me, tears streaming down her beautiful face. “I need to leave for a little while, but I’ll be back before your wedding. I still can’t believe you asked Abel to officiate.”

She giggled and wiped away the tears. “You have to admit, it will be a one-of-a-kind service.”

“Yes, I’m positive it will. Abel hasn’t stopped talking about getting a Pope’s hat.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay? You could help us plan.”

I kissed her forehead and stepped back from my daughter. “I’m not really the planning festivities type, but I promise I will be here. This is something I need to do.” I looked back at the house that held so many memories for me and all the best ones after I met Kirby. “This house haunts my mind. It’s time I step away and clear my head.” Carter laid his hands on her shoulders. “And it’s time you moved on with your new life.”

Hopping in the driver’s side of the truck, I put the window down, and Kallie still looked like she would try and come with me. I couldn’t understand her worry for me.

“Angel, I will be fine, and...I do love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

Starting the truck, I backed up and pulled out of the driveway but watched Kallie and Carter get smaller in the rearview mirror. He wrapped his arms around her, and I knew they would be fine. She was ready.



It took me two days to reach Colorado Springs. It would’ve been less, but I decided Kirby would’ve liked the scenic route. I rented a cabin near Mount Muscoco and spent the night before setting out early to hike to the top of the mountain. The four-and-a-half-mile trail was quiet as I made my way to the top.

I chugged some water and sat down to stare at the tops of trees and the other mountains in the distance. Pulling out the

small container, I sat it beside me and grabbed a protein bar.

“We made it. I promised I’d bring you one day,” I said to Kirby and looked over at the urn, but all I saw was her beautiful smile, her amethyst eyes shining in the light while her unruly hair blew around her face.

“It’s perfect,” she said, cuddling close to my side. “Exactly how I pictured it.”

“Kallie is all grown up. She’s everything you hoped she would be and more, and I hate to admit it, but I’m pleased that you talked me out of killing Carter.”

Kirby laughed, and the sweet sound filled me with the warmth I’d missed all these years.

“Yes, she really is, and I wasn’t sure about them getting together, but they’re perfect, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

“Are you going to go back?”

“I will. I promised to be back for the wedding. There is no way I’m letting Abel give her away.” She slipped her hand into mine, and I shuddered with her touch. “I miss you every day.”

“I miss you more, but it’s time to let me go. You’ve been an amazing father. You’ve done everything you promised, and Darryl is burning in hell. You even sent the FBI to the farm to find the bodies of all his victims. So many families will find peace.”

“Carter asked me what you would want. I figured that was it.”

She kissed my cheek, and I cupped hers and softly kissed her lips. “I don’t want to let you go. My chest aches every second with the void of not having you by my side.”

“I’ll always be in your heart, and I know you don’t believe, but I watch over you.” Kirby kissed my lips softly and the constant dull ache turned into panic. This was it, this was the last time I’d see her. The peaceful look in her eyes told me

she'd never come to me again. "But it's time you moved on," she said, resting her forehead against mine.

"I'm not a good man without you."

"I beg to differ. I think you're exactly who you need to be. You will find a new calling and maybe one day someone else to make you happy."

"No, I had my perfect. I never want anyone else, you were always it for me," I said and watched the lone tear trickle down Kirby's cheek and could feel my own tears on my skin.

We sat there for the rest of the day in silence, her head on my shoulder and my arm around her waist, but as the sun began to set, she stood, and I followed her lead.

"Promise me one last thing?"

"For you, Sunshine, I would promise you the world."

"Protect the family. No matter what you choose to do with the rest of your time, protect those we call home and the next generation. They will need you."

I smiled. "You never have to ask me that. It's a given."

Kirby laid her hand over my heart. "You were always my forever. I love you, Cain Buchanan and I will wait for eternity for you to join me."

"You will always be my Sunshine. I love you, Kirby Buchanan." Smiling, she kissed my lips, and it felt like the first time all over again. I wanted to hold her like this, right here in this spot, forever. Hanging on to every last second I could steal.

But she stepped back, my fingers lingering on her as long as I could. I bent down and picked up the pretty purple urn, then opened the lid.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away," I sang as I released the ashes to the wind. As they blew away, the image of my Sunshine faded, but I would never forget the smile she only gave me shining back.



KALLIE

Stepping out onto the deck, I handed Carter his coffee and smiled as he pulled me onto his lap.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? How purple the sky is tonight?”

“It is.”

He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. I savored his body heat since a chilly wind had interrupted the normally hot summer night.

“I have some news that the doctor shared with me,” I said, and Carter sat up a little straighter, the look on his face instantly worried.

“Is something wrong with your side? Is it not healing? What about the stab wound? Are there complications? Whatever it is, we’ll get the best doctors on the case.”

I kissed him, loving the flavor of the coffee on his lips. “Well then, you better find the best OB-GYN.”

His forehead pulled down in a frown as he sounded out the letters. “But isn’t that? No....” I nodded and smiled as I laid my hand on my stomach. “You’re pregnant,” he said, his voice filled with excitement.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, fucking yes!” Carter cheered as he jumped up, and I squealed as I wrapped my arms and legs around his body. I laughed as he continued to yell like a madman.

“You’re not worried it’s too soon?”

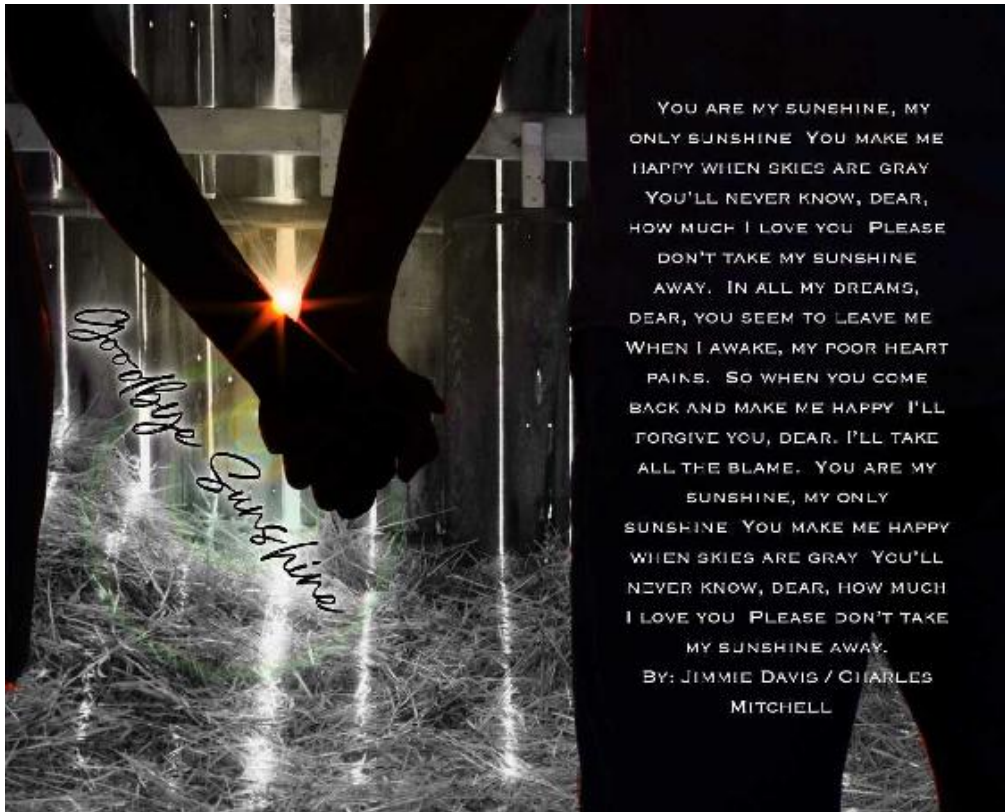
“No. I love you. I want an entire baseball team of children with you.”

“Whoa, that’s like twenty-five,” I said.

“Forty, really, but we can stop at twenty-five,” he said and laughed at the look on my face that was definitely horrified.

“I’m joking, but no, I’m not worried. I know that whatever comes our way, we can handle it.”

He kissed me hard, and I knew he was right. My parents raised me to be strong, and nothing, and no one would ever hold us back.



*Goodbye
Sunshine*

YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE, MY
ONLY SUNSHINE YOU MAKE ME
HAPPY WHEN SKIES ARE GRAY
YOU'LL NEVER KNOW, DEAR,
HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU PLEASE
DON'T TAKE MY SUNSHINE
AWAY. IN ALL MY DREAMS,
DEAR, YOU SEEM TO LEAVE ME
WHEN I AWAKE, MY POOR HEART
PAINS. SO WHEN YOU COME
BACK AND MAKE ME HAPPY I'LL
FORGIVE YOU, DEAR. I'LL TAKE
ALL THE BLAME. YOU ARE MY
SUNSHINE, MY ONLY
SUNSHINE YOU MAKE ME HAPPY
WHEN SKIES ARE GRAY YOU'LL
NEVER KNOW, DEAR, HOW MUCH
I LOVE YOU PLEASE DON'T TAKE
MY SUNSHINE AWAY.

BY: JIMMIE DAVIS / CHARLES
MITCHELL

Cain's Rules

#1 – “Rule number one, never panic.”

#2 – “Rule number two, never make a decision when you’re angry.”

#3 – “Rule number three, always be prepared for anything.”

#4 – “Rule number four, never kill out of anger.”

#5 – “Rule number five, never ask Abel for advice. Ever. I mean it.”

#6 – “Rule number six, chose your prey wisely, don’t become the pattern.”

#7 - “Rule number seven, kill anyone that is a threat.”

#8 – “Rule number eight, make the most of a bad situation and create something you can use later.”

#9 – “Rule number nine, never play a game with Abel. Ever. I mean it.”

#10 – “Rule number ten, clean, clean and clean again. The tiniest drop of blood or fingerprint missed can be your downfall.”

#11 – “Rule number eleven, you always use leverage first before paying for anything.”

#12 – “Rule number twelve, know your surroundings, never get caught on video unless you want to be seen.”

#13 – “Rule number thirteen, revenge is best served well planned.”

- #14 – “Rule number fourteen, keep a low profile in the area you live and plan to hunt.”
- #15 – “Rule number fifteen, never lie to me, or I will cut out your tongue.”
- #16 – “Rule number sixteen, know your enemy as you know yourself.”
- #17 – “Rule number seventeen, arrogance without thought will get you caught.”
- #18 – “Rule number eighteen, always have an alibi. Sweet old ladies work best.”
- #19 – “Rule number nineteen, don’t make promises you don’t know if you can keep.”
- #20 – “Rule number twenty, you can ask Abel for acting advice. This is the only time you are allowed to ask Abel anything.”
- #21 – “Rule number twenty-one, stab them when no one is looking.”
- #22 – “Rule number twenty-two, never watch your family member’s recordings, you never know what you will find.”
- #23 – “Rule number twenty-three, if you’re stalking your prey in a subdivision take a dog.”
- #24 – “Rule number twenty-four, memorize your surroundings.”
- #25 – “Rule number twenty-five, only kill family members when there is no other choice. Punching them in the face is perfectly acceptable.”
- #26 – “Rule number twenty-six, measure twice and cut one to put your bitch in a box.”
- #27 – “Rule number twenty-seven, make sure your blade is sharp and your mind sharper.”
- #28 – “Rule number twenty-eight, gloves are your friends. Never leave home with out a pair and a spare.”

- #29 – “Rule number twenty-nine, never lock yourself in a coffin.”
- #30 – “Rule number thirty, don’t kill your babysitter.”
- #31 – “Rule number thirty-one, never agree to get matching tattoos.”
- #32 - “Rule number thirty-two, never assume anything. Always make sure you know the facts.”
- #33 – “Rule number thirty-three, if Abel says he has a surprise, you don’t want it. Ever. I mean it.”
- #34 – “Rule number thirty-four, bugs are your friend.”
- #35 – “Rule number thirty-five, know how to change your own tire.”
- #36 – “Rule number thirty-six, check your go bag before every hunt.”
- #37 – “Rule number thirty-seven, make friends with a local police officer. Yes, you can have sex with them when needed.”
- #38 – “Rule number thirty-eight, always check your backseat.”
- #39 – “Rule number thirty-nine, when outmatched, always go for the eyes. They rip out easier than you would think.”
- #40 – “Rule number forty, never get in a cab. No, especially not Abel’s.”
- #41 – “Rule number forty-one, learn to use both hands equally, being ambidextrous is not a suggestion, it is a must.”
- #42 – “Rule number forty-two, never offer more information than you wanted someone to know.”
- #43 – “Rule number forty-three, one dog is enough.”
- #44 – “Rule number forty-four, never forget to close the pig pen.”
- #45 – “Rule number forty-five, make sure your knots are tied tight.”
- #46 – “Rule number forty-six, when threatened kill first and ask questions later.”

#47 – “Rule number forty-seven, always speak to me with respect or I will cut your tongue out.”

#48 – “Rule number forty-eight, act like I’m always watching you, because I am.”

#49 – “Rule number forty-nine, Vaseline doesn’t make you invisible.”

#50 - “Rule number fifty, cucumbers are an excellent torture tool.”

#51 – “Rule number fifty-one, no Abel, a distraction noodle is not a good option.”

Thank You

Thank you to all those that decided to pick up this book and read it. It is only with readers continued support that Indie Authors, such as myself, are able to keep writing which is why your reviews mean so much to us. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving me a review.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Writing is not just a passion for me. It is a lifeline to my sanity.

I have always loved writing but suffer from severe dyslexia and short-term memory retention issues. I struggled in school while I worked every night on re-training my brain.

I was frequently treated like I would never succeed, and I found myself putting my love for writing on a shelf.

Even at the age of six, I found it easier to communicate with animals than people, which was a big reason why I was drawn to dressage horseback riding. I remained focused on my passion for riding until I had to step away from the competition world for personal reasons.

Today, my desire for writing and storytelling has been rekindled. I have published multiple books and will never let anyone or anything hold me back again.

I am a proud romance author who offers my readers morally grey heroes, a ton of spice, epic journeys, and redemption stories.

-Follow Your Dreams-

Brooklyn Cross