

WINE  
WHISKEY &

*Lipstick  
2*

LASHIAWN  
VASSER

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# WINE, WHISKEY & LIPSTICK 2

By

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**WARNING**

This novel is considered romantic fiction with erotic elements or erotica. This book is for mature audiences only. This book contains profane adult language, mild violence, and strong sexual content.

## Dedications & Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to you, the Readers! Thanks for all of your love and support.

## Chapter 1

“Sir. You asked for an update if there were any significant changes.” Rajan ‘Ran’ Omar, Syntax’s top Lieutenant, stated as he held up a sealed envelope. “There’s been a significant change.”

Without turning around, Syntax stood like a cold slab of marble with his hands clasped behind his back while gazing out of the massive floor-to-ceiling windows. After years of friendship, Syntax didn’t have to see Ran’s face to understand his change in tone. It could only mean one thing.

His jaw clenched, and he dared not breathe, “Is she safe?”

There was a heavy pause before Ran responded, “For now. But if you want to keep her that way, I’m not sure how much longer you can keep this secret.”

Stoically, Syntax half-turned, “You must have forgotten that I’m the man who makes mountains move. I made the decision years ago that Dillyn was on a need-to-know basis. Nothing on that front has changed.”

Ego and arrogance could be a potential problem in this situation. Inwardly, Ran was frustrated that Syntax was blowing off his warning and not taking it seriously enough. Still, he maintained his composure.

Ran had to get through to him. This threat was unlike any other, and he had to reflect the seriousness of the situation, “*That* is no longer viable.”

Ran's words seemed to have broken through. Slowly, Syntax turned around fully to face him and lifted a brow, "Not viable?" His stern glare would have made lesser men cower, but not Ran.

He held his ground, "No. It is *not* viable." Ran extended his arm and pushed the large manila envelope toward him.

Irritated, Syntax took it, "The world must be coming to an end if an answer to me is *no* and not finding a solution that doesn't include telling Dillyn the truth."

Bad news was part of the job, but on this front, Ran had to deliver it. Karma had shown up. Luck and time had run out. As Syntax's trusted friend and dedicated employee, Ran had to be honest. "I am telling you, keeping this secret will do more harm than good. Arming Dillyn with knowledge might just keep her alive."

"What exactly are you talking about?" Syntax showed a rare flash of anger. "I have Dillyn walled off from danger. I have eyes and ears all over that property. Some of her protection is known to her, and some unknown. Plus, that cowboy can't keep Dillyn out of his sight. He seems hell-bent on protecting her and her friends." Syntax laughed sarcastically, "Dillyn has better security than the Pope."

"Sir, if I may, don't allow your ego to cloud your judgment." Syntax's bravado hadn't moved Ran. He wasn't convinced that Dillyn was safe and implored Syntax to review the documents he'd just handed him, "You need to read the update and prepare for all possible scenarios."

"All scenarios?" It was Syntax's turn to release a long sigh, "As in ALL scenarios?"



The seriousness on Ran's face did not change. The man didn't even blink, "yes."

Syntax held Ran's gaze an extra moment before finally opening the envelope and reading its contents. He could only stare at it momentarily before releasing several expletives under his breath and crushing the summary document into his hands. "Goddammit! Is this real?!"

"I can confirm the contents are indeed accurate."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"I've had the information confirmed and reconfirmed. This is the real deal."

"Shit!" Frustrated, Syntax ran a hand down his face. "I brought Dillyn into this business."

Ran was matter of fact, "Yes, you did. But you also saved her life. None of this is your fault. We can and should lay the blame squarely where it belongs, that worthless piece-of-shit ex-husband, Steven. He opened Pandora's box."

"True, but I can't quite make him pay for his misdeeds. That dickhead is already dead. I can't dig him up and kill him again."

In some ways, Ran knew Syntax better than he knew himself ... *but not in this situation*. It would be impossible for Ran to understand the source of his guilt. Those seeds were planted years ago and, as of today's news dump, were now in full bloom.

"Emotions aside," Ran placed a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder, "You will do what must be done."

It was true. Syntax had never allowed raw emotions to cloud his judgment, and he wouldn't start today. If what he'd just learned was true, there wasn't any time to waste.

Syntax scanned the room. He was filled with both dread and pride as he watched the team he'd assembled working hard. He was responsible for them, which was a heavy burden to carry. It was the reason Syntax always brought his A-game. Anything less would cost lives. Fortunately, they trusted him because he had proven himself worthy.

Most of the men and women in the room initially believed Syntax to be nothing more than an urban myth. Now they and Dillyn knew that he was real. He was a man who didn't exist to the outside world, but he wasn't a ghost or myth. Syntax was a legend to be lived up to.

It could be said that the headquarters for his business was built in the same vein. From the outside, it looked no different than any other Fortune 100 high-tech company. Given that it was a place where espionage and treason occurred regularly, most would imagine it to be eerily silent, dark, and mysterious. Maybe even filled with people working secretly within their own silos. Yet, that description couldn't be further from the truth. It sat on the top floor of a 100-floor building with 360 degree views of Chicago's impressive skyline. The place was buzzing with energy, bright lights, and cutting-edge technology.

His hand-picked team sat in pods of four. Some of them were wearing what appeared to be regular glasses, only for them to be the most advanced in VR technology eyewear. Others move floating images around on glassless monitors.

For this next assignment, this team would have to dig deep and pull on their extraordinary talents as they will be tasked with an assignment unlike any other.

Syntax clasped his hands together. “Listen up,” His voice boomed throughout. “Whatever you are currently working on, reassign it to your AI backup or your counterparts within our London offices, as we have a new priority called Operation Triton. I will need all hands on deck.”

## Chapter 2

A fresh wave of conflicting emotions emerged as Dillyn studied her reflection in the mirror. Her fingers trembled as she applied one last touch of lipstick.

She was anxious.

Briefly, she closed her eyes. *Deep breaths. Girlfriend, you've got this.* Dillyn held her gaze and pointed a finger at the woman staring back at her, “No self-sabotaging tonight. After all we've been through, Cat and Palmer deserve a stress-free and fun-filled evening.”

The pep talk did little to prevent the negative thoughts from creeping into her mind. Suddenly, Dillyn was no longer looking at her reflection. Instead, her thoughts had transported her back to the moment her and Ben's life changed forever.

*I'm pregnant.* It was surreal. It would be an understatement to say they were shocked when those pink lines appeared on that tiny stick.

Ben seemed to accept it as a welcomed surprise. At the time, so had Dillyn. She had been caught up in his joy, and it was infectious. Two weeks later, Dillyn's feelings had cooled considerably. The shock hadn't worn off, and she still couldn't wrap her mind around becoming a mother. *How was it possible to conceive after so many years of trying with Steven?* It was a nagging question that kept popping into her mind.

“I'm really pregnant,” Dillyn whispered as if repeating the words for the one-thousandth and one time would make it

real.

It hadn't.

*Would it feel real once I start to show?* Dillyn's head tilted as she turned her body to the side to study her reflection. Slowly, she ran a hand down her stomach, curious about what she might look like in seven or eight months. Considering how flat it was, it was hard to imagine it protruding heavily with a child.

"Isn't it normal to feel everything all at once?" Dillyn asked herself. Try as she might to tamp down the swell of anxiety, there were moments where it rose so close to the surface Dillyn thought she might be consumed by it.

*This is an incredible gift, right?* It was an honest question, considering good things never happened to her. Even relocating to Summer was mired in crazy. Quite frankly, it had been a bit of a shit show.

Dillyn couldn't prove it, but instinctively, she knew Steven's death was connected to everything. Thinking back to their last conversation made her shiver.

There were too many unanswered questions surrounding everything that happened over the past few months. Dillyn still had no idea who killed him and why. Who was really behind kidnapping Selah? Did they get everyone involved? She had a sinking suspicion that they hadn't scratched the surface of what was happening, and maybe she was the real target. Until Dillyn had answers, she would continue to look over her shoulder for the next shoe to drop, even with the extra security Ben and Syntax hired.

*What am I missing?* Dillyn had been working tirelessly to piece together the few clues left behind but had come up empty. Was she running into a brick wall because the people responsible were so good at their jobs or because Syntax didn't want her involved? Either way, it didn't matter. Dillyn was determined to get to the bottom of it.

"Dillyn! Cat!" Palmer could be heard shouting all the way from downstairs. Her voice had breached the closed door to Dillyn's bedroom. "Move ya asses! We're going to be late."

Palmer sounded impatient and irritated.

Dillyn sighed and took one last look in the mirror. She was as ready as she was going to be. *Put your cares to the side tonight.* "Have fun," she told herself as she flipped off the light and rushed out the door.

## Chapter 3

“Dammit. It’s almost ten o’clock.” Pacing back and forth, Palmer checked her cell for the time while she waited in the foyer. She’d been ready to leave for more than twenty minutes. Annoyed, she yelled for her friends to get moving, “C’mon ladies! Let’s *gooooo*.”

After a few minutes, Cat was the first to make her grand entrance. She laughed as she exaggerated the swaying of her hips when she sashayed into the foyer. Cat lifted her hand up and down the front of her body. “You can’t rush all this.”

“My goodness. About damn time!”

Palmer was being melodramatic, so Cat waved her off. “I don’t know why you’re so pumped about going to Franks anyway. The last time we were there, the damn place exploded. Plus, you already have a man.”

At the mention of *having a man*, Palmer glanced away. Instead, choosing to focus on an imaginary wrinkle and smoothing it out so that Cat couldn’t read the big ass lie she was about to tell. “Ain’t nobody got a man but Dillyn. I’m single and most definitely ready to mingle. Plus, it’s not *always* about a guy.”

“Mmmkay.” It was clear by Cat’s tone that she didn’t believe her for a second. “If you say so.”

Palmer’s love life was not a subject she wanted to discuss. Instead, she redirected the conversation and commented on Cat’s outfit. “You’re wearing that?” It was

much more casual than what she would usually wear for a night out.

Cat smirked and winked, “Yep. Cute, isn’t it?”

Dillyn entered the room before Palmer could answer. She’d heard part of their exchange and didn’t believe Palmer either. “The question is, does Lucas know that he’s *not* your man?”

Not missing a beat, Palmer looked around Cat and answered Dillyn as if she had been standing there the entire time. “A one-night stand does not make a relationship.”

Cat leaned over and whispered into Dillyn’s ear loud enough for Palmer to hear, “I thought it was more than one time.”

“At least a dozen,” Dillyn couldn’t stifle a giggle, and neither could Cat as they burst out into conspiratorial laughter.

Palmer beat back the grin threatening the edges of her lips. “As of this moment, my bedroom activities are off-limits.” She changed the subject. “Even though you two are late *late*, I guess it was worth the wait. Franks ain’t going to know what hit ‘em when they see us tonight.”

“I guess,” Cat said nonchalantly. She wasn’t very excited about their upcoming evening.

“C’mon Cat! I need a bit more energy from you. We’re going to have so much fun, and Dillyn, don’t hurt Ben with that dress because, *baby* it’s hot. That cowboy ain’t going to be able to keep his hands off of you.”

“And I hope other parts of me too.” Dillyn released a throaty laugh as she twirled around in a circle.



Playfully, Cat rolled her eyes. “My besties are some hoes! I love it.”

“Hold up now. I’m a lot of things but a hoe ...” Palmer pretended to think thoughtfully, “Well ... nevermind. Maybe I am.” She laughed out loud as she high-fived Cat.

Dillyn could only shake her head. “We all know that’s a lie. Lucas has your heart in a chokehold. Is he the reason you’re wearing this new freak’um dress? You don’t have to answer. It looks so good on you.”

Cat nodded in agreement.

Palmer fluttered her lashes, and her voice hitched up an octave. “It’s not that new. At any rate, I’m not thinking about Lucas. I just want to have a good time.”

Dillyn couldn’t help herself, “Well, if we’re not going to Franks to keep an eye on Lucas, why are we going again?” The bar scene and going to clubs were never Palmer’s thing, nor any of them.

Cat chimed in. “*Ding. Ding. Ding.* Lie all she wants. That’s the reason why Ms. Palmer is in a rush to get to Franks. She wants to stake her claim.”

Palmer denied it. “That is absolutely not true.” It was partially true. “I just want to get out of the house. We’ve been cooped up here for days on end, afraid of our shadows. I want to let my hair down a little. Plus, tonight is Frank’s grand re-opening. I’d like to see what they’ve done to the place since it burned down.”

Dillyn was sure the drama of that night was etched into their minds. The panic they all felt as they searched for each

other would never be forgotten. Still, she supposed tonight would serve as something akin to a do-over.

“Well, I didn’t dress up like you and Dillyn. These jeans and boots are the best you’ll get from me. My feet were on fire that night, and if I need to run, I’m prepared.”

Dillyn glanced down at herself. The yellow mini dress she’d worn hugged every curve and showed off her smooth brown legs. Ben liked her legs. No, it wasn’t appropriate for Franks, but, in her defense, Dillyn was wearing a pair of cute 3-inch heels versus a pair of stilettos. *Can I run in these? Probably not.* Maybe she should have made a better outfit choice, but Dillyn hadn’t gotten dolled up in a while, and she wanted to look sexy. Ben was probably sick of seeing her in sweats and a t-shirt. “You have a point about the shoes, but Cat, you look good in anything.”

It was true. Cat with her chestnut-colored pixie haircut highlighted in platinum blonde accented her heart-shaped face. A face that was almost makeup-free except for the fuchsia lipstick that matched her boots. She was a natural beauty. Cat paired her lipstick and boots with a fuchsia halter underneath a jean jacket. Those colors stood out against white chocolate skin that had been kissed gently by the sun.

Dillyn was under no illusions about Cat’s feelings regarding going out. It was obvious she had resigned herself to go with the flow. If Dillyn were honest, even she would have preferred being curled up in bed with Ben, watching a good movie. However, Palmer did have a point. They had to at least try to put the pieces of their lives back together. Guilt also played a heavy part in why Dillyn was *up* for the night.

Everything that had happened over the past few months was her fault. Hanging out with her friends at the local bar was a small sacrifice.

Palmer's voice drowned out Dillyn's thoughts. "Waiting on you two," Palmer pointed between Dillyn and Cat, "probably cost us good parking."

"If that's the reason you're using to rush off to Franks, we'll go with that." Dillyn laughed. Even though there was some truth in Palmer's words, she also knew Lucas attracted a lot of women. So did Ben and Wyatt, for that matter. "Think of it this way, you'll get to make a grand entrance. Now stop fussing, grab the keys, and let's go."

"Grab the keys?" Palmer responded cheekily, "To what?"

"The truck." Dillyn blinked innocently, "You're driving, right?"

Her question generated an outburst of laughter. "Girl, now you know better. That's your job!" Dramatically, Palmer twirled around, opened the door, and strutted out into the darkness.

"Yep. What she said." Cat smiled wide and then proceeded to quickly follow Palmer outside.

"Really?" Dillyn placed her hands on her hips as she watched her friends walk out of the door, leaving it wide open.

Dillyn couldn't even be mad when she hadn't expected anything less. She picked up the keys from the hook on the wall, turned on the alarm, and walked out the door.

*Some things never changed.*

## Chapter 4

Given the size of Franks, blending into the crowd wasn't hard to do. And it gets even easier when a person is average in height, has a slight build, and an unassuming face.

It was imperative to remain incognito and position himself where he would have a birds-eye view of every direction. There was just one problem—his partner. The man was like a bull in China shop, so he settled on the table next to the main entrance. It was out of the way. Nobody would recognize him there, but just in case someone did, he pulled his Stetson down to obscure his face while drinking his beer.

Still, one could only hope he wouldn't be recognized or the man sitting beside him. That dude had been giving him grief all night. He hadn't tasted freedom in a while, and it showed.

While he blended in with the locals, his tagalong did not. The man looked like he had just come out of the joint—a straight menace. It didn't matter that it was true. He wasn't supposed to look like it.

In a hushed tone, he growled at him. “Sit down and shut the fuck up!”

“Hey man, just trying to enjoy myself a little.”

“Not here. We're on a job. Pull your baseball bib down to cover your face and drink your *goddamn* beer.”

This assignment was going sideways. It had from the moment he accepted it, and this guy was forced upon him. It

was too late to have second thoughts, not when a large sum of money had already been wired into his account. He hoped it was worth it and that they didn't get caught.

His phone vibrated inside his jean jacket. Frustrated, he reached inside, pulled it out, and held it to his ear. Good thing it was a burner since his client was doing stupid shit like *calling him in the middle of a fuckin' job!*

The voice on the other end sounded anxious. "You made it?"

Before answering, he stole several furtive glances around the place to ensure he wasn't being watched or overheard. After feeling relatively confident that nobody had eyes on him, he spoke quietly into his phone. "Yeah."

"Have you spotted her?"

It was hard to hear, given the noise level. "No."

"My sources say she will be there."

His jaw clenched, "You're fuckin' kidding me right now, right?"

"I don't make jokes, especially when paying you this kind of money. I need to know you're going to get the job done."

"I always get it done."

"Are you sure you're out of sight and she won't be able to see the two of you?"

His voice was husky and low, "You've got ten more seconds to tell me what the fuck you want."

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line. “Incarcerated people lie, and I need solid proof that she is his daughter before I make my next move.”

“You’re compromising the mission by calling to tell me something I already know. I said I’d get confirmation, and I’ll get it!” He didn’t wait for a response before quickly disconnecting the call. It wasn’t a moment too soon. The subject of his call had just walked through the door.

It was show time.

He spoke mostly to himself as he zeroed in on Dillyn, “Soon, we’ll know exactly what to do with you.” His goal was to keep her within his sights and his partner invisible until it was time to make his move.

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Ben took a long pull from his beer as he watched Lucas glance over at the front entrance of Franks. He’d been hawking it from the bar for the past couple of hours.

Wyatt popped a pretzel into his mouth. “How many is that?”

Ben chuckled. “Too damn many to count.”

Lucas turned around and tossed back another shot of whiskey. “What are you two knuckleheads giggling like teenage girls about?”

“Why don’t you just text her?” Wyatt asked.

“Who?” Lucas shrugged off the question as if he didn’t know who Wyatt was referring to.

“You ain’t foolin’ nobody.” Wyatt waved over to Cliven, the bartender, for another beer. “Call the woman.”

“A) I’m not looking for Palmer and B) she has to make the next move.”

Ben laughed. “Who said anything about Palmer?”

“What?” Lucas was caught red-handed.

“Look, if you’re really into her, you’ll have to put in some work. Snaggin’ Palmer won’t be easy.”

Frustrated, Lucas challenged, “I’ve made *all* the moves.” Thinking about it gave way to a slow grin. “I know she appreciated at least some of them.”

Wyatt smacked him on the back of the neck. “A hook-up is not the same as getting to know someone.”

“Oww!” Lucas rubbed the stinging area. “Watch that shit, man.”

It felt like old times as Ben watched his younger brothers acting up. “All I’m saying is that you can’t use the same moves on Palmer that may work on other women.”

“Not if she’s special.” Wyatt agreed.

Lucas didn’t think they were sympathetic enough to his situation, “I don’t know how many ways I can tell her. It’s not my fault that she doesn’t take me seriously.”

Ben was curious. “Whose fault is it then?”

Wyatt answered for him. “Definitely Lucas’ fault. But, to move this boring ass conversation along, did you ask yourself why she doesn’t take you seriously?”

“Screw you and you.” Lucas pointed first to Ben and then to Wyatt. “If I had to guess, I’d say my age, but ain’t nothing I can do about that.”

Wyatt asked, “Are you that much younger than her?”

“Not much, around seven or eight years.”

“Has she said that was the issue?”

“In roundabout ways. There is always an ageism comment or joke.”

“Then, you’ll have to *show her* and not tell her you’re mature enough to handle a relationship. Make her see that you’re serious.”

Lucas was getting irritated with Wyatt. “You’re giving a lot of advice tonight. Are you talkin’ from experience because the last time I checked, yo ass ain’t never been married and is still single?”

Before Wyatt could respond, a sassy little siren with lust in her eyes approached them. She squeezed past Ben and Wyatt in her quest to get to Lucas.

“Hey, y’all.” Her voice was sultry and laced with a deep southern drawl. While she may have spoken to all of them, she set her sights on the youngest Cash brother. Smiling from ear to ear, she got up in his face, slid her hands across his chest, and linked her fingers behind his neck. “It’s been a while, darlin’.”

As if Lucas couldn’t help himself, he flashed her a mega-watt smile just as Dillyn, Cat, and Palmer walked through the door.



Immediately, his smile froze as his eyes connected to and locked with Palmer's.

Her gaze turned icy.

“Whoa boy,” Wyatt shook his head as he started to walk away from the scene of the crime. “I think Lucas just fucked up both your nights.”

Wyatt had a point. It was hard to miss the red-hot anger written all over Dillyn's face.

*Damn Lucas!* Ben would have to put in his own work to smooth things over.

## Chapter 5

Dillyn glared at Ben from across the room. Franks was packed, but not enough to hide all the women flocking around him and his brothers. And Lucas? She was so disappointed. Why was he entertaining that woman? She had high hopes for him and Palmer, and Palmer was clearly upset.

Instead of making a beeline to the bar, Dillyn and Cat followed their friend to a table. Before they could get settled, a waitress appeared to take their drink order. “Hey there! Good to see you ladies again at Franks. What can I get ya?”

Palmer pretended seeing Lucas with that inflatable Barbie doll-like woman didn’t bother her. “A round of tequila!”

Dillyn hadn’t told them that she was pregnant. She wasn’t quite sure why, but a small part of her was hesitant. She glanced over her shoulder, and Ben was staring a hole into her back. Subtly, he lifted his chin and directed her toward the hallway leading to the bathrooms and away from her friends.

“I can’t.” Dillyn mouthed and quickly turned away.

“What’s all that commotion over there?” Palmer asked as the three of them craned their heads toward a crowd standing in a circle.

“Is that what I think it is?” Cat looked wide-eyed and curious.

“I’ll be damned,” Dillyn said in the wondrous tone of a five-year-old. “It’s a mechanical bull! My god, we are not in

New York anymore.”

Palmer pushed herself up from the table. “No, we are not! Think I’m going to ride it.”

Cat stood as she pressed her lips together in gleeful anticipation. “Me too.”

There was no way Dillyn would get on that thing even if she weren’t pregnant. Not the way it had just tossed the last person around like a ragdoll.

Palmer led the charge, “Let’s go!”

Cat chastised them as she followed Palmer, “I told both your asses not to wear those freak’um dresses tonight!”

With mischief sparkling in her eyes, Palmer turned halfway around and responded, “I know how to hike this baby up.”

*How much higher can it go? That dress already rests at your mid-thighs.* Dillyn kept her thoughts to herself as she snatched up their purses and quickly followed her friends.

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“What the hell?” Ben gripped the neck of his beer tightly as he slowly lowered it. He watched in horror as Dillyn and her merry band of bandits maneuvered their way into the inner circle of Frank’s newest attraction.

Lucas turned to see what had got Ben all worked up just as Palmer was about to climb onto that mechanical bull. He slammed his shot glass down on the bar. “No, the fuck she ain’t!” He was just about to tell Ben that he was going over to

stop the nonsense, but apparently, Ben was already heading in that direction. Lucas had to almost run to catch up with him.

They pushed through the crowd until Ben was standing almost side-by-side with Dillyn. Out of nowhere, he made eye contact with Wyatt, who had cozied up next to Cat. Ben wasn't sure how or when Wyatt arrived, but how he looked at her only fueled his suspicions. Ben made a mental note to ask Wyatt about it later. For now, his focus was Dillyn.

He leaned down and spoke into her ear. "You're not getting on that."

Dillyn wasn't surprised to see him. Honestly, she wondered what had taken him so long. Still, Dillyn didn't like being strong-armed, especially when she hadn't planned on riding anything. Gone were the days when she would let a man tell her what to do.

Instead of saying what was on her mind, Dillyn wrinkled up her nose and chose to ignore him. The crowd was pumped, and so was she as they watched in wonder as Palmer got on that bull without exposing all her lady parts.

Palmer threw one long, shapely leg over the side and then the other until she was seated properly. That only intensified the hootin' and hollerin' as the crowd egged her on. Once Palmer was settled on the saddle, she glanced over at Dillyn and Cat and smiled. "Let's see if I can hold on for eight seconds!"

Cat was losing her shit. She was excited for her turn. It was obvious to Dillyn when Palmer's eyes landed on Lucas. Her naughty little smirk turned into an instant scowl, and she gave him a hall-of-fame eye roll.

If looks could kill, he would be dead. And if the steam coming out of his ears was any indication, Lucas was equally pissed.

He didn't appear to take the obvious hint or didn't care. By the look in his eyes, Lucas wanted to snatch Palmer right off that thing. He might have if Wyatt hadn't grabbed his forearm just as he stepped forward.

Palmer was oblivious. Maybe not entirely, but she planned to pretend that Lucas wasn't even there. She wrapped one hand around the rope tied to the bull and lifted the other in the air. It's what she'd seen the person before her do.

Then she let her arm drop.

*Eight seconds.* She just needed to last eight seconds.

Palmer held the rope tight and squeezed her thighs against the thick leather as a way to grind herself to the bull.

At first, it moved very slowly, but it didn't take long for Palmer to find her rhythm. Her hips moved back and forth in time with the rhythm of the bull. It was more than a little sexually suggestive. She knew it and decided to play it up, becoming more animated by the second.

Cat cupped her hands around her mouth and screamed, "Go, girl! Yee-haw!"

The crowd surrounding Frank's new attraction was already large, but when folks saw Palmer, it grew even more.

Lucas's face was flushed. He stood rigid with his arms folded across his chest, watching men he had known since childhood lusting over the woman he wanted to make his. He hated every second Palmer was on the damn thing.

“Keep your cool, lil bro,” Wyatt advised.

Three seconds in, and the bull still had not increased its speed. It was moving much slower than the other person who had ridden it just before Palmer.

She glanced at the operator, wondering if it was broken, only for him to give her a wink and the thumbs-up sign.

Lucas saw their entire exchange and was ready to blow a gasket.

Palmer rolled her hips while straddling the mechanical beast just like she had ridden him during several rounds of passionate sex.

He seemed to be recalling the same memories. Lucas had not only seen Palmer move like that but also experienced it first-hand when she straddled him, squeezed her knees around his hips, and ridden him hard. No other woman had ever made him feel the way she had. Not even close.

Lucas was getting hot under the collar just thinking about it and had to tug at the neck of his shirt to loosen it up.

*Three seconds left.* Finally, the operator increased the speed of the bull. Not by much, but enough for Palmer to continue the theatrics. It twisted and turned as she angled her hips in the opposite direction and lifted her butt up and down. Palmer would have given a porn star a run for her money.

The timer buzzed, and Palmer received a huge applause. She remained seated until the bull came to a complete stop. That ride lasted much longer than eight seconds. Her face was flushed, but she was beaming as she hopped down, “Oh, my god! That was so damn fun!”

Nothing Ben or Wyatt could do to keep Lucas from making an ass out of himself. So, they did nothing as he went stomping up to Palmer and got in her face, “I need to talk to you.”

Palmer batted her lashes innocently, “Nope! You don’t.” She reached for Cat and Dillyn’s hands and guided them away from the bull and to the dance floor where folks were line dancing. She completely paid him dust while yelling over the music, “This is my song. I love Kane Brown!”

“Ugh,” Cat said to no one. She wanted to ride that bull! However, she wouldn’t allow the Cash brothers to ruin their night of fun. Palmer was running away from Lucas to the dance floor, so she figured it was time to dance. At some point, Cat would have her chance to ride that thing.

Sorrowfully, Dillyn glanced back at Ben as she was being led away and gave him a slight one-shoulder shrug. Palmer needed her.

Dillyn wasn’t a great dancer, but she could keep a beat. It didn’t take long to get the hang of it. The dance was very similar to the electric slide. Before long, she was into it and having fun.

After more than thirty minutes of dancing, Dillyn’s bladder was about to explode. She didn’t want to be the fun sponge but had no choice. She yelled over the music, “Um ... I need to use the bathroom.”

Cat yelled back, “Someone should go with you.”

Dillyn waved her off. “I’ll be fine. It’s just around the corner.”

“If you’re not back in five minutes,” Cat held up her right hand and wiggled her fingers, “we’re coming to find you.”

“Okay, *mom!*” Dillyn couldn’t even be upset. Lately, there had been too many crazy things happening, and they needed to be on guard.

Maneuvering through all the people was challenging. After the remodel, Franks was much bigger, which meant it could hold more customers. Still, Dillyn pushed her way through by angling her body this way and that while slowly inching toward her destination.

It was strange to hear so many folks speaking to her along the way, considering she was still new to Summer, but Dillyn learned quickly that word traveled fast in small towns, and it wasn’t like there were that many black folks around. It was probably very easy to pick her out.

“Hey, Dillyn.”

She smiled brightly, “Hi.”

“Howdy, Dillyn.”

“Hey there.” She continued to speak as she made her way toward the bathroom. She recognized many faces, but there were still too many unfamiliar ones.

“Hey, Dill.”

That deep, gravelly voice stopped her cold. *Who said that?!* Dillyn whirled around, looking for the person who spoke, but didn’t see them. She stood perfectly still, hoping it would help her concentrate. The problem was there were too



many voices, and it was difficult to pick out that one from all the others.

*Impossible. I could not have heard him.* As if to convince herself that she had been mistaken, Dillyn listened harder, only to still come up empty.

Her anxiety was rapidly rising.

It might be time to call her therapist for another session because she was wildin' out. Dillyn's doctor would probably tell her it wasn't unreasonable to think about him now that she was pregnant. As much as she wanted to pretend her father didn't exist, she couldn't. He'd left an indelible mark, and her pregnancy was bringing out all manner of buried emotions. *But to think about him here? Now? At Franks?* That was weird.

Dillyn sighed. Not only was she being silly, but it also wasn't remotely possible. The man was in prison and would be there for a long time. *Focus on what's important, like using the bathroom before you pee on yourself.* Dillyn shook off her heebie jeebies and continued toward the ladies' room.

She took a few steps in that direction, and just like in a horror movie, she heard his laugh! Dillyn paled. Her breathing became erratic as she again spun around in a full circle.

Breathless, she whispered, "Where are you?" Frantically, she stood on tiptoes and craned her head around the room. It was just too hard to find anyone among so many people. Still, Dillyn searched.

*There's absolutely no fuckin' way! Someone would have contacted me about his release.* Dillyn continued to search.

There were lots of faces, but none were that of her father. Common sense tried to enter the craziness of her mind. *Why would he be here? How would he even know where to find you?*

He wouldn't. *So, calm down.*

Dillyn hadn't seen Melvin Anderson since she was a child, and he still had another ten years to serve before being eligible for parole. Her eyes fluttered closed as she pinched the bridge of her nose to calm her nerves. *You're being ridiculous.* That was not him. *He is not here.*

*Girl, get a grip!*

She inhaled. Then, slowly, blew it out.

There was a gentle tug on her arm. Dillyn's eyes popped open, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. She placed a hand over her chest and breathed a huge sigh of relief when she realized it was Ben. She forgot all about being pissed at him.

He was instantly on alert after gazing into terrified eyes. Something had scared her, and Ben was determined to find out who.

His voice was dead calm, but the tightness around the edges of his mouth revealed the truth. "What's wrong?"

Dillyn knew Ben well enough to know that look. She was being irrational, and he had been worried enough about her. *Get it together.* Nervously, she pressed her lips together. "N-Nothing. I just ... I just thought I'd seen someone I knew."

Ben scanned the room, "Who?"

Dillyn took another calming breath. She was doing a poor job of convincing him to stop worrying. She placed a hand on his arm. “Really, I’m fine. It wasn’t him.” She released a nervous laugh. “Being at Franks and around so many people has me a little rattled.”

“We can leave,” Ben was dead serious.

This time, Dillyn really did work to shake off her ill feelings. “No. That would be silly. We all came to have fun, and Palmer would be so disappointed.”

Ben didn’t give a damn about any of that.

She continued to plead her case, “Just about everyone knows I’m with you. Nobody would be stupid enough to try anything.”

Ben wasn’t buying it. Someone had scared the shit out of her.

“You see all the bouncers and cameras in here?” Dillyn pointed around the room. “Franks has upped their security game. I promise. I’m fine.”

Ben wasn’t a hundred percent convinced, “you’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Against his better judgment, he decided to let it go, but he wouldn’t let Dillyn out of sight. He began to guide her away from the crowd while simultaneously looking for unfriendly faces. He also sought to find the undercover bodyguards he’d hired to watch over Dillyn and her friends.

Ben steered her toward the hallway next to the kitchen and bathrooms. However, he couldn’t fully relax until he made

visual eye contact with the members of his security team. They'd been close by this entire time, watching them closely.

The second Ben had Dillyn in the hallway, he pulled her into his arms.

He could feel her heart racing. As it slowed, he placed his lips next to her ear, "Are you sure you didn't see anything or anyone?"

Dillyn sighed heavily, "Yeah, I'm sure. I promise I would tell you." She had been freaking out for no reason. Her mind was playing tricks on her. There wasn't even a remote possibility that her father would get out of prison anytime soon.

She rested her head on his chest a while longer, relishing the feeling of being in his arms. It was a place where she felt safe, and time stood still. It was as if it were just the two of them, even surrounded by a sea of people. Everyone else disappeared. It was a miraculous feat, considering where they were. After a few moments, a thought popped into her head—the memory of what happened earlier with Lucas. Dillyn stepped back, placed her hands on his chest, and then gently pushed.

His arms loosened, but Ben refused to let her go.

"Why was Lucas all over that woman?!"

Dillyn switched gears on him so fast it made his head spin. "What?"

"That woman? Wait ..." Dillyn held up a single finger, "hold that thought. I've got to use the bathroom!" She ran off through the door.

Ben was tempted to follow her inside but figured he would hear if anything went down. Instead of being the overprotective boyfriend, he patiently stood outside and waited.

Dillyn wasn't gone for too long. She walked out, drying her hands with a paper towel. She spoke as if there wasn't a pause in their conversation. "When we walked in tonight, Lucas was all up in some woman's face."

Ben thought he would escape this conversation. Apparently, not, "Really? So we're still on Lucas and that woman?"

"Yes," Dillyn hadn't forgotten. "Palmer is one of my best friends. If I can, it's my job to get to the bottom of this."

"No, actually, it's not your job. None of this has anything to do with us, and to be fair to Lucas, that woman was in his face."

Dillyn gave him her infamous head tilt, "C'mon Ben, he could have resisted. Palmer is really into him, and I don't want her to get hurt."

Once again, Ben pulled Dillyn close and gently kissed her lips.

She melted like a hot knife cutting through butter. After releasing her, he pressed his forehead against hers. It really was just the two of them. His tone softened, "Lucas is into Palmer too, but whatever they have going on is between them. It's not our business."

Dillyn ignored the *not our business part*, "He has a funny way of showing it."

“Maybe, but again, whatever their situation is doesn’t have anything to do with us. We need to stay out of it. What’s going to be will be.”

“But she’s like my sister.”

“He *is* my brother, and I don’t want to see him hurt either.”

Dillyn sighed, “Him? Lucas is the one with a reputation for having a different woman every week!”

“The only woman Lucas wants to spend time with is Palmer.”

“You say that, but it’s hard to believe when that woman was wrapped around him like an octopus.”

“Have you ever thought Palmer might be sending mixed messages? What was she doing on that bull? Lucas’s head was ready to explode.”

Dillyn giggled.

Ben was doing exactly what he said he wouldn’t do. He was getting drawn into his brother’s love life. “Nope. Don’t answer that. We are not discussing them. We have our own shit to deal with and shouldn’t be adding theirs to ours.”

He had a point. Dillyn would always stick up for Palmer, and Ben would always stick up for Lucas. “So, we stay out of it?”

“Yep. We stay clear out of it. Don’t you think we have enough on our plates?”

Dillyn set herself up for his next question.

“Have you told Palmer and Cat about the baby?”

Nervously, Dillyn nibbled on her lower lip. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

She shifted in her heels, which were starting to hurt. They *were* cute, though. “I’m just looking for the right time. I don’t want them thinking they started this new venture only for me to abandon them.”

“Having a baby doesn’t mean you will have to give up your plans.”

“No. Not exactly, but I’ll have to amend them, affecting my friends. I’ll tell them, I promise. I just need a little more time.”

“When?”

“Soon. In the meantime,” Dillyn pleaded, “can’t we just keep this between us?”

Reluctantly, Ben nodded. “Fine, but I’m happy about this. It’s hard not to share with my family.”

Dillyn’s stomach was in knots. She felt a lot of emotions when it came to being pregnant, and she was sure excitement was wrapped in there *somewhere*. At least, it had been when she’d first found out. Only something changed, and she couldn’t pinpoint what or when.

Ben spotted the waitress serving Dillyn’s table out of the corner of his eye. He called out to her as she walked past with a tray of drinks. “Hey, Becca! Are those for my lady and her friends?”

She smiled brightly after recognizing Dillyn. “Oh, well, yeah! Palmer just told me after all that dancin’, y’all were

ready. They were out of lemons at the bar, so I had to come to the kitchen. I was returning to your table to drop them off.”

Ben lifted a shot glass from her tray, tossed it back, and then sat it down. “Think you can keep this one filled with sparkling water or something?”

Suspiciously, she glanced between Ben and Dillyn before the light bulb in her head turned on. “Um ... yeah, of course!”

“Good. That one belongs to her. Make sure it doesn’t get mixed up with the others, and bring me the bill at the end of the night. If you can do that, there might be an extra hundred or two waiting for ya.”

Becca’s grin split her face wide open. “No problem. I’ve got it covered.” She started to head back toward Dillyn’s table before turning around. She lifted the back of her hand to her face and whispered behind it, “Congratulations!”

Ben winked at her, and Dillyn released a forced smile. After Becca had gone, she turned to Ben. “Way to keep it between us. By morning, the whole town’s going to know.”

“Not the whole town.” He grinned and leaned down to kiss her again, this time so thoroughly Dillyn’s knees went weak.

Ben dipped his head low and captured her lips in a kiss. Dillyn’s quick intake of breath was enough for him to slide his tongue inside adeptly. He skillfully tasted her sweetness. After only a moment of kissing, something happened, and the kiss went from sweet to blazing.



Dillyn wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with a passion and desire that surprised her.

The tight control Ben usually had ... slipped. He wrapped his hand in Dillyn's hair to draw her even closer. He could feel her nipples pebble and harden underneath her dress. His other hand captured her ass.

He greedily sucked and thrust his tongue in and out as he made love to her mouth.

Ben was aroused, and the thought of being inside of Dillyn caused all the blood to rush to his cock, making it quite obvious to anyone who might pass by them.

They were standing in the hallway of Franks, devouring each other. Dillyn's thong was useless at this point and drenched. She was on fire and needed some relief. The space between her thighs was clenching at an emptiness that she wanted Ben to fill. *Maybe we should sneak out to the car.*

Their kiss had officially gone out of control. Ben had almost forgotten where they were until someone cleared their throat. "Get a room!"

It was an old high school buddy joking with them. Still, Dillyn immediately broke their kiss. Her face was flaming red from embarrassment. Ben didn't give a shit who saw them, but he respected her enough to understand the rules were different for women than for men.

His eyes said it all, "Let's get out of here."

"God, I want to but we can't. Not yet."

"An hour. One hour! That's it. No more and we are out of here."

Dillyn couldn't hide her impish grin, "Make it forty-five minutes."

## Chapter 6

Dillyn spent until late evening in her bedroom, trying to recuperate from her night at Franks. They didn't get home until the early morning, and then Ben had the nerve to stay over for their own private party, leaving just before dawn. Dillyn would always find the energy for him, but now she was paying for it. If Ben hadn't called to say he was on his way over, she would still be buried under her covers. Exhausted, Dillyn didn't feel the least bit guilty about clinging to her bed all damn day.

The house was quiet when she finally emerged from her room. Palmer and Cat were still cocooned within the confines of their bedrooms too.

Dillyn chuckled. *The little luses*. This was the one time she was grateful not to have had any wine or whiskey! She could only imagine how they were recovering.

She tried to pick up her butt, but it dragged heavily behind her as she descended the stairs to the foyer.

"Ugh! This is new!" *You've got to be kidding me*. Her back ached, and her feet were sore. "All this from a night out at the bar?" Father time was funny. He had a way of reminding people ... people, meaning Dillyn, that her days of going out with careless abandon were over.

*Clearly, I am way too old for this*. Dillyn could admit defeat as she massaged her aches and pains. *I wonder if Cat and Palmer know that they are too*.

Dillyn couldn't keep the silly smirk off her face as she thought about her friends. Their recovery will probably take at least another day or two. She laughed inwardly as flashes of their night came to mind. Her girlfriends were tossing back shots like it was water. They, for sure, were nursing hangovers and probably woke up to realize they weren't twenty-one anymore too.

*We had a good time, and that was all that mattered.*

Aches and all, Dillyn was still grinning when she reached the bottom of the stairs. She walked over to the front window and pulled the curtains back, looking for Ben.

It was the golden hour. The time of day when the sun hung low and cast a beautiful glow over everything.

*Perfect timing.* He was walking up onto the porch. When the doorbell rang, Dillyn quickly approached to open it. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him standing on the other side, bathed in gold and wearing a cocky little smile. There was no need to fight it, smile or no smile, she was putty in his hands.

Ben held a blanket in one hand and a picnic basket in the other. Dillyn glanced up into his unshaven face, which was made even more handsome by an after-five-shadowed beard that had grown in the hours they'd been apart. Dillyn wondered if she would ever stop being mesmerized by those cool, ocean-blue eyes. If Dillyn were honest, she was bowled over by his impish grin too.

Ben leaned onto the doorframe and crossed his legs at the ankles, "You busy?"

*You. Busy.* Those words said in that husky timbre and southern drawl made Dillyn quiver. *He was so wrong for this.* Her backlog of work would get longer, but what could she do when he looked at her like that? Most assuredly, anything he asked.

“Never too busy for you.” Her smiles came so much easier when he was around.

Ben was in the same boat. He couldn’t keep his eyes off her and knew he looked like a besotted fool, but he didn’t care. “That’s what I’d thought you’d say.”

Dillyn did her imitation of looking stern and failing miserably, “Did you now? What if I said no?”

“Nah. You wouldn’t miss hangin’ out with your man, especially if he cooked all your favorites.”

Dillyn laughed as she tapped the tip of his Stetson. “More like Selah made my favorites.”

“Semantics. I brought them, so I should get the credit.”

Dillyn placed her hands flat against the hard wall of his chest before stepping up on tiptoes. Her lips hovered just shy of his. She whispered, “You think so?”

Ben used his arm to pull her flat against him. “Definitely.”

She could feel his semi-erect cock pinned between them. It activated a dull ache between her thighs. How was it possible to desire him so much? Ben had done the impossible and made her crave sex. He was hers, so she wouldn’t fight the feeling. It brought a hint of a smile to her face, knowing she would be screaming his name at some point tonight. She

always did. For now, Dillyn would breathe in his woodsy scent, savor it, and look forward to that moment.

*Would she ever stop feeling this way? Would he?*

“Aren’t you tired of me?” Steven always looked for any excuse to get away, but Ben was the opposite. “After our early morning escapade, I’d think you’d need a break.”

“From who? You? *A break?* Never.” Dillyn kept Ben in a semi-state of arousal too, but she was also funny, and he enjoyed her company. Most of all, he was in love. It made the sex so much better. If Ben thought Dillyn was ready for marriage, he would have already gotten down on one knee. For now, he would be patient and move at her pace. Instead of whisking her away to the land of happily ever after, Ben kissed her hard.

Reluctantly, he pulled away. Otherwise, his plans for the evening were going to go to shit. Gently, he placed his hands on Dillyn’s shoulders, turning her around towards their mode of transportation, “my chariot awaits.” Instead of driving his truck, *aka*, Bertha, Ben had ridden Whisper.

Dillyn squealed. She’d been so focused on Ben that she missed the Golden Goddess behind him. It had been a couple of weeks since she’d seen her.

Excited, Dillyn bounded down the porch steps and ran towards her. Once within arm’s length, Dillyn ran her hand down Whisper’s head, “Hey, girl. Did you miss me?” She made a noise that seemed to acknowledge that she had. “I missed you too.” It had felt like ages since she’d sat atop the magnificent beast.

“Figured Whisper is much safer than that bull at Franks.”

Dillyn teased. “Ah. C’mon. That looks like fun.”

“Nothing beats the thrill of ridin’ a real bull, but you ain’t getting on either of them.”

Dillyn wasn’t going to argue, especially since she had no intention to ride one in the first place.

“We should get going before we lose the sun,” Ben motioned for Dillyn to hop on Whisper.

“Wait, let me grab something for my arms.” She quickly entered the house, grabbed her favorite jean jacket, and left a note that she was leaving with Ben. She was a little breathless when she returned, “Okay. I’m ready!”

Ben was ever so careful when he helped her onto Whisper, especially since she was carrying precious cargo. Once Dillyn was settled atop, he hopped on. For a minute, they just sat there with Dillyn sitting in front of him, cradled between his arms. Ben held her tight while his hands rested on her non-existent belly.

Content, Dillyn released a soft sigh, “I love it up here. It’s unlike any feeling I’ve ever felt. I feel ... free.”

Ben felt the exact same way. They marveled at the moment for a little bit, then he clicked his tongue, gently pressed his heels into Whisper’s sides, and they began to move. “We need to make the most of our rides while we can because before long, you’re going to be too far along for it to be safe.”

Dillyn leaned back into his chest and basked in how good she felt. “I’ll deal with that when the time comes. For now, I’m just going to enjoy the ride.”

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*How’d he do it?* Dillyn was amazed at Ben’s thoughtfulness. He had chosen the most magical spot on her property for dinner and to watch the sunset. Dillyn took it all in as she glanced around in wonder. “It’s so beautiful here. How do you always manage to find the most perfect places?”

Ben was pleased that Dillyn loved the area he’d chosen. He could see it in her eyes, and that filled him with pride. He lifted a shoulder in a little shrug, “You forget, old man Steele and my father were best friends. I know his property, well, yours now, almost as well as mine.”

*Lana would have hated it. Nope.* That chapter of his life was done. Ben refused to let any thoughts of his deceased wife taint this moment. Dillyn was his future, and this night was about her and moving their relationship to the next level. More and more, she was opening herself up to him. Soon, Ben hoped Dillyn would trust him completely, not just with her body but also with her heart.

Ben helped Dillyn get down from Whisper. “It’ll just take a minute to set everything up.” He walked to the rear of the horse and opened the pack that was hitched to the back of her, then handed Dillyn the picnic basket while he held on to a couple of thick blankets.

Ben tucked one of them underneath his arm and spread the other on the ground, where they could watch day turn into



night through a small opening in the trees. “Have a seat while I finish getting things situated.”

Dillyn felt useless, “Let me help do something.”

“Nah. I’ve got this. You’re fine right here,” He patted the ground, “enjoy letting me pamper you.”

Begrudgingly, Dillyn sat down with the picnic basket and decided to unload it until Ben stopped her.

“When I said I’ve got it, that’s what I meant.” His voice was stern even though it was laced with a smile, “Get your hand out of that basket.”

Dillyn raised her hand and saluted him. She giggled, “Aye-aye, Captain.” She resigned herself to watching Ben create their own slice of heaven. He easily rolled a fallen tree trunk closer to where she sat. The muscles in his arms bunched and tightened as he worked. It was a thing of beauty. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and gently nibbled on the soft fleshy part while thinking of touching his body, including that big muscle bulging between his legs.

She trembled.

No doubt about it, the Gods sculpted Ben, and they gifted him with a keen sense of how to use his gifts. The man had an innate knowledge of where to touch, taste, and stroke to make her body come alive.

Dillyn’s little kitty clenched and pulsed at the thought. The longer she watched him work, the more intense that dull ache from earlier became. *Girl, calm down.* Dillyn squeezed her thighs together, hoping it would keep her building desire in

check. She was amazed at how she'd gone from having zero sexual urges, to becoming a raging sexual lunatic.

A little embarrassed, Dillyn blushed. She was grateful that Ben was too busy to see her lusting after him.

Slowly, she exhaled a long breath. *It's official. I'm addicted to this man.* She wondered if he enjoyed having sex with her as much as she did. Self-doubt began to creep into her brain. *He's a man. They like sex. It could be with anybody.*

"Stop." She told herself. Ben was trying to create a romantic evening. *No self-sabotaging with negative thoughts.*

Ben was completely oblivious to Dillyn's lustful thoughts and misgivings. He was singularly focused on making her feel special. After rolling the tree trunk next to her, Ben covered it with the other blanket so she could comfortably lean against it.

Her eyes closed, and she released a small moan. "I feel like a princess."

"Nah ... that's not good enough. My job is to make you feel like a queen." Ben returned to Whisper and miraculously pulled out another, thinner Afghan.

"Whisper can carry all of that?" Dillyn couldn't keep the laughter out of her voice as Ben kept grabbing things from that pack. "What else is in there, a refrigerator?"

He winked. "Maybe. Is that a request? Will it make you feel like a queen? If so, I might have to figure something out."

Dillyn giggled like a teenager in love for the first time. To some degree, she was. Although not a teenager, but the butterflies she was feeling in her stomach were real. It was

different from what she had experienced with Steven. If Dillyn wanted romance with him, she had to be the one to initiate and execute the plans. Being on the other side felt wonderful. “Let me rephrase. I feel like a queen even without the refrigerator and am in awe at the endless number of items you keep pulling out of the bottom of that thing.”

Ben handed Dillyn the little blanket, “Good. Now wrap yourself in that until I get the fire going.” It didn’t take long before he had it blazing. Soon after, they ate and sat contentedly nestled in each other’s arms, watching the most beautiful bursts of deep yellows and reds morph into different arrays of dark purples until the eventual arrival of the calm of inky darkness. It was the most beautiful sunset Dillyn had ever seen.

The glow from the fire was now their main source of light. Dillyn looked up at Ben. “Thank you for this.”

“No thanks needed, nor required.” Ben leaned down and softly brushed his lips against hers just long enough to inhale her breath and taste her lips.

It was the sweetest kiss but not nearly enough for what he needed.

Dillyn craved more than just a taste, too.

Ben took his time. He knew how this night would end—*making love outside by the fire and underneath the moonlight. Fuckin’ perfect.*

Dillyn grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled him closer. Breathlessly, she spoke his name. “Ben,” parting her

lips and allowing just enough access for his tongue to slip inside.

Ben deepened the kiss. He loved the taste of her and her eagerness. Hearing Dillyn call out to him in that way fueled his own desire.

*What inhibitions?* Whatever Dillyn had earlier in the evening was gone. Her shyness vanished. Dillyn's body was on fire.

Her heart raced. Not only was she dizzy from passion, but she felt as if she were floating some place way above the clouds.

They were hit with such a primal desire that it was impossible to get close enough fast enough as they fumbled to take off each other's clothes. Dillyn's jacket was thrown somewhere over her shoulder, and it was the same for her yoga pants and t-shirt.

Her bra and panties quickly followed.

Ben's t-shirt went flying and his jeans and boots too.

They never broke their kiss while fighting to get as close as possible to one another. Ben gently laid their bodies down, and instinctively, Dillyn's legs parted so he could nestle in between them. He wanted to rush and take his pleasure but remembered ... this night was about Dillyn. He wanted her always to remember this place and this moment. It was where he planned to propose when the time came. However, it was hard to maintain control with her squirming underneath him. Instead of positioning his body between her silky thighs, he

lodged half of himself with his cock sandwiched between his stomach and her hip.

It was a protective measure to keep from moving too fast.

Dillyn was so aroused and very wet. Ben could feel it when his upper thigh connected with her slit. He smiled, knowing she wanted him even before he had kissed her. He hadn't had time to get her ready, so to speak. Still, he teased her by reaching his hand between them, parting her slick folds with his fingers, and running the pad of his thumb lightly across her clit. "Feel good?"

Dillyn gripped his shoulders. "Mmm ..." Her mind was mush.

He was hard and more than ready to sink deep into Dillyn's velvety heat. He knew how good she felt. He had experienced it just last night and early this morning. His voice was strained as he tore his lips away from hers, kissing her jaw and moving down the curve of her neck, "I could live inside your body."

"I'd love that," Dillyn ached to touch him. Her hands were greedy and needy as they searched the sinewy of his body.

The palm of her hand came in direct contact with his thick, long, and powerful cock. *The man was definitely blessed. Blessed be for me!* Dillyn still didn't understand how Ben could get all of that inside of her, but she didn't care. It was magical when he did. She wrapped her hands around him, gently squeezing as she slowly moved up and down.

He stroked her.

She stroked him.

Dillyn could feel herself falling to the power of his touch but wanted to stop before she couldn't. Tonight, Dillyn felt bold enough to try something she'd always wanted to do.

She wanted to take control.

Dillyn forced her eyes to open, but Ben's was still closed. The look of pure ecstasy on his face only strengthened her resolve. Quickly, she maneuvered her body so that she was sitting on top straddling him.

Nervously, she whispered. "I might be awkward, but I want to do this."

Ben swallowed hard. *Awkward? In-fuckin-possible.* Talk about a special moment to remember. Dillyn was always an eager participant when they made love, but she had never done anything like this. Ben was all for it. He didn't know if his cock could get any harder, but it managed to do so.

"I'm all yours." Ben reached up and took her breasts into his hands kneading and massaging them.

Dillyn's head fell back again, almost getting lost in how he made her feel. "Nuh-uh." She shook her head and waved his hands away. "It's my turn to make you feel good."

The surprise on Ben's face was worth it. Dillyn lifted her body up just enough to position his cock right between the seam of her swollen sex. He moaned when she started to slide her body back and forth.

It was torture. Ben wanted in. He wanted to pound Dillyn hard. To keep from losing his shit, he closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. Only, she felt too good.

*What the entire fuck?* Ben placed his hands on her hips, doing his level best to move at the pace she set.

Dillyn leaned down and pressed her breasts against his heated skin to kiss him. Loving him with her mouth in time with the rhythm of her rolling hips.

Subtly, Ben lifted to meet her in small thrusts as if he was enveloped inside her sweet heat.

Dillyn's insides were doing crazy things. She was on the verge of cumming, and Ben hadn't even entered her.

It was time.

Again, she lifted her ass just enough to line Ben's cock up at her entrance, then slowly sat down until Ben had fully impaled her.

They moaned in pure pleasure as her tightness hugged him like a glove.

"Shit!" Ben's voice was strained. "Fuck!"

Dillyn's husky voice sounded foreign to her ears, "That's my plan." She pressed her knees tightly against his hips while lifting her body up and down. She increased the tempo and rode him as hard as she could.

Ben allowed her to do as she pleased for as long as he could but couldn't take it another second. He wrapped an arm around her waist for support and met her movements thrusting hard into her core.

Dillyn held on for dear life as Ben pounded her into oblivion. “You feel so good.” She ground out. Each stroke was magical and Dillyn want more.

Her breasts were right there in front of him. Ben would be a fool not to. He took them into his mouth, kissing and sucking them while thrusting with all his might.

The frenzied pace of their lovemaking was causing them both to build toward an orgasm much sooner than anticipated. Ben could feel the early spasms of her body. It was good because he wasn’t sure how long he could hold on.

“Ben,” Dillyn’s voice started to rise.

“I know, baby.” He continued to drive into her. “I feel it too.”

Shortly after, Dillyn screamed his name as her body exploded from the best orgasm she’d ever had. It wasn’t long before Ben found his release and filled her with his seed.

It took a moment for their breathing to return to normal and to come back down to earth.

“Wow.” Ben kissed her lightly on the lips.

“Wow?” Her shyness was starting to rear its ugly head.

“Definitely, wow. You were amazing.”

Dillyn sighed contentedly as she moved her body to lie in the crook of his arms. She snuggled into his side, and he covered them with the afghan.



## Chapter 7

Dillyn didn't want to move as she basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking. It was hard to believe before him, she couldn't find any joy in sex.

Ben was feeling euphoric, too, and wished this moment could last forever. Unfortunately, the temperature had dropped. It was too cold for Dillyn to be out. He kissed the side of her temple. "We should get going."

Dillyn's limbs felt like jelly, "Mmm...I don't want to move."

"You say that now, but your entire body will be screaming tomorrow. The ground is too hard for you and the baby."

"Right," *The baby*. Stubbornly, Dillyn still wanted to stay put. *Does that make me a bad mom?* Shouldn't she automatically put the needs of her child first? It seemed so easy for Ben but not so much for her. She could only hope it eventually would.

Dillyn groaned as Ben helped her up so that she could get dressed. Her clothes were strewn everywhere. Fortunately, her t-shirt and yoga pants were close. She picked them up and began to wiggle into them.

As she was putting on her clothes, Dillyn heard a noise. It was accompanied by a strong energy that hadn't been there before.

She stiffened. Something felt off as a chill began to creep down her back, and it had nothing to do with the night air.

“Ben?”

He was putting on his other boot. “Mmm ...”

Dillyn inched a little closer to him while glancing around. “D-d did you hear that?”

Ben sometimes forgot that Dillyn was a city girl. He chuckled, “What specifically? There are all kinds of critters out here this time of night.”

She turned toward the direction from where she thought she’d heard the noise. Given the darkness, it was difficult to see anything further than a couple of feet away from the fire. “Nuh-uh. What I heard didn’t sound like critters. More like footsteps. The humankind.”

Ben turned and followed her line of sight. He had asked security to stay far enough away not to intrude but close enough. He wondered if one of them had gotten a little too close. He stared hard into the woodsy brush. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. Then, he saw it.

“Be still.”

Dillyn stopped breathing. She was scared shitless and wouldn’t have been able to move even if she tried.

Ben moved quietly as he inched to Whisper to retrieve his rifle from its scabbard.

Dillyn whisper-yelled, “What do you see?! What is it?”

Rifle in hand, Ben quietly came to stand beside her, then subtly moved Dillyn behind him. He put a finger up to his lips, “*Shh.*”

Dillyn’s heart was now thundering inside her chest, threatening to explode. She jumped at a howl, or rather more like a yipping noise.

Ben whispered, “It’s a coyote.” As soon as he spoke, it walked out into the clearing with several others. Their eyes glowed yellow like little monsters.

Dillyn was going to DIE right where she stood.

There was an intense stare-down between Ben and the main coyote. The alpha-to-alpha standoff went on for what felt like hours but was more like seconds until the pack leader seemed to decide they weren’t worth the effort. Eventually, he turned and walked away, taking his friends with him. After a few more moments, Ben joked, “Think they got a full-on show?”

Dillyn hadn’t yet found the humor in being stalked by a pack of coyotes, “Are we safe? Think they’ll come back?”

Ben pulled her into the crook of his arm. “You’re always safe with me.”

The sincerity in his eyes made Dillyn relax . . . *a little*. She released a small sigh, “I’m going to hold you to that because it’s not hard to imagine being eaten alive by those things. Glad they’re gone.”

“Me too,” He chuckled.

Dillyn *still* couldn’t find the humor, and it bothered her. “Lately, I’ve been so jumpy.” Obviously, not when they were

making love. Her thoughts returned to hearing her father's phantom voice at Franks and now feeling like someone had been watching them.

"S'pose it's kinda normal. We've been through a lot the past few months, and remember, you're also still getting used to living in the country. It hasn't been long since you traded-in your red-bottoms for cowgirl boots."

"When did I do that?" Dillyn asked, "I might have traded in city life for the country, but I'll never give up my red bottoms."

"Speaking of ..." Ben had put off the inevitable long enough and figured now was a good a time as any to bring it up. "I went to town earlier today to pick-up a few things and um ..."

Dillyn waited impatiently for him to finish his thought before gently prodding, "Yeah?"

"I think it's time we tell our friends and family that you're pregnant."

Frustrated, Dillyn rolled her head around her neck. "Didn't we agree to wait a little while longer just last night?" *Please don't ruin our amazing evening sans the potential attack of the coyotes.* She wasn't ready to tell Cat and Palmer.

"We did, but we might have a problem."

Her head snapped up, "What?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, "You know Tony Myers?"

His name sounded familiar, but she was having trouble recalling his face.

Ben prompted, “The mechanic at Zone Auto.”

“Oh, yeah, him.” Dillyn was confused. Why would Tony’s name come up regarding telling her friends about her pregnancy?

“He’s dating Becca.”

Dillyn still didn’t make the connection.

“He congratulated me about the baby.”

Dillyn dropped her chin to her chest. “*Ugh!* She told him. So that means the word is out, and time is ticking.”

“Babe, time was always ticking.” Ben watched Dillyn start to fidget. It was a tell-tell sign that she was nervous. So was he, but Ben wanted to shout it from the roof tops. He was with the most incredible woman and about to be a father again. Life couldn’t get any better. Still, he was doing his best to be patient, given how fast everything unfolded between them. It was hard, but it made sense why Dillyn would be nervous. “It’s been two weeks since we found out.”

Pissed, Dillyn went to grab her boots to put them on. “That’s not very long. I don’t understand the rush to tell everyone. Shouldn’t we wait until I’m out of my first trimester?”

“That’s almost six weeks away. Were you planning to wait that long?”

Dilly shrugged.

“I don’t understand the reluctance. The fact is, if people already know, it’s going to get back to Palmer and Cat sooner rather than later.”

“Who’s fault is that?!” Dillyn shot back before immediately calming down. “And I’m not reluctant.” She wouldn’t make eye contact as she searched for her jean jacket. “Where’s my jacket?”

An unsettling feeling started to form within the pit of Ben’s stomach. He took a minute to gather his thoughts as he picked up her jacket and handed it to her. However, he didn’t release her hand when she reached for it. Instead, he spoke softly, “Dillyn, look at me.”

At first, she wouldn’t do it. She was too afraid of what he might see when Dillyn herself wasn’t even sure what would be reflected. *I’m not a coward.* Nervously, she lifted her head and gazed up into hopeful eyes.

“You want this baby, right?”

Dillyn felt hot all over, and breathing was a little difficult. *Did she really want to be a mother?* It wasn’t a question she had asked herself. *Why wouldn’t she?* Dillyn already knew that Ben would be a doting father.

Ben didn’t move an inch as he waited for an answer. *Yes. Just say the word.* It was a simple three-letter word. His entire world was riding on Dillyn saying it. His chest felt heavy, like a two-ton weight sat on it. *What the hell would he do if she said no?*

The tension in the air was thick. Dillyn didn’t know what to say, so she answered honestly. “I won’t lie and say I’m

not nervous. Maybe something even close to terrified. Bringing a life into this world is not a decision to take lightly. After the fiasco with Steven ...”

More sternly than intended, Ben interrupted, “I’m not *Steven*. Do not compare me to him.”

The last thing Dillyn wanted to do was compare Ben to him, “I know. There is no comparison. It’s not you that has me scared out of my mind. Our baby will be the luckiest person alive to have you as a father. I don’t doubt *you*. I doubt ... myself. I don’t know if I have what it takes.”

Ben finally released a breath, and his chest expanded with relief. Dillyn’s answer wasn’t a flat-out no. Her hesitation was based on the fear of motherhood. He should have been able to anticipate that. She just needed reassurance, “Babe, you’ll be amazing.”

Dillyn stuffed her hands inside the pockets of her jacket. She glanced down at her feet as she kicked the dirt. “How do you know that? I haven’t exactly had the best examples.”

“Do you think I’m not scared too, and I had great examples?”

Slowly, her head lifted, and she held his gaze. Dillyn studied his face for the truth, “You are?”

“Yes, and a small part of me feels guilty for being this happy about starting a family with you, as if I’m burying my daughter’s memory.”

Dillyn covered her hand with his. “You would never do that. You’ll love Rylee forever. I knew that the day I heard you singing to her over the phone.”

His daughter would always hold a special place in his heart. Still, the pain of losing her and not being able to protect her weighed on him. Ben was sure it was why he was a bit over-protective when it came to Dillyn. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

Dillyn was thoughtful before she spoke, "Ben, before we say anything to our friends and family, I just want to sit with the idea first. I need a little more time. Can you give me that? Just a little more time?"

Ben had to pretend like he wasn't disappointed. He wanted Dillyn to be as excited as he'd been but understood her hesitation. Dillyn's parents had done a number on her. His wife had done a number on him, but he was ready to leave all of that behind and start over fresh. Dillyn had to find a way to move past the trauma of her past but that wasn't anything he could help her with. No matter how much he told her that she would be a great mom. She had to come to that conclusion on her own.

He agreed. "I'll do my best not to push." Ben drew Dillyn close, leaned down, and covered her lips with his. Ben pulled back and placed his cheek on hers while whispering into her ear, "If that's what you need, you've got it. Tony won't tell a soul, and I doubt if he wasn't Becca's boyfriend, she would have said anything."

Dillyn's eyes became glassy as she blinked away tears, "Thank you." *How the hell did I end up so lucky?*

"Okay. Now that that is settled, I should get you home."

They were a reluctance to release each other from their embrace but did so anyway. While silently setting about



gathering their things, both got lost in their own thoughts.

Ben put out the fire. If not for the moon, they would have been draped in almost complete darkness.

The darkness put Dillyn back on edge. Slowly, her eyes turned back to the spot just behind the brush where the coyotes had emerged and lingered. It was harder to make out anything now that the fire had been extinguished.

She sucked in a breath and blinked rapidly while trying to adjust her vision.

*What was that?*

Was her mind still playing a brutal trick on her? If she didn't know any better, Dillyn would swear that standing at a distance was the outline of a dark shadowy figure.

She swallowed hard.

Ben was oblivious as he readied Whisper for the ride back home. Dillyn blinked and whatever was there was suddenly gone. She squinted harder. *Had someone been there? Was it a person from their security team?*

"You ready?" Ben held out his hand to help her onto Whisper.

Dillyn nodded. She was more than ready to return to her home's safety. As they rode away, Dillyn glanced back over her shoulder and shivered.

"You're cold?" Ben asked as he tightened his arms around her.

"Um ... a little." Dillyn wished that was the truth. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been watching

them and was *still* watching them.

## Chapter 8

Lucas was standing on the porch with hat in hand when Ben and Dillyn rode up. It was apparent he'd been waiting for a while.

Dillyn didn't smile or warmly welcome him because she was still pissed.

Lucas's hands were stuffed into the front of his jeans pockets. "Hey. I see y'all went for a late-night ride?"

Ben leaned down and whispered into Dillyn's ear. "Can you at least hear him out?"

Dillyn didn't respond.

Ben had done his part. He'd helped all he could. It was up to Lucas to fix the mess he'd made. He got down off Whisper and then reached for Dillyn.

She leaned into his arms, and he helped her down.

Nervously, Lucas ran his fingers through his hair. "I know y'all are pissed at me, but I just wanted to stop by and say I'm sorry about last night."

Dillyn rested her hands on her hips, "Sorry for what? Leading my best friend on when you're not serious about her at all?"

"You're wrong about that. I like Palmer a lot."

"Then why was some other woman all over you?"

"Look, Dillyn, technically, I didn't do anything wrong. Palmer and I are both single. However, I will explain my side

because I'd rather have you as an ally than an enemy. Nothing is going on between me and Stephanie. I haven't been interested in any other woman since I met Palmer. I'm trying to get to know her, but she hasn't made it easy."

"So, you're blaming her for your shenanigans?"

"No, but we're also not exclusive, even though I'd like to be."

He had a point.

"Palmer and I have a real connection. I want to explore it. Only I'm not sure that she does. One minute, she acts like she's really into me, and the next, she acts like I'm disposable."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Palmer's special, and I want to prove to her that I'm her guy. Like I said, I want you on my side."

"Are you?" Dillyn wanted to believe him. "I mean really her guy?"

Lucas stood a little taller. "I am."

The porch light came on, and the door creaked open. "I thought I heard voices." Palmer took a look at Lucas, "Oh, I didn't realize ..." She turned to Dillyn, "We'll talk later."

Dillyn believed Lucas. Until now, her own track record with men had been abysmal, so that wasn't saying much. However, she decided to go with her gut and hoped she was not wrong. "Actually," Dillyn linked her hands with Ben's. "We were just coming inside."

Ben and Dillyn started to walk towards the house when she stopped to whisper into Lucas' ear. "Don't make me regret this."

He nodded as they went inside. Palmer was just about to follow them when Lucas stopped her. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Palmer was emotionally drained. She released a small sigh, "It's late."

"I just need a minute."

Palmer took another deep breath before turning around to face him. "Sure. What's up?"

"Last night ..."

She cut him off. "You don't have to apologize."

"I wasn't going to."

His response threw her for a loop, "No?"

"No. I don't have anything to apologize for."

Palmer's blood pressure was going up again, "Really? You don't think so?"

"No, because we're not a couple. You said you wanted to keep things casual between us."

Palmer had said that. "Okay. Now that we've cleared that up, good night."

"We haven't cleared up shit. You've been sending mixed messages, but my intentions have been clear from the start. I'm hella interested in you, and you're interested in me even if you're too scared to admit it."

Palmer scoffed at the idea, “I’m not scared of anything!”

“Then why won’t you give me a real chance? Why won’t you let me take you out on an actual date instead of calling me over when you’ve got an itch to scratch?”

Palmer blushed, “That’s not ...”

“True? The hell it’s not! You saw me with Stephanie last night, who was coming on to me, by-the-way and you didn’t like it.”

“I may not have liked it, but you sure as hell seemed to be enjoying it!”

Lucas was relieved to see Palmer showing emotion, even jealousy. Jealousy meant she cared, and that was enough to spur him on. *Maybe* Lucas thought he had a shot to win Palmer after all. “She’s not the woman I want.”

“She’s way more your speed than I am.”

“Because she’s a white woman with blonde hair and blue-eyes?”

Palmer thought that was funny, “Pfft, definitely not. I have never, and I mean *never*, been insecure about who I am. I love the skin I’m in. No offense to anyone else, but I happen to be my own favorite shade of milk-chocolate. I’m full-figured and fabulous. I can compete with the best of ‘em if I wanted to.”

Lucas smirked. That was true. Palmer was confident, curvy, and fabulous, and he wanted her bad. He adored everything about her. The way she walked, the sound of her voice, the purring noise she made when they made love. The list of attributes was too long to name. No other woman made

him feel the way she had, but how comfortable she was in her own skin stood out the most.

Although Lucas thought he knew the answer, he still had to ask, “then why Stephanie and not you?”

She decided not to center her answer around Stephanie. “Here’s the thing,” Palmer explained, “the first time we got together, we were both reeling from a crisis.”

As Palmer spoke, Lucas inched closer. His voice dropped so low she had to move closer to hear him, “What’s the excuse for the second, third, fourth, and all the other times?”

His proximity was turning Palmer’s brain to mush. It was making her stomach do somersaults, and her knees feel a little wobbly, “I-I ... won’t stand here and lie. We have a strong physical connection, but we both know we’re incompatible.”

“That’s what you keep saying,” Lucas used the tip of his finger to gently caress the side of her cheek, “but I don’t know. We feel compatible to me.”

Briefly, Palmer’s eyes fluttered closed, “Lucas, I’m not talking about sex.”

He leaned in close, and it was all Palmer could do not to fall into his arms. The mix of his natural scent and musky cologne was almost her undoing. Palmer’s eyes popped open. “Okay. Wow.” She backed up and placed her palms flat against his chest, “I’m talking about everything else. I’m mean ... do you realize that I’m almost thirty-six years old?”

“And? I’m twenty-eight. I knew that was your hang-up.”

“It’s not a hang-up. It’s a legitimate concern.”

“I’m more than old enough to know what I want, and what I want is staring me in the face. Stop being stubborn and be honest with yourself. You want me too, and not just as your fuck boy. I see it in your eyes, so stop with the bullshit.”

Her voice softened. “Us? Together. It’s unrealistic.”

Lucas was getting even more frustrated. He was not breaking through. He decided to press the physical issue. Lucas captured her hands in his. “So, you’re saying two adults with great chemistry and who enjoy each other’s company is unrealistic?”

“It is when I want marriage and kids.”

“So do I someday.”

Palmer expected her words to throw Lucas for a loop. Surprisingly, they didn’t, but they did bring her back to her senses, “See, that’s the problem. My someday is now. I don’t have time to play games.”

“Who’s playin’ games?” Lucas couldn’t hide his irritation, “Give me a chance, and let’s allow things to progress naturally.”

“We’re just in two different places in our lives.”

“And some old lame-ass schmuck is right for you? Some jerk you haven’t even met? Won’t that take more time if you want to get married and have kids?”

“You have no idea about my romantic relationships!”



“I know you wouldn’t have slept with me if you were involved with someone else.”

Palmer didn’t confirm nor deny it. She just held his gaze. It was a stalemate between them. Neither budging nor backing down.

Lucas had had enough of Palmer’s bullshit. If there was a move to make, now was the time to make it. He pulled Palmer into his body, eliminating any space between them, and covered her lips with his. It wasn’t just any old kiss but a soul-snatching, toe-curling, can’t remember your name kind of kiss. Palmer didn’t even try to fight it. She couldn’t. Not when it felt like magic.

They had to breathe, which was the only reason Lucas pulled back. He challenged her, “You think you have all the answers, and you don’t. Not when our kisses feel like that. So, let me make a few things crystal clear. 1) You have no idea where I am in my life or what I want, 2) I want *you*, and 3) fighting what’s happening between us is a losing battle.”

Palmer was still trying to recover from that kiss, and he knew it based on the twinkle in his eyes.

After his declaration, Lucas decided it was best to let her think on his words, even though it was taking all his willpower not to scoop her up and take her to bed. Instead, he worked to regain his composure before giving in to lust, “You should probably go inside and rest up, but fair warning, my onslaught to make you mine is coming.”

Instinctively, Palmer nodded. She had to be honest, Lucas seemed very serious, and his kisses were dangerous. For the first time, Palmer wondered if there could be something

more than just a physical relationship between them. The possibility was both terrifying and exciting. Before she said or did something stupid, Palmer decided to take Lucas' advice. She smiled inwardly and hightailed it into the house.

## Chapter 9

Dillyn had been in a coma-like sleep for the past couple of hours. It was an incredible feat, given the anxiety she'd experienced earlier. She needed it. The emotional and physical strain of being pregnant was wearing her out. She saw and heard things that weren't there, but laying in Ben's arms gave her peace.

The man was a balm to her soul. No one could tell her he didn't possess healing powers, and Dillyn was determined not to take him for granted. Not when she had never come so close to feeling peaceful *and* safe in her entire life. Those feelings never held a place in her life until him. He made her believe it was possible.

*Jokes on you.* As if the mere thought of peacefulness could summon Dillyn's inner demons. *Are you willing to throw it all away? You will if you don't have this baby. He's going to leave you!* A coldness swept through her and spider-webbed throughout every cell of her being. As of late, it was becoming an all too familiar feeling.

Dillyn stirred but didn't fully wake, placing her somewhere between consciousness and a state of twilight.

Fighting to recapture the calm of moments before, Dillyn burrowed into Ben's side to absorb some of his heat. Instinctively, he held her tighter.

*You're safe. Trust his love.* Those were the thoughts of one side of her brain, but the other was diametrically opposed. That side was darker. It told her that she was not safe and that

Ben couldn't possibly love her. How could he when she was so tainted? *He will drop your ass like a bad habit at the first sign of trouble.* Ben would never understand terminating this pregnancy.

*What? Why is that even a thought?* And what kind of evil person would rip his heart out by even considering it?

Dillyn's inner chill grew colder, and being wrapped inside Ben's arms didn't do a thing to stop it. How could it be when the cold wasn't external? It was coming from that hidden place deep within her.

Her skin prickled. The hairs covering her body stood up as dread spread throughout. Dillyn clenched her nails into the fleshy part of her palms and winced in pain.

*Wake up.* She struggled to come into full consciousness while her head writhed from side-to-side.

The wrinkles on her forehead from frowning reached her hairline. Her eyes tightened and flitted erratically behind closed lids, "please, no," she said in a pained whisper.

Dillyn could now name it. She knew what this feeling was. *He* was coming. However, *he* hadn't appeared in her dreams in years. No amount of time could make Dillyn forget. In some ways, it was like no time had passed at all.

*Forever wouldn't be long enough.* It was wishful thinking on her part. She was well past the point of no return—an unplanned visit would happen tonight.

Her sperm donor, Malcolm Anderson, who shared her DNA, was coming. DNA Dillyn wished she could give back. He invoked fear in her unlike any other. It was worse than

conjuring Bloody Mary as a child. It was enough to induce a panic attack if Dillyn said Melvin's name just once, without a mirror, let alone three times.

No matter how hard Dillyn's subconscious fought, his face appeared plain as day.

The unkempt look of his matted beard, skin that appeared jaundiced from years of drug and alcohol abuse, and fire engine red eyes greeted her. Not only could Dillyn see him, but she also saw her ten-year-old self huddled in the back of the closet, hiding, and scared to death.

Dillyn's knees were tented, and her tiny little arms were wrapped tightly around them as she rocked back-and-forth. *Please, God.* Dillyn silently begged. *Don't let him find me. Not this time.* It was asking for the impossible.

He would find her. He always found her.

As soon as Dillyn finished her prayer, glazed eyes spotted her through a crack in the door from across the room. He stared a hole into her as he spoke between clenched teeth. "Get over here!"

Tears streamed down Dillyn's face. She squeezed them shut hoping to make herself disappear only for her mother's voice to take a sledgehammer to that wish shattering it into microscopic bits.

"Dillyn," her mom slurred from either being high as a kite or drunk as a skunk. Probably both. "I promise. He won't hurt you. Come on out."

It was a lie. Dillyn knew better.

Her mind screamed, “Wake up!” But she couldn’t. Dillyn was stuck inside the nightmare of her mind.

“Joyce, if I have to walk across the room and snatch that girl out of that damn closet,” His tone invoked an even bigger fear, “it’s really going to be a goddamned problem! That man is waiting in the living room and has already paid me. He ain’t going to wait all damn day. So, hurry the fuck up!”

Dillyn’s eyes popped open and grew to the size of saucers. She watched her mom nod in agreement as she began to advance towards her. Then, Joyce stopped just a few inches from the door, and for the briefest of moments, Dillyn thought *her mom might save her for once.*

She didn’t.

Instead, Joyce turned around to wave her impatient father off. “I said I’ll handle this!”

Her mother took a few more steps before stopping in front of the closet. She opened the door fully and reached her hand out to Dillyn. Dillyn shook her head violently while pleading for her mom not to make her go. Her words were strangled as she pleaded and cried. “Mama, please don’t make me.” Large droplets of tears rolled down her face, falling into a huge pool onto her arms. They did not affect the woman who should have fought tooth and nail to protect her.

Panicked in her dream and real life, Dillyn’s eyes popped open, and she bolted upright, gasping for air.

Immediately, Ben woke-up ready to battle whatever had scared the daylights out of her. His head moved as if on a

swivel, only to realize Dillyn had awakened from a bad dream. Her eyes were wild and unfocused.

“Hey. It’s me.” He spoke gently like he would have spoken to Whisper when she had gotten spooked.

At the sound of Ben’s voice, Dillyn still wasn’t fully present. He repeated himself, hoping to break through. “Dill, it’s me.”

Her face was wet with tears. She’d been shaken to her core.

Ben caressed the side of her cheek. “You were dreaming.” He wanted to pull her close but waited until she knew where she was.

“I’m safe?” Her voice sounded small.

Ben’s heart was aching for her. “Very. I promised you that I would never let anything happen to you.”

Slowly, Dillyn was transported back to the present. She placed her palm across her forehead. It was covered in beads of sweat, and so was her body.

The emotional residue from her dream was much too real. Dillyn could only thank God her parents were locked up where they belonged and could no longer hurt her.

Still disoriented, she felt dirty and disgusting. *You’ve got to calm down and steady your breathing.* Deeply, she inhaled and then exhaled. *Deep breaths. Breathe in. Breathe out.* Finally, her heart rate began to slow. Unfortunately, her anxiousness was not going away.

“I’m sorry.” Dillyn sighed heavily, “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Ben used his thumb to wipe away her tears. Even in the moonlight, he could see them glistening on her face. “I’m glad I was here.” He hesitated for a moment, not sure how far to push. “You want to talk about it?”

*That dream? Absolutely not.* Dillyn wanted to shove it back down whatever hell hole it came from. Considering how powerful it felt, she didn’t think that was realistic. Still, she did not want to discuss it.

*Ugh!* She hated this feeling. This particular three-headed monster of vulnerability, fear, and helplessness was brutal. It was a toxic brew that had resulted in some of the more intense panic attacks she’d experienced growing up. Tonight, harkened back to those days. It was seismic on the emotional scale. *Why now? Why like this?*

Dillyn was not that little girl anymore. *I’m an adult.* As if to prove that she was in a different space and time, Dillyn rested her head inside the curve of Ben’s neck. He was the here and now. And, while she was strong, Dillyn was glad to have Ben by her side. She appreciated his strength. Instead of thinking about that horrible dream, Dillyn focused on the steady rhythm of his breathing.

He didn’t push. Instead, Ben waited patiently for her to talk ... or not.

After all these years, Dillyn still held onto some of the same fears from childhood. Her trauma was not going to go away magically. She had to face it. Otherwise, she would never truly heal. *Maybe talking to Ben would be a good start.*



Slowly, Dillyn raised her face to his. She whispered into the darkness, “I was dreaming about my parents.” Just uttering their names made her nauseous. Her voice shook, “I was just a kid, you know?” Her voice broke.

Ben didn’t have an answer. He had no idea how a parent could harm a child like that. He’d rather die than let anyone hurt those he loved. It took everything within him to keep from crushing Dillyn into his chest. “You didn’t deserve what happened.”

She looked up at him with watery eyes. “Why now? I haven’t dreamed about them in years. And last night-” She hesitated, “I thought I heard my father’s voice at Franks.”

*That’s who she was looking for.* Ben pressed his lips against her forehead. He figured this was all spurred on because of the pregnancy.

Dillyn tried to make sense of her inner turmoil. She could only assume becoming a mother conjured up all kinds of bad juju. *A mother.* It wasn’t exactly a term that elicited warm or fuzzy feelings. For many years, the fear of being too broken kept her from thinking about having children.

Of course, this was why she was spazzing out. The idea of being a parent was not only surreal but panic-inducing. *Anyone in my shoes would be on the brink of a total meltdown.*

Dillyn pulled away slightly from Ben as a fire-hydrant of thoughts hit her fast and furious. *Can I do this? Will I be a good mom? Shit. This is crazy.* Dillyn hadn’t even been sure she could conceive, and strangely enough, that had given her a sense of relief. She tried for years with Steven and had zero

results. While Dillyn married him, the mere thought of having a baby made her physically ill.

*That would have been a complete disaster.*

Dillyn wondered if all those feelings had gone away or evolved into what she was currently experiencing.

Again, Dillyn glanced up at the side profile of the man who would be the father of her child. She could barely make-out his silhouette, but she had memorized his face. Ben was different in every way from Steven. He was kind, patient, loyal, and fiercely protective. Frustrated, she sighed. *Maybe your anxiety isn't about Ben, Steven, or even your parents, but the fear of passing on unresolved issues to an innocent child.*

Both sides of her subconscious were at it again. It told her *you won't be like them*. Only to contradict itself and say *you probably already are*.

Dillyn tried to reason with herself. On the surface, she knew she was not her parents. *Everything is going to be fine. Get more therapy and stop self-sabotaging. You don't want to lose this man*. Of course, that darker voice continued to plant doubts. *Is it going to be that easy? Will everything be fine?*

*Deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out.*

Dillyn squeezed her eyes shut! *This baby will be happy, healthy, and whole, dammit. I'm still standing after all the shit I've been through. I can do this. I need to take everything one minute, one hour, and one day at a time.*

Even after her pep talk, something still felt *off*. That nagging feeling that something else was deeply wrong wouldn't go away. *Should I try meditating?* Dillyn had never

been particularly good at quieting her mind. *I should have practiced more.*

“You do know everything is going to be okay, right?”  
Ben reassured her.

“I-I’m sorry I woke you. We should try to go back to sleep.”

It didn’t go unnoticed that she hadn’t agreed. Ben wouldn’t push too hard. Instead, he held her gaze to ensure she was good. He hoped she could see the truth in his eyes. That he would always love and protect her. Nothing else mattered, and whatever burdens Dillyn had, he promised he’d help her carry them.

After a few moments of Ben holding her gaze captive, she realized he wouldn’t let it go until she gave him something resembling an affirmation. So, she gave him a weak smile and then slid back down underneath the sheets.

They resettled their bodies into a spooning position, both lost in their own thoughts. Ben didn’t immediately fall back to sleep in case she needed him. He focused on her breathing.

In the comfort of his arms, Dillyn’s mind wandered. She began asking herself unserious and random questions, hoping to quiet all the other noise.

*Will our child have brown eyes like me or blue ones like Ben?* She had just had the worst nightmare in years, and that’s what she was thinking about? *Yep. Simple and mundane.* Not ugly and horrifying. *Definitely Ben’s demeanor.* Like tonight, he was calm and steady.

Dillyn released a small sigh.

It took a while, but eventually, she fell back to sleep. Ben kept his promise. He watched over her until he knew she was sleeping soundly.

He would do whatever it took to make Dillyn feel safe. Even if that meant staying up all night watching over her.

## Chapter 10

“There she is sleeping beauty.” Palmer teased as Dillyn made her way into the living room.

She yawned. “I wasn’t asleep. I’ve been working, but I could use a nap.”

“Were you working?” Cat used her fingers to air-quote her question. “Or, were you *working*?”

Palmer laughed. “I’m sure Ben was working!”

“Maybe he was.” Dillyn giggled. She quickly looked around for his sister. “Where is Selah?”

“Don’t worry, she won’t hear you talking about sexing her brother. She’s off today. She’ll be back tomorrow.” Cat responded. “Speaking of sexy, have either of you noticed the one guy with the dark hair working in the great room? Talk about sexiness personified. What was his name ... Greg? Robert? Mike?”

“Girl, you just listed every common male name.” Palmer laughed as she shook her head. “If it was the guy that asked to use our bathroom, his name is Ellison.”

“Oh.” Cat shrugged and giggled as she crossed her legs. “Yes! That was him. He is fine *fine*.”

“He is definitely cute.” Palmer wasn’t impressed. Ellison couldn’t hold a candle to Lucas. The second his name popped up into her mind, she quickly forced a change. Palmer held up two fabric samples for a couch she wanted to

reupholster. “What do you guys think about starting work on my house after we finish refurbishing this one?”

Dillyn was fine with whatever Cat and Palmer wanted to do.

Cat shrugged. “You’re over being roomies already?”

“Not exactly.” Palmer hesitated. “It’s just that ...” Her voice trailed off, causing both Cat and Dillyn to turn their full attention to her.

Palmer bit her lower lip. “How do you feel about having children around here?”

Dillyn’s stomach bottomed out. *How did Palmer know that she was pregnant? Who told her? Did Ben tell Lucas?* She was going to kill him. Dillyn was just about to explain why she hadn’t been the one to tell them about her pregnancy when Palmer dropped a bomb.

“I want to have a baby, and I’m thinking of doing it alone.”

Dillyn and Cat were both stunned into silence.

After a second or two, Dillyn was the first to speak. “Is that really what you want to do? I mean, you’ve always dreamed of getting married and having a crazy number of kids?”

Palmer sighed. “I’m almost thirty-six. If I don’t start soon, I’ll be lucky to push out two.”

Cat cocked her head to the side, “I get it. I mean, men ain’t shit, so I can see why you want to have a baby alone. If I ever wanted children, I’d take the same route.”

Dillyn turned away from Palmer toward Cat and mouthed, “That’s not helpful.”

Cat mouthed back, “But it’s true.”

*Who hurt you?* Cat never really talked about ever being in a serious relationship as long as Dillyn had known her. She had always casually dated. It was now clear someone had done a number on her. Dillyn would table that thought for later. For now, Palmer was the focus. She found the nerve to ask the question that was rolling around in her head, “have you talked to Lucas about it?”

Palmer pursed her lips. “Lucas? Why would I talk to him?”

Dillyn shrugged, “Maybe because ... you two are kind of in a situationship?”

Palmer rolled her eyes, “You’re such a romantic.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Everyone doesn’t have a Ben.”

“Did you forget I had a Steven?!”

Cat wrinkled up her nose, “definitely proves my point that men ain’t shit.”

Dillyn nodded in agreement. Cat was a thousand percent correct.

Palmer wanted to end all talk of Lucas, “We are not dating. We’re not even hooking up *anymore*.”

Dillyn was disappointed. “I guess that answers how your conversation went last night.”

Palmer thought about the kiss Lucas laid on her, and a tingle went down her spine. Then, she remembered him being wrapped up in that young girl's arms. "You would be correct. My position is still the same. Mostly because I've come to a couple of realizations. 1) I'm not a one-night stand kind of girl, and 2) I'm ready to become a mom. Unfortunately, I don't have a real partner, and no one is on the horizon."

Dillyn thought it was ironic that Palmer was ready for motherhood, yet she was the one who was pregnant.

"There is nothing wrong with one-night stands." Cat chimed in. "I used to have them all the time. Sometimes, a vibrator just isn't enough. My only issue with one-nighters is with men who like to talk after the deed is done. More often than not, their performance wasn't worth the hassle of shaving my legs, let alone a boring-ass conversation."

"Ellison might be able to help you out there." Palmer giggled.

Cat teased, "You might be on to something if I can remember his name."

Palmer laughed harder, "Now that sounds more like you. I was seriously starting to worry."

"I'm fully capable of taking care of myself, which is why we can live together in perfect harmony, but sometimes a girl needs a little something something." Cat laughed. "For now, I'm going to chillout. If that changes, I'll look up Robert."

"Ellison." Palmer corrected.



Dillyn laughed even as she doubted Cat's words, "I kinda thought you and Wyatt would make a cute couple."

"Wyatt?" Cat's head snapped back as if Dillyn had slapped her. "Out of all the men, why would you pair me with him?"

"I don't know. You two seem to vibe when you're together." Dillyn said as she turned to Palmer. "Just like you and Lucas. C'mon ... I think he is serious about you."

Palmer didn't want to talk about him, "There is no me and Lucas."

"It didn't look that last night." Dillyn disagreed.

Cat mumbled, "Surely didn't. I saw you from the window."

Dillyn asked, "Is it because of that woman at the bar?"

Palmer shrugged, "Not really. I just told you that I am ready to settle down. Lucas is young. He still likes to party."

"He's not *that* young." Dillyn countered, "He's twenty-eight."

"That's not young." Cat nodded in agreement. "Men are stallions at that age."

"Cat!" Dillyn was doing her best to be serious, but her friend wouldn't allow it. Sex was always on her brain. Maybe she did need a hook-up.

Palmer shut Dillyn down. "Lucas is not an option or part of this discussion. I'm asking my best friends and business partners, are you okay with me starting a family given our current plans?"

“Palmer, we love you,” Cat glanced over at Dillyn. “I’ll support whatever you want.”

Feeling defeated, Dillyn sighed, “When have we ever not had each other’s back?”

Palmer released a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you for not judging me,” a lump formed in her throat for the loss of her ideal family, “I love y’all right back.”

Cat tried to lighten the mood, “I’ll be the cool Aunt. But I draw the line at early morning feedings and poopy diaper changes.” Cat was teasing. She would do whatever Palmer needed.

Dillyn echoed the sentiment. She thought she would be a better auntie than a mom. It would have been a good time to tell them about her own news, but Dillyn thought better of it. She still wasn’t ready, and while Dillyn felt a pinch of guilt, she decided to keep quiet. “Well, I will compete for the most awesome Aunt.”

Cat laughed, “Awesome Aunt? What even is that?”

Playfully, Dillyn nudged Cat’s shoulder.

Cat was still laughing, “Cool and awesome aunts are not the same.”

“I’ll leave you two to figure that out, but if I have your blessings ...” Palmer looked excitedly between both women, “May the best Godmother win!”

## Chapter 11

“Two weeks? That is the earliest appointment you have for a consultation?”

Dillyn was still dragging. She couldn't buy energy. She was exhausted when she walked back into the business office carrying a huge bowl of cereal. It was something she rarely ate but now craved like crazy. She caught the tail end of Palmer's conversation and remained quiet until she finished her call.

Frustrated, Palmer released a huge sigh, “If that's all you have, then I'll take it. Mmhmm. Okay. Thanks.” She disconnected her phone.

It was clear Palmer wasn't happy with having to wait the two weeks. Instead of asking what was happening, Dillyn sat at her desk while munching loudly. She would tell her if Palmer wanted her to know about that call.

Palmer's face was pensive as she stared into space.

Slowly, Dillyn lowered her bowl, “everything okay?”

Palmer exhaled loudly, “I can't believe I'm finally doing this, but can't get an appointment for two more weeks.”

Cat walked into their shared office. “Finally doing what?”

Disappointed, Palmer explained, “I was on the phone with a sperm bank. They can't see me for a consult until two weeks from now.”

“Speedy Gonzalez over there. You just mentioned the idea a few hours ago and are you already calling a sperm bank?” Cat said as she took a seat opposite both Dillyn and Palmer.

Dillyn didn’t know exactly what to say, so she kept her mouth busy eating. Something about what Palmer wanted to do didn’t sit right with her, but who was she to judge? Dillyn had her own situation to deal with. She just wished things could have worked out the way Palmer wanted. She, of all people, deserved to have a traditional family.

“That’s it? No smart-ass response from you, Dillyn?” Palmer glanced up to take a good, long look at her friend as she remained silent.

Dillyn only opened her mouth to put another spoonful of cereal in it. Palmer wouldn’t want to hear her thoughts, especially when they were so hypocritical.

Cat piped up. “I know I’ve asked this before, but are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Palmer leaned forward and placed her elbows on her desk while steepling her fingertips. She was very thoughtful before answering, “My parents have been happily married for almost sixty years and have four beautiful children. They built a wonderful life for us. That’s all I ever wanted.” Her voice cracked. “However, I’m mature enough to accept that my life might look drastically different.”

Dillyn felt a lump forming at the base of her own throat. Palmer was usually strong and almost always found a way to get what she wanted. But this time, it didn’t seem likely, or at least not in the way Palmer hoped. Dillyn’s heart ached when

she heard Palmer's voice break. There had to be something she could do to help. *How are you going to help when you have your own problems?* Dillyn's internal battle was real. Still, something within her felt as if she had to try. No sooner had Dillyn decided to get involved did an idea pop into her mind.

"We've all been so stressed out by a million different things. Let's park our problems for tonight and do something we haven't done since we moved here."

"We're just switching topics like that, huh?" Cat asked.

"Yep." Dillyn nodded. "Lately, things have just been way too heavy. We could all use a break."

"Ain't that the truth." Palmer agreed. "The weather matches my mood... stormy."

"An even better reason to have a movie night."

"Ohh ... it has been a minute since we've done that, and it sounds like fun." Palmer turned to Dillyn, "As long as it's not one of those sappy rom-coms. I'm trying to forget my relationship woes."

Cat nodded in agreement.

"I pick good movies!" Based on the expression on their faces, maybe she didn't. It's a good thing that wasn't the point of movie night anyway. It would serve a dual purpose and set a couple of things in motion. If all went well, Palmer wouldn't need a sperm bank. *Or my idea could blow up spectacularly.* It was a risk, but Dillyn was willing to take it. "Begging both of your pardons, fine, no rom-coms! How about a kick-ass action flick?"

"That could work," Cat said.

“That’s a really good suggestion.” Palmer co-signed.

“Great! Then, how about we meet in the library tonight around seven o’clock?”

Palmer reached for her notepad and started scribbling on it. “Works for me. I don’t have any plans.”

Cat looked at Palmer, “Make sure you add chocolate ice-cream to that list.”

“Girl, I’ve got you. You know I know your favorites.” When Palmer finished jotting down the list of snacks, she ripped the page out of the notebook and handed it to Dillyn.

Dillyn took the slip of paper. “I suppose it’s my turn to go to the store.”

Both Palmer and Cat spoke in unison. “Yep,” Palmer added, “And don’t forget the wine.”

“At least four bottles,” Cat responded.

“Fine, I’ll buy the drinks and snacks for you two gifters.” Dillyn felt good about her plan as she left the office. She had a lot to do before tonight. She was proud of herself and couldn’t keep the huge smile off her face.

*Surely, I can pull this off.*

## Chapter 12

The rain was coming down hard and fast. It was supposed to storm all day. They needed the rain, but Ben hated being inside. There was nothing like fresh air and working under God's blue skies. However, instead of burning off some energy working in the fields today, he would have to settle for their home gym. Dillyn's nightmare rattled him. She was mentally tough. Tougher than his ex. There was no way history would repeat itself. He wouldn't allow it.

Ben thought he would have the gym all to himself when he walked in, but Lucas was already there and working the weights like a maniac.

He didn't want to disturb him, so Ben went to another bench press on the other side of the room.

Lucas finished the last reps before placing the barbell back into its cradle. He removed his ear buds and addressed Ben, "You are late old man. You're going to lose those baby abs at this rate."

Ben laughed. "Baby abs? Dude, you wish your shit was as defined as mine. Dillyn can touch each and every one of 'em. Now you, little bro, might want to work on them side handles."

"You got jokes, huh? Don't pretend you're not jealous that I'm more shredded than you."

"Ha. Good one. You're in a good mood?"

“Why wouldn’t I be? I closed the deal with Suge Thompson.”

“You’re kidding.” Ben sat up. He was impressed. “You got Honeysuckle?”

“Yep.”

“When?”

“About an hour ago.”

“Damn. Breeders from all over the world have been trying to get that thoroughbred. How’d you manage that, and how much did you pay?”

“Two million.”

Ben raised a brow in disbelief, “That’s half of her asking price! How did you pull that off?”

“Promised Suge Honeysuckle’s second born and a discussion with you about breeding Whisper.”

“That’s a nonstarter, “I’m not breeding Whisper.”

“I know that. I said a discussion. Suge thinks he’s got a silver tongue. Dude thinks he can sweet talk anybody out of anything.”

“Just as long as we’re clear.”

“We’re clear. Whisper is part of the family.”

Ben was super impressed. “Congratulations! Again, pretty damned impressive. I thought your good mood was due to ...” Ben almost said Palmer, then thought better of it.

“Something else.”



Lucas knew what Ben wanted to ask. “That Philly is a little trickier. Palmer’s being stubborn, but I’m up for the challenge. I was right though.”

“About what?”

“She’s afraid of my age.”

“Should she be?”

“Nah. I’ve been playin the field since I was sixteen. I could settle down for the right one, and she’s the right one.”

Ben agreed, “When you know, you know. So how do you plan to get around her concerns?”

“Not sure yet. I’m still analyzing the best way to deal with it.”

“Whatchu got so far?”

“I think Palmer is so used to seeing me as your little brother and not the man I am that she can’t imagine me as a husband and father.”

Ben had to admit even he had a hard time seeing Lucas as a husband and father, but he was sure most likely for different reasons.

“I need her to see all of me, not just my washboard abs.”

“Baby abs. Those things aren’t even close to washboard.” Ben laughed.

“More like King Kong. The way I see it, Palmer has no idea I run shit. Maybe she needs to see me, the businessman. For example, I run this entire ranch. Wyatt’s been off doing his best Jason Bourne impersonation and you’ve been doing your Tony Stark bit in conservation. I’ve been here ensuring the

family business runs smoothly and is profitable. You and I both know that shit ain't easy."

"True." Lucas' words hit Ben in the gut. His guilt was real. "We did put a lot on your shoulders. But you know we've always been here when you needed us, right?"

"I know that. I ain't mad about it. I love what I do. It doesn't feel like work to me. This land is in my blood. I just said all that to say Palmer doesn't know me as a man. The hundreds of lives and livelihoods I'm responsible for. She sees your little brother."

"You might be on to something." Ben also saw Lucas as just his little brother.

"I'm guessing a woman needs to feel safe and protected before they take you seriously. Like you and Dillyn."

"Me and Dillyn?"

"Yeah, it's no secret she's been through some shit. So have you, but somehow, you've managed to break through her walls. I guess you make her feel like she can depend on you. After everything with Selah, it seems like you two have gotten even closer."

*Dude more than you know.* "We are."

"I want that with Palmer."

"I'm curious. Why her? She's an extremely attractive woman, but she ain't your type."

"What's my type?"

"No offense, but brainless Barbie comes to mind, and I can't say I've ever seen you date a black woman. I can't say

I've ever seen you date even a dark-haired woman, and Palmer is no Barbie."

"Hey, I could say the same about you."

"True, even though I was young when I got married and never dated a black woman, I did date different types of women. Blondes, brunettes, redheads, short, tall ..."

"Yeah, yeah. I get the picture."

"I've just always been a relationship kind of guy. You and Wyatt, y'all assholes, were as far away from that as it came."

"Point taken. To answer your question, Palmer's different in obvious ways. She has meat on her bones, but it's the kind a man likes to hold on to. Her curves are dangerous. But more than anything, I'm attracted to her confidence. That blows me away. She's smart, funny, and doesn't take herself too seriously. But man, she's so comfortable being Palmer. She's not looking for me to affirm her. She affirms herself. She makes me feel like I must step up my game with her. Ordinary won't do. I must be extraordinary."

"Damn!"

"What?"

"You've got it bad."

Lucas laughed. "I do, and whether she knows it or not, this fight is already over."

"I like *your* confidence. You're going to need it. Wooing her won't be easy. You can't impress Palmer with material things. While she's not rich, Dillyn and her friends are

creative. Palmer gave up a big-time real-estate career in New York to move to Summer. That takes a certain amount of kahunas.”

“Easy? I don’t want easy. I want Palmer.” Something seemed to click. “Wait ... I think you just gave me an idea.”

Ben laid back on the bench press, “What are brothers for? What great wisdom did I impart?”

Lucas was thoughtful. He sat upright as a slow grin spread across his face, “I think I’ve suddenly discovered I’m in the market for some real estate.”

## Chapter 13

*Thank God it stopped raining.* The confidence Dillyn had before leaving the house was starting to wane. As a matter of fact, *antsy* would better describe how she felt. She hopped into her truck, opting not to take her 1967 red convertible Mustang, and glanced up into the review mirror.

They summed up perfectly why she felt the way she had.

*Security.* They followed Dillyn everywhere. It was a constant reminder of possible danger lurking around the corner. Until they could figure out the reason behind the shenanigans over the past couple of months, Dillyn couldn't let down her guard, and that meant being followed by two beefy guys trained to protect her at all costs. *Did that include killing someone?* She wondered. Instead of leaning into those negative feelings, Dillyn suppressed them as she pushed the ignition button. She waited for her Bluetooth to connect, then spoke out loud. "Babe."

The inside of her car was suddenly filled with a phone ringing. Seconds later, Ben answered.

"Hey beautiful."

"Heeeeeeeey. What are you doing?"

Ben placed his weights back into its cradle. "In the gym working out with Lucas. What about you?"

"On my way to the grocery store to pick up a few things." Dillyn glanced into her review mirror again as she

pushed the ignition button. The typical roar of the engine was silent. “Hold on a sec.”

Dillyn rummaged through her purse to locate the key fob. She found and inspected it. The battery seemed to be good. So, she pressed the ignition button again.

Her car still didn't start. “Dammit!” Dillyn released an audible sigh.

Concerned, Ben asked, “What's wrong?”

“Car is not starting.”

“I can come over and take a look.”

“No, it's fine. I don't want to interrupt your workout.”

“Can one of the security guys take you?”

“If I don't want them trailing me, what makes you think I would want them to play ride-along?”

Their earlier banter was replaced with a gruff seriousness, “It's necessary.” There was no way Ben would allow Dillyn to travel anywhere without the necessary protection.

“I know.” She was resigned to the fact that they did indeed need security. “I'll take Cat or Palmer's car.”

Ben released a frustrated breath, “it won't be forever.”

Somberness was starting to creep into her body. *Nope. Please do not allow it. Focus.* “That's not why I called.”

“You mean this isn't about hooking up?” Ben joked.

Dillyn beamed, “This is a late-morning call, not a late-night one.”

“I’m ready morning, noon, and night.”

“I bet!” She laughed.

“We wouldn’t be talking about hook-ups or booty calls if you didn’t have that early morning meeting.”

Dillyn sucked her lower lip into her mouth as she thought about the tricks Ben had used to make her forget about the nightmares. She had been so close to canceling that meeting.

Her face heated, “I’m my own boss, but I still have a business to run.”

“When it’s your business, you can be late every now and again. If you had listened to me, we would be exhausted from making love and maybe gearing up for another round. Instead, I’m here taking my sexual frustrations out on this bench press.” Ben was only half kidding.

Lucas made a face like he was going to vomit. He stood and mouthed, “I’m out,” before leaving their gym.

Dillyn’s voice went from playful to saucy, “Can I get a raincheck for later tonight?”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.” Ben knew damn well no thought was needed.

“There has to be *something* I can do to convince you,” Dillyn got out of the car and held up a single finger to her security. “Hold on ...” She put Ben on hold to speak to one of them. “Hey guys. Sorry, I will need to take another one of the cars. Running inside to grab the keys.”

Dillyn was quick. She ran inside and grabbed the keys to Cat's car. The Mustang didn't come out on days like today.

Dillyn came running back out. "Okay. Sorry about that," she said to Ben.

"Back to me. How do you plan to convince me?"

Dillyn giggled as she got inside the car. "I have my ways." She pushed the ignition button, and the car started right up without any problems. She put it in drive and pulled off.

No more stalling. It was time to ask the big question. "Um ... not to change the subject, but I wanted to ask you something."

"What's up?"

*Here goes nothing.* "Well, we're having a little movie night tonight. I was hoping you would come over and," Dillyn rushed her words, "bring Selah, Wyatt, and Lucas."

Ben glanced heavenward. "That's not exactly what I had in mind."

Dillyn turned out onto the main road. "C'mon. It'll be fun."

"I can think of a million fun things, but that ain't one of 'em." Ben was silent momentarily before he spoke again, "Palmer's okay with inviting Lucas, or are you going rogue?"

As Dillyn drove down an incline, the car started accelerating, "What exactly do you mean by rogue?"

"Shit. You're meddling."

"Listen ... she'll be fine once we can get the two of them in the same room for longer than five minutes!"



Ben closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “C’mon Dillyn. I thought we agreed to stay out of their business.”

“Technically, we are not in their business. I’m inviting my boyfriend and his family for a movie night.”

Ben ran a hand down the back of his head. “We need to let sleeping dogs lie. They’ll figure it out, or they won’t.”

“I don’t own a dog, so I don’t know what that means.” Dillyn smiled inwardly. “Anyway, this is a well-thought-out plan I devised about fifteen minutes ago.”

“This is going to blow up in our face.”

Dillyn wasn’t above pleading. “Maybe, but Palmer ...” She chose her words carefully. “Hasn’t been Palmer lately, and Lucas wants to spend time with her. This could work.”

*It could also be one giant clusterfuck.* Ben released a few curses underneath his breath that Dillyn couldn’t make out.

It was time for her to pull out the big guns. Dillyn wasn’t above begging. “*Please.* Support me on this.”

“I can’t support this, but I won’t stand in your way. I’ll extend the invitation. If they want to come great, I can’t guarantee they will.”

“That works!” Dillyn said quickly. “I’ll take whatever help I can get. And I’m sure Lucas will appreciate having another shot with Palmer.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Dillyn had a point, but Ben wasn’t going to encourage her.

Dillyn took a curve too fast. She pressed down on the brake to slow it down, but it maintained its current speed.

“Wow!” Dillyn glanced out of her window only to stare at a steep drop over the side of a mountain.

There was a heightened anxiety in her voice, “Ben?”

“Hmm ...”

As the car straightened from going around the curve, it accelerated in speed. Dillyn stepped on the brakes again, but the car was not slowing down.

Ben could hear her breathing. “Dillyn?”

She couldn’t speak. Her words were caught in her throat as she shifted to full-on freak-out mode. The car was moving at a dizzying pace and Dillyn could barely keep control.

“Oh shit!” There was another curve coming up. There was no way she would be able to make it. Dillyn gripped the steering wheel hard as she pushed the brake pedal to the floor.

“Oh my god!”

Ben stood. “What? Tell me what’s wrong?”

She spoke in broken sentences. “I can’t. Stope. The brakes. Aren’t working!”

He had to have misunderstood. “What?!”

“They’re not working! I’m pressing it to the floor and ... OH MY GAWWD!”

Dillyn released a blood-curdling scream, and the line went dead.

## Chapter 14

Dillyn sat on the edge of the hospital bed swinging her feet, waiting for the doctor to bring her test results, when Ben came rushing into the room.

He had broken every law to get to her in record time. He cradled her head in the palms, “I got here as soon as possible. Are you okay?”

“The baby and I are fine.” She smiled weakly as she captured his wrists in her hands. “I’ve just got a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Thank God.” Ben gave her a full once over as if to make sure himself. “Are you sure?”

She sighed, “Yeah. They gave me the whole internal exam.” Dillyn wrinkled up her nose. “That was fun.”

Once Ben saw Dillyn was fine, he felt more at ease. “I’m sure it was. Cat and Palmer are on the way.”

“I don’t want you all to worry. I’m fine. Although Cat’s car is probably totaled.”

“We don’t give a damn about the car. We can replace that.”

“Tell that to Cat. She’s going to have a fit.”

“Lucas called Zone Auto. They are towing it to the garage and will have a look. If she needs another car, we’ll buy her one.”

“You’re just a knight in shining armor, but that’s what insurance is for. We’ll figure it out.”

“As long as you’re good, I don’t care how we handle it.” Ben kissed the band-aid on her forehead. “What else did the doctor say?”

“Not much. They took some X-rays and stuff. We’re just waiting for the results.” Dillyn tried to move too quickly and winced in pain.

“You are not okay.”

“I promise I’m fine but I’ll be sore for a while.”

“What happened?” Ben had almost lost his shit after hearing Dillyn scream and the phone go dead.

Dillyn lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “I have no idea. Everything seemed fine. I didn’t realize the car was accelerating until I started going down the incline and around the curve.”

“The one about a quarter mile after you drive away from your property?”

“Yep. That one. But I didn’t start to freak out until the turnaround Jacob’s Landing came up. I wasn’t sure I could make that turn without flipping the car over.”

“You didn’t make the curve.”

“No, I didn’t. Luckily, it hit the guardrails, slowing the car down before it flipped over.”

“It did flip over.”

“I mean over the mountainside.”

Just thinking about it freaked Ben out. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“Me too,” Dillyn smirked. “I guess this means we’ll need to reschedule movie night.”

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It had been almost a week since Dillyn’s accident, and Ben hadn’t left her side since she came home from the hospital.

He was driving her insane.

“Have you called to make your follow-up appointment?” Ben’s eyes were downcast as he pretended to be engrossed in reading a text on his cell phone. His charming southern drawl and smooth baritone voice didn’t mask his frustration.

He asked causally, but Dillyn didn’t miss the notes of irritation. It may have gone over the heads of most, but not her. It was loud and clear. *No* was the answer, but she wasn’t ready to share that information.

Instead of responding, Dillyn remained mum. Her mind wasn’t fast enough to figure out exactly what to say. *I need caffeine. Maybe a cup of dark roast with an extra shot of espresso. None of that decaf stuff.* Not when her brain was fried, nerves were shot, and the beginnings of a headache were coming on.

Silence stretched between them as they walked toward the kitchen while Ben waited for an answer.

He glanced at her side profile and watched as an overactive vein pulsed at the base of her neck. She was

nervous. Ben's *only* concern was ensuring that Dillyn and their baby were safe and healthy. *Why was she dragging her feet?* Ben honestly didn't know since Dillyn had been acting so cagey. He was just about to push for an answer when a flash of his daughter's angelic face appeared out of nowhere.

Ben stopped walking in mid-stride. He couldn't move a single muscle.

*It was Rylee.* She was laughing and so full of life. Suddenly, he felt hot, and a small ache hit him center mass. Even though Ben knew it wasn't, her image looked real enough to touch. As much as it hurt to admit, Rylee was gone, and Ben would only ever be able to hold her in his heart. Still, he almost reached for her, but Rylee was gone as quickly as she appeared, like mist.

Concerned, Dillyn stopped walking too. She placed a gentle hand on his forearm, "Ben?"

Her soft voice brought him back to the present, but his throat was thick. There wasn't any way he could respond.

After another moment, Dillyn spoke again, "Are you okay?"

Ben couldn't look at her. Not yet. He had to get his shit together first. He gripped his phone so tight he thought it might shatter. After another few seconds, he cleared his throat, "Uh. Yeah. Just reading this message that came through."

Dillyn didn't believe him. "*Problems?*"

He took a quick breath, lifted his head, and gave her a lop-sided grin. "All good. Work stuff."

Dillyn's gaze locked with his. Ben's face was pale, making his piercing blue eyes even more pronounced. *Was it about Selah? The abduction?* Whatever was going on, Ben wasn't ready to share, and wouldn't she be the biggest hypocrite trying to force him? Instead, Dillyn trusted that he would tell her whatever was happening when the time was right.

Ben could see that Dillyn was worried. She didn't quite have the poker face she thought she had. *Nope. She didn't need to be worried about me. Not on my watch.* Ben flashed her a full-reassuring smile that he didn't feel. *A worried Dillyn wasn't a healthy Dillyn.* She had had enough of that for a lifetime, and Rylee reminded him to handle his business. This time, he would not fail. Ben would make sure that Dillyn felt both physically and emotionally secure. That brought him back to his original question. "When are we going to see the doc again?"

*Gah! That again.* For some reason, the hallway to the kitchen felt miles away as she continued toward it. They were never going to get there. Dillyn had no idea how to answer Ben when her head was so mixed up. *What are you going to say?* After the accident, she wondered if she should continue this pregnancy. *Better question, what are you going to do?* Given everything that had happened with Lana and Rylee, Dillyn had to tread carefully. Ben had been through enough, and she didn't want to add to his pain.

The problem amongst so many was that he *needed* normal, and Dillyn wasn't sure she could give him that. She was a walking disaster, and every day was a struggle.

Dillyn was fighting hard to silence the noise, but *you're too damned damaged* kept echoing throughout her mind, and those words had never been louder.

She was pregnant with Ben's baby, and he simply wanted to know when her follow-up doctor's appointment was. He wasn't asking for the world. Still, the question itself felt overwhelming. *I need a little more time.* The doctor had confirmed that she was healthy, and so was the baby while she was in the emergency room.

*Did she want to be a mom, or was she just afraid?* It was an internal battle Ben had no idea she was fighting and a question Dillyn didn't have an answer to.

*Longest walk ever to the kitchen.* Dillyn thanked her lucky stars that Cat was filling her water bottle at the sink. She would serve as a much-needed buffer.

Ben hadn't even noticed Cat. He was entirely focused on Dillyn and doing his best to maintain patience. "So ... when are you going to make it?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?"

"Because you haven't answered. If you answer, I'll stop asking'."

Cat was a hot, sweaty mess from an early morning run around the house grounds.

If Dillyn's exaggerated faux smile didn't give away the ballgame, speaking several octaves higher than her normal voice certainly did, "Morning!"

Cat glanced between them. Initially, her lips parted as if she were going to return her greeting with one of her own, but



then she snapped her mouth shut. A person would have to be blind to see that Ben and Dillyn were fighting, and Cat wanted no part of it. Instead, she grabbed the morning paper and sat at the table.

Dillyn was irritated with Cat's knowing gaze. Almost as irritating as she was with Ben. She had a way of seeing right through to a person's soul. *Today, that shit was annoying.* Dillyn's face must have expressed exactly how she felt because Cat didn't say anything. Instead, she ignored them both.

"I'm not letting this go."

*Has Ben always been this pushy?* "I knowwww!" Dillyn placed both her hands flat onto the island's surface and lifted her head heavenward as if asking God to give her strength. "Please ... STOP hovering." *You're driving me fuckin' nuts!*

Equally frustrated, Ben ran a hand through his already tousled hair, "Since asking *when are you going to make a doctor's appointment* hovering?"

Dillyn turned around to face him, "How about right now?"

*Why was she being so difficult?* Being patient and understanding were not Ben's best qualities, but dating Dillyn had forced him to work on both. However, Ben had had enough of Dillyn procrastinating. He wasn't going to compromise regarding the health of their baby. If she didn't make an appointment, he sure as hell would!

“Hey ... y’all back here?” Saved by the bell. Dillyn was glad for another slight reprieve since Cat decided to be zero help.

Wyatt came sauntering into the kitchen. “Actually ... you don’t need to answer that. I heard y’all as I was walking in.” He chuckled. “Lover’s quarrel?”

This time, Dillyn didn’t mind Wyatt’s interruption. It probably saved Ben’s life. On the other hand, *she was tired of the Cash brothers acting like this was their house.*

Wyatt was speaking to Ben and Dillyn, but his line of sight landed squarely on Cat. She was the real focus of his attention.

Dillyn knew Wyatt was into Cat but wasn’t exactly sure where Cat stood. She always seemed so aloof and uninterested when he was around.

Cat was a siren. Flirting came so naturally that Dillyn didn’t think she knew when it was happening. So, her response to Wyatt was confusing. Was she *pretending* not to be interested, or was she not interested?

“Coffee?” Wyatt asked.

Cat didn’t skip a beat. Instead of responding, she pointed toward the carafe while seemingly tuning everyone out.

Pissed, Ben took it out on Wyatt to keep from strangling Dillyn. He had no problem interrupting Wyatt’s Cat gazing. “Did Sammy call about the feed?”

Wyatt’s eyes lingered on Cat longer than necessary before casually walking over to the counter to pour himself a

cup. “Um ... I don’t know. Ask Lucas. He handles all of that,” he said sheepishly after being caught ogling her. “I just came over because I was hoping somebody made breakfast.”

“A bit male chauvinist, isn’t it?” Cat mumbled as a crease formed between her brows. Slowly, she lifted her head. “I’m sorry. When did our house become a Bed and Breakfast?”

*Damn.* Wyatt had stepped in it. Dillyn was already in a mood, so Ben decided to let Wyatt figure his own way out of this one.

“A Bed and Breakfast? Run by three of the most beautiful women I’ve ever met?” Wyatt glanced between Dillyn and Cat as he made his way over to the table and took a seat. “It would stay booked. Hell, can I make a reservation now?”

Ben tipped his head in Wyatt’s direction, “well played. A little heavy on the charm.”

“Thanks,” Wyatt lifted his coffee mug to toast him. “However, the crowd is a little hard this morning.”

“Yeah. Very.” Ben agreed. “Just trying to figure out why Dillyn hasn’t made her follow-up appointment with the doc.”

“Did you call Dr. Clarkson on Main Street?” Wyatt asked. “That’s who everybody goes to.”

The last thing Dillyn wanted was for word to spill out about her pregnancy before she was ready to tell everyone, *especially* since she had serious doubts. The news would spread like wildfire the second she entered that local clinic.

“Ben? Can we discuss this later? I want some coffee.” Dillyn asked.

The intensity of Cat’s gaze made Dillyn squirm as she watched her friend walk over to the carafe.

Concerned, Ben asked, “Is it decaf?”

“Yes, it’s decaf,” Cat answered before Dillyn could. She could probably tell that her friend was ready to explode.

Grateful, Ben responded, “Thanks.” He wondered if Dillyn had told Cat. She seemed to have a sixth sense.

“Yeah, thanks *a lot*.” Dillyn’s response sounded sarcastic even to her own ears.

Wyatt’s cell phone vibrated. He quickly looked at the screen, and his playful mood evaporated.

Cat hadn’t known him long, but she knew his *taking care of business* face. She’d seen it the night Selah was abducted.

“Just got a message from our feed guy.” He said, “We need to go.”

There was no way it was the feed guy. Not by the look on both Ben and Wyatt’s faces. Dillyn wondered if it was related to his earlier text. “Is everything alright?”

In a couple of big strides, Ben stood before Dillyn, placing his hands on her waist and pulling her close. He leaned down and pressed his lips hard against hers. “It’s just a guy about the feed. I’ll call you when we get back.” Seconds later, both he and Wyatt hustled out of the kitchen.

Dillyn asked Cat, “What do you *really* think that was about?”

“I have no idea.” Cat faced her friend. “They’re big boys. Whatever it is, they can handle it. What I want to know is what’s *really* going on with you?”

Dillyn did her best to deflect. “Me? How about you? Were you even reading that paper while Wyatt was here?”

A corner of Cat’s lip edged up. “I only made it through the first damn sentence.” She released an earthy laugh that Dillyn loved so much. “I don’t know why that man has my stomach tied up in knots every time he’s around.”

“You’d never know it.”

“Good! That’s the point.”

“What I don’t get is if he likes you and you like him, why won’t you both acknowledge it?” Dillyn was genuinely curious.

Cat was thoughtful in her response. “Neither of us are emotionally available, nor am I interested in a purely sexual relationship. If I were, I would have already slept with him.” Cat’s response did throw Dillyn off balance. “No offense, but that’s ... new. You’ve only ever been interested in purely sexual relationships.”

“Yeah, but,” Cat sighed, “I told you moving to Summer is supposed to be a fresh start. That means no more sex as a crutch. We all came here for healing. Granted, that looks different, but it’s also the same.”

Dillyn nodded in agreement, “true.”

Cat joked, “Who knows, maybe one day I’ll be able to make love to a guy and not just screw him.”

Dillyn could tell her bestie was serious even as she tried to laugh it off. She saw the pain in Cat’s eyes and placed her hand on her. “I want that for you too.”

“Yeah, well, that day is not today. Anyway, you’ve deflected long enough. What’s the real deal with you? You’ve been so moody lately and all over the place. Ben has been so patient. I probably would have tossed you over my knee and whooped your ass by now.”

Slowly, Dillyn pulled her hand back and placed them in her lap. She could no longer hold Cat’s gaze. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Do any of us?” She laughed as she waited for a real answer.

Dillyn was slow but forthcoming. “I keep having these dreams about my mother.”

“Ah.” Cat nodded as if it all clicked.

“I don’t want to be like her.”

“From what you’ve described, you’re nothing like your mother. You’re warm, kind, and loving. You really care about your friends and the people around you. Doesn’t sound like your mom to me.”

“I don’t *know* that, and the unsure part is terrifying. If I’m honest ... I mean really really honest, I don’t know if I can do this.”

Cat was hesitant, “Do what exactly?”

*I don't know if I have what it takes to be a mother.* She didn't say her thoughts aloud. Nervously, Dillyn nibbled her lower lip before saying the quiet part out loud. "I don't know if I can have a healthy relationship with Ben. What if we don't work?"

"That's crazy talk." Cat tried to reassure her. "It's clear you two are falling in love. Just take your time and go with it. There's no pressure. I mean ... it's not like you're pregnant."

It took everything within Dillyn not to spill her guts.

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As soon as Ben and Wyatt were out of the house, he asked the question that had his mind whirling with all possibilities, "What the hell was on that text?"

"It was Mike. He sent over this morning's security briefing and said he needed to get with us *ASAP* to discuss."

"I'll text Lucas and have him meet us at the house."

They drove like a bat out of hell getting home. It took less than five minutes before they walked through the front door.

Lucas happened to be walking towards them at the same time. "Hey, I've been looking for you."

Ben responded, "Yeah, I've been looking for you too."

Wyatt kept walking to their office. "I'm going to grab the report off the printer. I'll be right back."

Lucas looked stressed, "I just received a call from Tony regarding Cat's car."

“That’ll have to wait. Mike called. He needs to talk to us regarding an urgent security matter.”

Lucas ran frustrated hands through his hair. “When it fuckin’ rains, it pours. What now?”

Ben responded. “We don’t know yet.”

“I hope whatever Mike wants to talk about ain’t connected to the car accident.”

Ben was fully engaged. “Why would it? What did Tony say?”

Frustrated, Lucas exhaled, “I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to come right out and say it. He’s been pretty backed up at the shop and just now had a chance to look at it. The brake line on Cat’s car was severed.”

“Wait, what?” Ben wasn’t sure he heard him correctly.

Lucas repeated himself. “It was severed.”

“Was it cut on purpose?!” Ben asked.

“I asked the same thing. He didn’t have an answer, but let’s not jump to conclusions.”

“With everything going on, that is exactly the conclusion we must be jumping too! She could have died in the car crash.”

Lucas placed a calming hand on Ben’s shoulder. “I know. All I’m saying is that we need a cool head. If that is the case, we must consider the best way to protect her and everyone else.”

Wyatt walked back into the room carrying what Ben believed to be the security report. His face was like stone.



“This shit is serious.” Wyatt handed the papers to Ben.

Lucas read it over Ben’s shoulder. “What the fuck is going on?”

Ben was quiet as he consumed the report. The further he read, the more unsettled he became, and the hairs on the back of his neck started to stand on end.

“It could be nothing ...” Wyatt started to say.

“You add this to Cat’s brake line being cut, and it adds up to a whole lot of something.” Ben glanced over at him.

Wyatt couldn’t possibly have heard correctly, “Wait ... what?”

Ben answered, “Tony told Lucas that Cat’s brake line was severed.”

Wyatt’s facial expression went blank. His training was kicking in, and Ben saw it happening in real-time. “Dillyn was in Cat’s car. So, we don’t know if she was targeted.”

Ben thought back to that week. “Dillyn’s truck wouldn’t start, so she took Cat’s.”

“Has Palmer driven her car since all of this?” Wyatt asked.

Immediately, Lucas pulled out his cell and called Tony. He picked up on the second ring. “Can you get over to Dillyn’s place? I need you to check Dillyn and Palmer’s vehicles for tampering. We’ll pay you whatever it takes to make it a priority. Thanks. Call us ASAP!”

Wyatt tried to calm the room, but he knew this was all connected. “I’ll update security. If the girls need to go

anywhere, security should take them.”

“Agreed,” Lucas said.

“Can they enhance the video?” Ben asked as he read a particular section of the report.

Wyatt answered. “Apparently, they were working on that last night.”

“When did they capture these images?”

“A week ago,” Wyatt confirmed.

Ben remembered Dillyn when they had a late-night dinner in the woods past the orchard. She thought someone had been watching them. *Was it possible?*

“Based on these photos, it could be a shadow, but they’re too dark to make out if it was a person.” Wyatt tried to downplay it, hoping to keep things calm. “Out of an abundance of caution, we’ll need to beef up security and stay close to the house.”

“How?” Lucas was genuinely curious. “How much more can we beef it up? We have cameras everywhere, on-site security walking the premises, the cars and phones are tagged, and the women all have bodyguards. What more can we do? Someone still got on our property and messed with their fuckin’ cars!”

Ben said what they all suspected. “We all know that’s not a shadow.”

Wyatt sighed, “We don’t, but we also need to deal with the facts.”

“Right around the time these photos were taken, Dillyn and I were out on the property having a late-night dinner.”

“I remember that,” Lucas said.

“She said it felt like someone was watching us.”

“What?!” Wyatt and Lucas both responded in tandem.

“I figured it was security since I know they are always close. But, clearly, someone can get on our properties without us knowing about it.”

Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck, “We have a lot of land to secure. There’s a few hundred thousand acres between us both. Parts of our land are protected by electronic fencing, parts by cameras, and other parts closest to the house have human security.”

“Where is Selah?” Ben asked.

“She’s down at the stables,” Lucas responded. “We have a man close.”

Wyatt nodded. “There is always security close by her. Selah barely leaves the ranch unless she’s going over to Dillyn’s. We can certainly add more people.”

“We’ll need to.” Ben read between the lines. “But we can’t cover this whole place and theirs at the same time.”

Wyatt agreed, but they couldn’t allow emotion to cause them to make a mistake, “We need to know what we are dealing with before we start making moves.”

Ben figured over-reacting might be better than under-reacting, “We have tighter security here than over at Dillyn’s place. We should move the ladies in with us for a while.”

Wyatt responded, “I’m not opposed to that, but I can’t see them agreeing.”

Ben didn’t give a shit. “They ain’t got a choice. When the fuck is Mike coming?”

Wyatt responded, “Any minute.”

## Chapter 15

The meeting with Mike hadn't given Ben the reassurances he'd hoped for. The news went from bad to worse.

It was a little late in the day for a ride on Whisper, but Ben needed to process the information Mike had just dropped on their laps. The enhanced security footage left no doubt that several unknown individuals had been on their property over the last week. What wasn't confirmed was if those people had been some knuckleheaded teens or someone with more sinister intentions.

They knew. Instinctively, they all knew.

Ben also couldn't stop recalling his conversation with Dillyn the night they'd been out by the fire. Around the same time, those people had been on their property. The memory of her words was playing a symphony inside his head. She felt like they were being watched. *Was she right?* Probably. Unfortunately, too many cross-currents of shit coincided, and Ben couldn't be convinced it was just a coincidence.

In the past few months, Ben had been at the lowest of lows and the highest of highs, and everything in between. Never could he have imagined Selah being kidnapped or meeting Dillyn, falling in love, and starting a family. In record time, no less. *A fuckin' miracle.* The universe had brought them together when neither was looking for love. It had been some magic that allowed her to take his breath away with a smile she didn't even want to give. One that he didn't want to

notice but was helpless to resist. That smile hid a million secrets, and Ben wanted to know every last one. He'd been through hell and back, but something about Dillyn's eyes, dark, brown, and hauntingly lovely, saw clear through to his soul and forced him to heal. Her being able to see the man behind the brokenness was part of it. Ben still had a lot of issues to work through, but he would do it because he wanted to be better for her and their unborn child.

Dillyn had opened his heart and expanded it in ways Ben never thought were possible. A year ... six ... hell, even three months ago he was just a shell. Now, he was looking forward to the future. Ben was under no illusions about how difficult things were going to be. Not only was he possibly fighting unknown assailants, but to a degree Dillyn herself. He wasn't blind to the fact that Dillyn was full of self-doubts about becoming a mother. *He* had no doubt she would be an incredible mom.

*I have to reassure her that she can do it all while keeping her safe.*

It was his job and a responsibility Ben took seriously. As he walked toward the barn, Ben made eye contact with Selah's bodyguard before walking inside. His job was always to be visible to her. Selah needed the reassurance.

Ben caught her unaware, "What's got you frowning so hard?"

Selah paused from brushing Whisper as she sent a soft smile his way. "A better question is what's got you out here this late in the day." It was a good question to ask.

"Just needed to clear my head."

“Everything okay?” Selah’s frown became even more pronounced.

“Yeah. Just working through some stuff. No need for you to worry,” Ben was not going to drop the news from this morning on her. At least not yet. He didn’t want to set back any progress she had made. Since the abduction, Selah didn’t roam too far away from the main house, but today, she was at least out and getting some fresh air. Ben hoped with time, his feisty sister would heal from her ordeal. Only he was fearful it wasn’t over. Until they could put all this madness to rest, he would support her in any way he could, and Whisper was a helluva salve for the soul.

Selah shrugged. “Now that you have a new woman in your life who has you smitten, someone has got to care for Whisper.”

Ben patted his golden girl on the head. “She knows she’s irreplaceable.” Whisper neighed and seemingly danced in the dirt. “I think she might be antsy for a ride.”

“Um ...” Selah dropped her gaze and pretended to refocus her attention on brushing Whisper’s golden mane. “N-no. That’s okay. You can take Whisper out since I hadn’t planned on going for a ride, just doing a little grooming.”

Ben could see the apprehension on her face. He readjusted his Stetson. “You know ... it’s been a minute since we’ve been riddin’ together. Why don’t you mount up Whisper, and I’ll hop on Gingersnap.” Ben needed some time alone, but his gut was telling him he also needed to spend time with his sister.

“I’m sure you’re super busy. You don’t have to ...”

“Yeah, spending time with you is the worst.” Ben lifted his arms and pretended to self-check his armpits. “I showered before I came out, so you ain’t got no excuse.”

Selah didn’t look like she wanted to go for a ride. Instead, she glanced over her shoulder toward the hidden gun closet. Nervously, she pressed her lips together, then turned back to Ben.

The fear he saw in her eyes was too much. He hated it. Ben had to do something but didn’t want to embarrass her, so he walked over to the closet, typed in the security code, and opened the door without saying a word. He pulled out his old faithful, a double-barreled shotgun, a 44 Magnum, and a 9 MM pistol. “When’s the last time you’ve been shootin’?” Ben figured with the revelations from earlier, it might not be a bad idea if his sister started to keep a piece on her.

Selah couldn’t remember the last time she’d discharged a gun. It had been years. She hadn’t particularly liked them, not for sport or anything else. Until recently, she had felt relatively safe and didn’t need one. Fast forward to the present, and everything made her jumpy. The least little sound had her on edge, “it’s been a while.”

“Let’s change that. Now, mount up. Not taking no for an answer.”

It was clear from her expression that Selah didn’t want to, but she also didn’t argue. Moments later, they trotted the horses out of the stable and into the sunlight. Ben wasn’t sure if it was the fresh air or Whisper, but Selah’s eyes had a little sparkle. It was enough to warm his heart. She did need this,



and a big part of him did too. “You beat me to Cressida Creek, and I’ll give you Bertha.”

“Bertha? Your classic pick-up truck. The one you keep hidden in the garage under that tarp and only bring out for special occasions or dates with Dillyn?”

“Yep.” Ben was encouraged by the excitement in her voice. “The one and only.”

“No way!”

“You know I don’t play when it comes to Bertha.”

Selah still wasn’t a hundred percent sold that Ben wasn’t joking. “Seriously?”

He nodded. “She’s yours if you can beat me. But understand this, if you want my truck, you’ll going to have to earn it.”

“You know I can beat you, right?” Selah reminded him as she pulled a scrunchie around her wrist to tie her hair into a ponytail.

“That happened *once*, and I was distracted.”

“You weren’t distracted. You just got whooped.” Selah laughed.

This was the sister he’d always known. The one with fire in her belly and the embers of her competitive spirit had certainly been lit. But in all honesty, so had his. “You ain’t winning on this day, baby girl.” Ben wrapped the lead rope around his fist and tightened his hold. “Once we reach mom and dad’s oak tree ... it’s on. The first one to the creek wins.”

Selah pressed her lips together and nodded in understanding. She gathered herself and sat a little taller in the saddle.

Even Whisper seemed up for the challenge. As the golden mare edged up to the Cash matriarch's oak tree, it was clear that this would be a real race. Selah had no intention of losing, and Ben had no intention of giving her Big Bertha.

"Ready?" Ben asked.

"Ready," Selah responded.

And just like that, the race was on as they rode the greatest known creations after a man at top speed.

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The water at Cressida Creek was clear, cold, and refreshing. The horses had had a workout and were bent over quenching their thirst. Two of her bodyguards had also arrived a few minutes after they had, but they gave them a wide berth.

"You know ..."

Selah didn't respond to Ben as she rolled her eyes at the smug look on his face.

"Big Bertha could use a good cleaning. If you want to take *my* truck out for a wash this weekend, feel free." Ben let out a hearty laugh.

"Whatever." Selah's face was flushed from the thrill of the ride. "You don't have to gloat."

A group of birds came barreling out from behind the trees. Selah was caught off guard, and her face drained of all

color. She almost leaped out of her skin. If it were possible, her heart would have exploded outside her chest.

Frantically, Selah looked around to find she had been startled by birds. Embarrassed, her eyes welled up with tears. “Dammit! When am I going to stop being afraid of my own shadow?!”

Ben reached for her and hugged her tight. He tucked her head underneath his chin, “you went through a lot. It’s okay to still have some residue from it. It wasn’t that long ago.”

Selah gripped the front of Ben’s shirt and buried her face into his chest. Her shoulders shook as the tears began to flow. It was the first time Ben had seen her cry since the incident. Tears were good. It meant she was processing the nightmare of her ordeal. Ben suspected this was all part of the healing process.

He held Selah close until she seemed to get it all out. He was emotional too. Thinking back on that night, Ben thought he had lost her.

She sniffled, “You probably think I’m weak for not bouncing back like you did.”

“Me? Bounce back? Shit! I’m still trying. But I wouldn’t be this far without the support of you, Wyatt, and Lucas. It took some time to realize I couldn’t shut everyone out who loved me.”

Selah dropped her arms and stepped back. “We do love you.”

“And we feel the same about you. Healing doesn’t have a timetable.” He prayed he was right. “We’ve hired extra full-

time security for the property and the house. See ...” He pointed to them. “They’re close right now. But it might make you feel better to know you can defend yourself.” It would make him feel better.

Ben walked over to Gingersnap, pulled the 9 MM out of the protective holster, and returned it to her.

“Here.”

Selah was hesitant. “You know I don’t like guns.”

“I don’t either.”

“Could have fooled me. You’re an expert with them.”

“I’m not an expert.”

“You’re literally an expert. Your military certificate says Weapon’s Expert.”

“I only served six years. It doesn’t count. Now, Wyatt, he’s an expert.”

“I always found it weird that you went from the most aggressive job on the planet to a renowned agricultural scientist.”

“I don’t think it’s strange. There’s always more than one way to save the world.”

“True. It’s still weird to see my brother on the cover of scientific magazines. You’re like this celebrity.”

“It’s kinda weird for me, too, and I’m not a celebrity. I’m more infamous than famous. No one cares about science.”

“You’re way too humble, and that’s not true. Companies all over the world have offered you millions for your formula.

They think it's amazing, and so do I."

"Correction. Companies all over the world want to bury my formula. I won't let them do that to the people. It's for everyone."

"I wish everyone had your heart."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So, then, you trust me?"

"You know that I do."

Ben held her gaze and looked deeply into her eyes to be sure before handing Selah the 9 MM.

There was only a slight pause before she took it. It wasn't the first time Selah had held a gun, but it had been a long time, so it took a moment to get used to the feel of the cold, hard, steel.

"Can you hit that tree?" Ben pointed toward a target no more than twenty-five yards away.

Selah nodded, "Yeah, I think so." She got into position, lifted her arms, and pointed it towards the target.

"Focus." Ben coached. "Aim, don't think too hard, inhale, release it, and pull the trigger."

Selah did as instructed. She squinted one eye until it was opened just a sliver, took a deep breath, released it, aimed, and fired several shots. The initial sound was much too loud, but she didn't jump. Her body remained still, and her arms firmly outstretched. It all began to feel familiar after pulling the

trigger a couple more times. Once Selah fired off the last shot, they walked over to the tree to inspect it.

Ben whistled low, “Damn, girl. You shoot better than Lucas.” He chuckled. “Don’t tell him I told ya that.”

She missed more than she hit but beamed with pride because of Ben’s compliments.

“I knew it would come back to ya.”

Selah smiled up at him. “I’m a little rusty.”

“We’ll keep practicing, and you’ll be an expert in no time.”

“You’ll be so great when you have more kids.” Selah’s face paled. She didn’t mean to say that. The words just slipped out. She held her breath, waiting for Ben’s reaction.

He smiled. “It’s all good.” He wanted to tell her about Dillyn and the baby but promised not to say anything. “I’m learning to be okay, and I hope you’re right. Now you ... you are going to be just fine too.”

## Chapter 16

*Oh my god! How much longer are these people going to be in my house?* The nonstop banging and drilling by the construction crew to get their new home in order drove Dillyn nuts. All she could do was deal with it since she couldn't stay over at Ben's. Unfortunately, his house didn't have the high-tech IT security Dillyn needed.

Covering her ears, Dillyn managed to make her way through the hallway and into their shared office. Cat and Selah were seated around the conference table, deep in conversation. Dillyn felt a hint of guilt because Cat was working hard to bring the orchard to life. There was just so much to do. With so many men in the house, they all took it upon themselves to ensure Selah was never alone.

Cat glanced up when Dillyn entered. "Hey girl."

"Hey!" Dillyn was surprised to see Selah, "I thought you were off today?"

She glanced up too after making a few notes in her portfolio, "Hey, Dillyn. I was but had a couple of ideas I wanted to share with Cat."

Cat turned to Selah, "if you have everything you need, I'm going to go run a few errands."

"Yep, I'm good! Thanks, Cat." Selah was hesitant as she pressed her lips together, "Um ... Dillyn, can I talk to you for a second?"

Dillyn could tell by the tense look on Selah's face that something was up. "Of course."

That was Cat's cue to exit, "Great. If either of you think of anything you need while I'm out, just text me." She left the room closing the door behind her.

Dillyn took a seat where Cat had been sitting.

"Um ..." Selah glanced down and started fidgeting with her hands. "I was hoping I could talk to you about something."

Dillyn reached out and placed what she hoped was a calming hand over Selah's. She spoke softly, "You can always talk to me."

Slowly, Selah looked up. Her eyes looked so haunted that Dillyn just wanted to hug her. She would do anything to bring back the sparkle.

Selah swallowed hard before speaking. Her voice cracked as she began, "I was really scared that night."

*Whoa. They were going there.* As far as Dillyn knew, Selah hadn't spoken to anyone about *the night*. Dillyn sat up a little straighter to ensure Selah knew she had her full attention.

"My life changed forever."

Dillyn remained silent as she listened, but guilt weighed heavily on her. Deep down, she felt she might be responsible for what happened.

"Sometimes it feels like they took everything from me." Selah's eyes were glassy.

Dillyn squeezed her hand.



“Most days, I feel like I’m a walking zombie. I’m so fidgety, and therapy isn’t helping.”

“Have you talked to Ben about it?”

She shook her head, “A little. We rode this morning, and it was great, but he’s been through so much. I don’t want to add to whatever he’s going through. Not when I know there is a part of him that feels responsible. He’s like that, you know. He piles all the bad stuff that happens in life on his shoulders.”

“I’ll make sure to make a mental note of that,” Dillyn smiled gently.

Selah sighed. “My brothers are doing everything they can to help, but they are guys, you know? Ben’s answer was to give me this gun.” Selah reached into her backpack and pulled out her 9MM.

“Wow. You know how to use it?”

She nodded. “Yeah, it’s easy enough. Point and shoot. I won’t lie and say I don’t feel a little safer having it than not. So, I’ve decided to just always keep it with me. However, I hoped talking to another woman might help with all the emotional stuff. I thought maybe you would understand more.”

Dillyn mulled over her thoughts. Speaking her truth out loud would be painful. But watching Selah, who was so vibrant when they met, become a shell of herself was worth it. “I think I might understand better than most what it feels like to be betrayed and violated.”

Selah’s brows knitted together. “Really? How?” This time, she sat up a little straighter as she gave Dillyn her full

attention.

“Up until I met Palmer, betrayal by those who should have done everything to protect me was an almost daily occurrence.” Dillyn released a big puff of air. “I was trafficked at a very young age.”

Selah’s eyes widened almost to her hairline. “Oh my God! That’s horrible!”

“I won’t lie. It was horrible. I was around nine or ten when I was saved. Then I bounced around from foster home to group home until I was eighteen.”

“I am so sorry that happened to you. I was smacked around, but it could have been so much worse. I wasn’t raped.”

Dillyn breathed a huge sigh of relief. They hadn’t known the extent of Selah’s injuries because she hadn’t talked to anyone outside of her therapist about them. Dillyn teared up.

Selah exited her chair and wrapped her arms around Dillyn, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know and never would have brought it up if I had.”

Dillyn held her tight, “These are not tears from grief but relief. That type of violation is a scar no woman should ever have to carry, and I’m glad you don’t.”

“Neither should you,” Selah whispered.

“Most days, I’m fine.” *Except for the occasional panic attack and nightmares, but I’ll keep that part to myself.*

“Anyhoo, back to my pep-talk. Where was I ...” Dillyn wiped a wayward tear away and smiled, “Palmer.”

“Palmer?”

“Yep. She helped me see the good in people again.”

“Have you known her a long time?”

“We met her in high school.” Dillyn smiled wider at the memory. “We had a math class together. I instantly liked her but was too shy to introduce myself. Good thing Palmer sucked at math. She quickly realized I was good at it and asked if I would tutor her. I jumped at the chance. We would go to her house every day after school to work on it. Her family was amazing. They gave me a sense of family and normalcy.”

“I’m glad you found her.”

“Me too.”

“Still, you don’t fit the description of a techie.”

“I don’t?”

“No. You’re too pretty.”

Dillyn blushed. “God, not in high school. I dressed funny, wore glasses, and was much too skinny. But I was always good with numbers and finding patterns in things.”

“Makes sense why you chose to be a digital forensic investigator and can hack things. Me,” Selah’s shoulders sagged a little, “I’m just the Cash brothers emotionally messed up little sister.”

“No. You’re not. You’re amazing, and it takes me back to the point of my story. After spending time with Palmer and her parents, I realized that a person must decide to be a survivor. I decided at fifteen that I didn’t want to be defined by

the things that happened to me.” *Although I still have ways to make that part a reality.* “I’m still a work in progress, and that’s okay.”

Selah hung on to her every word.

“You have a great support system. Not only are your brother’s here for you, but so are we. It might take some time to get over what happened to you, but remember, it hasn’t been that long. Make the decision not to be defined by this incident and to find that thing inside of you that makes you a survivor. It’s impossible to have brothers like Ben, Lucas, and Wyatt and not have that in your DNA.”

Selah seemed to ponder Dillyn’s words, “Thank you,” she whispered. “Sometimes I just feel like I’m drowning. I don’t want to feel like that anymore, so I came to you. Figured maybe you can help me figure it out.”

“I’m honored you chose me,” Dillyn hugged her hard, “When you feel like that, you just have to breathe. It might take a few minutes, but breathe through it.”

“That’s what my therapist says.”

“She’s right, and know that I am always here for you day and night.”

Selah remained in Dillyn’s arms and allowed herself a good old-fashioned cry. Dillyn rested her cheek on her head and held her the entire time. When Selah was finished, her face was flushed, and her eyes were red. “My brother couldn’t have chosen a better girlfriend even if he’d made you from scratch. I’m so grateful you’re in my life.”

Dillyn was choked up too, “That’s so sweet and if had to choose anyone for a little sister, it would be you. We’ll get through this together. I promise.” Dillyn meant every word.

Dillyn and Selah were still embraced when they heard a knock on the door. “Ugh. Should we answer it?”

Selah nodded yes as she wiped away her remaining tears. “Of course, we should. It could be someone telling us your entire house is falling apart.”

“The way my luck has been going, that wouldn’t surprise me at all.” Dillyn stood and walked over to the door to open it. She was pleasantly surprised when she saw Ben on the other side. “What are you doing here? I thought we weren’t meeting until later this evening?”

Dillyn noticed immediately that his face was tense.

“I need to talk to everyone about something important.”

“Everyone? As in Palmer, Cat, and me?” Dillyn pointed to herself.

“Yeah, and Selah. I’ve also asked Wyatt and Lucas to come over too.”

“This sounds serious.” Dillyn turned to Selah, but she had a bewildered look that mirrored her own.

“It is.”

“Well, Cat is not here. She just left to go to the store. Should we wait for her?”

“Actually, I caught her before she left. Cat’s waiting for us in the kitchen.”

## Chapter 17

The kitchen was crowded. Even for its size, considering it had been built to host at least eight bed-and-breakfast couples at a time. Dillyn recognized almost everyone, including Mike, but at least four new faces were in the mix. They were hulking and intimidating in stature. However, they stood quietly and stone face. She would hate to get on their bad side.

Dillyn didn't have a good feeling about this little fireside chat they were about to have *at all*. By the looks on everyone's faces, the consensus seemed that nobody did. Even if Dillyn couldn't see their expressions, there was no usual banter and back-and-forth chatter between them. She could feel the heaviness and anxiety in the room. It was palpable. Dillyn steeled herself for whatever they were about to learn as she and Selah went and stood next to Palmer, who was doing her best not to glance over at Lucas.

Ben cleared his throat, "I know you're all somewhat curious about why we called this meeting. However, we invited Mike, whom you know might have clued you in that this meeting involves our safety and security. Therefore, I will step aside and let him take the floor."

Mike followed Ben's advice. He moved to stand in the group's center and easily got their full attention. "Afternoon," He stood tall with his hands clasped behind his back. He had the stance of someone who had once served in the military. "Yesterday, a security team member reviewed some security

footage that showed a shadowy figure running across your yard and into the trees.”

“This happened yesterday?” Palmer asked.

“Unfortunately, this happened a week ago at approximately 10:23pm but was only discovered yesterday.”

*Oh shit!* Dillyn’s eyes connected with Ben’s. She knew he could read her thoughts that were screaming *someone had been watching them!* It happened right around the time of their rendezvous. Dillyn swallowed hard as she shared concerned glances with her friends. She refocused her attention on what Mike was saying.

“We immediately activated our plan if either of your properties were ever compromised.”

“Do we know who was on the video?” Cat asked.

Palmer nodded. “Did you catch him? Why didn’t you call the police?”

Frustrated, Dillyn asked the obvious question, “And ... why didn’t someone say anything then?!”

“Those are all good questions. I’ll answer Dillyn’s first. “We didn’t know what was on the camera. We weren’t even sure if it was a person. It wasn’t until we were able to enhance the video that we could confirm a security breach. Unfortunately, it was by more than one individual. We haven’t contacted the police because other than someone trespassing, we don’t have much in terms of a criminal case.”

That explanation made Selah’s face ashen, and she sat at the table. Dillyn went to her and placed what she hoped was a comforting hand on her shoulder. Gently, Dillyn squeezed,

hoping it would give her some reassurance. If she were honest, Dillyn was just as scared.

“So what now?” Dillyn asked.

“We beefed up security,” Mike said matter-of-factly.

Cat was more angry than scared, “Beefed up? I thought you were already doing that?!”

“Ma’am, I understand your frustration ...” Mike didn’t get to finish his statement.

“No! That’s not possible!” Selah stood with so much force her chair almost fell over backwards. By the looks on everyone’s faces, no one was ready for her explosion.

Her fists were balled up at her sides, “You couldn’t possibly understand! I was taken away from my family and violently attacked! I thought I would die and never see anyone I loved again. The only place I’ve felt safe since it happened has been our home! Now you’re telling me I’m not safe here either?”

Ben, Lucas, and Wyatt felt utterly helpless.

The guilt-eating at Dillyn literally made her want to vomit. Deep in her heart, she’d known that she’d brought the entirety of this fuckery to her friend’s doorstep. Dillyn had no idea how to fix this. *What can I do?* For now, all she could offer was comfort. She placed her hand on Selah’s back and gently rotated it in small circles.

Dillyn spoke softly as she asked Mike, “Have you been able to identify the people on the video?”



“Not yet. Our team is working on it. Until we do, anytime you step outside your home, one of these gentlemen standing behind me will escort you.”

“What are you doing to detect intruders *on* the property?” Palmer asked.

“We’re adding some additional people and more technology to assist.”

“Whose paying for all the additional people and more technology?” Palmer had no idea how they were going to afford that. “We don’t have that kind of money, and Dillyn, I know you don’t. We sunk almost everything we had into buying and renovating this place.”

“That’s being managed,” Mike answered.

Palmer was adamant, “By who?”

Lucas was frustrated that money was even a topic of discussion. “Why do you care as long as it is paid for?”

Palmer snapped, “Because none of us in this house want to be considered kept women!”

“No one thinks that.” Ben worked to calm the waters. “We all have a shared interest in keeping us safe.” Ben glanced at Dillyn. He was not going to lose another woman that he loved. “We have the means to pay for it, so we will.”

Palmer was still being stubborn, “Then set us up on a payment plan.”

“Hold on now ...” Cat was about to nip the ego and pride thing in the bud. She would not pay for shit if she didn’t have to. “If the guys want to pay for security, we should let

them.” Cat was flat-ass broke, and it would take some time before the vineyard took shape and started earning any money. That meant it would be years before they could pay the Cash brothers back, probably long after she’d died and gone to heaven or *hell* ... depending.

Dillyn was still pondering Mike’s words about the type of security they planned to add. She understood the technology part well enough but had some lingering questions. “Is that why Tony was checking our cars today?”

Lucas and Wyatt deferred to Ben. They didn’t know if or how much he wanted to tell them.

Ben exhaled. “Yes. The brake line on Cat’s car was severed.”

Gasps could be heard around the room.

Cat shook her head in disbelief. “And that’s not a crime?!”

“We can’t confirm if it was intentional or is connected to all of this. So, no. It’s not a crime. Still, we’d rather be safe than sorry, so we’ve had Dillyn and Palmer’s car inspected.”

Dillyn knew that was bullshit.

“Like Mike said, we’ve added more technology to secure our properties. Unfortunately, for now, you will need to pause your renovations.”

It made sense. They all nodded in agreement. Dillyn had more questions, “If someone trips the technology, how long will it take us to know about it? And how will it know the difference between humans and animals? Can it? There are all kinds of creatures out there. If we work in the orchard, how

would we know if something is wrong?” The way Dillyn’s mind worked, the more questions she asked the more that sprang to mind. “Securing our property and the Cash ranch simultaneously is a lot of ground to cover. Is that even possible?”

That was the question Ben hoped Dillyn wouldn’t ask, at least before he had a chance to discuss it with her alone, but before he could say anything, Wyatt stepped in to answer, “You’re right. It is a lot of ground to cover, but we’ll get it sorted.”

Cat shook her head. “That’s a half-assed non-answer if I’ve ever heard one. Y’all are going to need to give us more specifics than that.”

“You’re right. We don’t have the answers yet, but we’ve been working with experts to determine the best way to secure our properties. However, until we come up with a solid plan,” Ben knew this idea was going over like a lead balloon as he rubbed the back of his neck, “maybe it’s a good idea for you ladies to pack a bag and come stay with us for a little while.”

Palmer was flexible up until that point. She glanced over at Lucas, “Oh, hell no! We are not leaving our home. Technically, we’re still moving in!”

Lucas was pissed that Palmer was being boneheaded, most likely because of him, “You being pissed at me is a dumbass reason for you not to take your safety seriously.”

“She’s not being boneheaded.” Dillyn agreed with Palmer. “My work is here. I can’t just pack everything and bring it to your house.”

“Why not?” Wyatt asked. He figured the reason but wanted more answers.

Dillyn knew he wanted more information about the work she did and, specifically, Syntax, so she needed to tread carefully. The bottom line was that there was zero chance they were moving into Ben’s house. “My digital security is elaborate.” It was the first thing installed. “I can’t leave.”

Ben tried to reason with her, “It’s just until we figure this shit out, Dillyn.”

“No.” Dillyn was not backing down. “I cannot leave my clients in limbo. I have contracts and commitments.”

“Agreed,” Cat responded. “You all are just going to have to figure out how to keep us safe on our property because we’re staying put.”

After her initial outburst, Selah had been quiet until now, “this is all my fault. If I had never ...”

“None of this is your fault,” Dillyn wasn’t about to let Selah feel guilty about something she knew in her bones had everything to do with her. “We’ll figure out how to end this,” She told Ben, “but it won’t involve moving into your house.”

Ben understood better than most pain and guilt, and he was tied up in knots watching his sister go through it. *Fine*. He would move the mountain to them if they wouldn’t come to the mountain. “I guess that means we’ll be moving in here.”

Wyatt and Lucas were more than surprised, but it was a decent compromise, considering they weren’t about to leave any of them unprotected.

Ben didn't give Dillyn and her two-woman crew a chance to disagree. Instead, he whipped his hand in the air as if it were a lasso. "We've got a lot of work to do before nightfall. Let's get to it."

## Chapter 18

It had been a long day and *night*, and Dillyn was exhausted. Ben didn't seem to be faring any better. He and his brothers had overseen the installation of a new temporary electronic fence, and they had personally walked the entire perimeter around the house. By the time Ben came upstairs, he looked completely spent and almost fell into the bed. As exhausted as Ben was, he still had enough energy to pull Dillyn into his arms. He was asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

Even in his sleep, Dillyn could see his mind working. Ben wouldn't stop until he figured out how to keep them all safe. It was a feeling she shared. If Dillyn had to guess, Palmer and Cat would feel better once Wyatt and Lucas moved into the house, though they would never admit it.

Dillyn exhaled deeply. *Is it possible for all of us to live together in perfect harmony?* She had her doubts, considering Palmer and Lucas weren't getting along.

As Ben and Dillyn lay in bed, she watched him sleep. The tell-tale signs of stress were etched across his forehead. With everything going on, Dillyn still hadn't dealt with the baby issue. *How can I bring a child into the mess I created?*

It was also difficult to take Ben at his word regarding them having a baby together. *Is it possible he's genuinely happy about this pregnancy?* Or was Ben making the best out of the situation? He was such a standup guy and incredibly

responsible. His character was impeccable. Yet, they still had so much to learn about one another.

Gently, Dillyn caressed his forehead as if that would smooth out the wrinkles while searching his face for answers. She had noticed the creases weren't nearly as pronounced as when they first met. *Are we good for each other? Isn't it natural to feel uneasy about an unplanned pregnancy with a man I've only been dating for a few months? If I'm feeling a way, he has to?*

*Close your eyes and go to sleep.* Dillyn snuggled a little closer to Ben. *Tomorrow is a new day to figure it out.* She closed her eyes and did her best to clear her chaotic mind.

Relaxing was a struggle, so she took a few deep breaths and blew them out slowly. Stilling her thoughts was taking a lot of effort as Dillyn continued to wrestle with them. After more than an hour, the noise of her mind started to quiet, and silence finally took over.

Total and complete silence.

Wait. Her eyes popped open. *Complete silence?* That wasn't right either.

The realization that her room was quiet brought Dillyn's unease back full force. The potential problem hit her like a ton of bricks.

Dillyn disentangled herself from Ben's sleeping body while moving quietly.

*Why am I just now realizing this?* She felt like a bolt of electricity had hit her because *you are losing your shit.*

Most folks wouldn't have noticed, but Dillyn was uniquely attuned to the now-nonexistent sound.

*How could I have missed it?*

The gentle hum of her computer's server was always present, but not tonight. The ongoing, unceasing sound that had always been in the background for most of her teenage years and adult life was gone.

*I must be trippin.* For the briefest of moments, she thought she might have been mistaken. Dillyn stilled and listened harder, hoping she was wrong. When nothing came, Dillyn threw the sheets off her body and shot out of bed, making a mad dash over to her workstation.

Her jerky movements roused Ben awake. It may have seemed like he was in a deep sleep, but he hadn't been. He had way too much on his mind. His brain may have been a little sleep-fogged, but Ben was alert enough to notice the set of Dillyn's shoulders and the ram-rod straightness of her back as she sat in front of her monitor.

Something wasn't right.

The deep timbre of Ben's voice cut through the silence. "What's wrong?" He checked his cell on the stand next to the bed to ensure none of the alarms had been tripped.

Dillyn couldn't form words, not when her mind was moving a mile a minute.

Concerned, Ben worked to get his sleep-addled mind to work properly. "You realize you're sitting in front of a monitor butt ass naked, right?"



He was speaking, but Dillyn couldn't really hear him. She was one hundred percent focused on her task. It was impossible, but she had to be sure.

Dillyn studied her screen. It was black, and the blinking green light in the lower bottom half of her monitor was not only missing. It was red. "Shit!"

Ben got up, picked up his jeans, thrown over a chair, and walked over. He stood towering over her shoulder. His voice was still husky from sleep when he asked again. "What's going on?"

"My computer is off."

"It's always off."

"No. The screen is always black when I power down, but it's never off."

"What does that mean?"

Dillyn closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She took a deep breath and opened them again. "You see that light right there? The solid red one?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"It shouldn't be red. It should be blinking and green."

"Okay." Ben still didn't fully understand the problem.

Dillyn could read it in his face. Her personal life might be crazy, but she could always count on computers, *at least until now*. Dillyn tried to explain what she thought was happening. "Green means that my security is functioning as it should."

It finally dawned on Ben as he finished her thought.  
“Red means that it’s not.”

“Exactly.” This was the first time in Dillyn’s life that her fail-safe security system had seemingly been compromised. Someone had gotten through her defenses.

*She’d been hacked.* Fortunately, the Labyrinth that was her security had built-in contingencies for something like this. She hoped it had held. “I woke up feeling ...” Dillyn paused. She decided not to go into too much detail about her feelings. “It was too quiet in here. My system is not loud, but if you’re used to hearing something when it quiets, you hear it.”

Dillyn’s fingers started flying across her keyboard, and the monitors finally came to life. She was now working in what was called “safe mode” just as a precaution. She continued to explain. “I don’t think they actually got into my network.” At least, she hoped. “But they definitely got through the first line of my defenses. However, once you are *in*, it’s like standing on a closed-in porch of someone’s home with the lights off, unsure of the layout, and tripping the silent alarm. In this case, it caused my entire system to shut down, and they were immediately put into quarantine. Quarantine mode mimics my system when it’s live.” Dillyn glanced up at him. “That’s why it was so quiet in here. That’s why there wasn’t the low-grade buzzing sound I’ve heard every day for the past twenty-plus years.”

Ben raked his hands through his hair. He was clueless when it came to this kind of thing. “What can I do?”

“Nothing just yet.” For long moments, Dillyn didn’t say a word. She continued to type in numbers and codes that Ben

couldn't make heads or tails of. He could only watch different screens pop up that looked like jigsaw puzzles until, finally, her fingers stilled over the keys.

Dillyn's eyes closed briefly as she released a long sigh of relief. "There."

Ben was anxious. "What?!"

"I've got him. Him or her." She turned around and spoke into the darkness. "They broke into my system and got lost just as I hoped."

"That's good, right?"

"Yes and no. It would take a highly sophisticated system and a very skilled person to get into my system. Fortunately, they couldn't figure out where to go once they got in. They probably thought they could leave quietly and that I would never be the wiser. They were wrong." Dillyn glanced up again into his eyes. "You know what this means, right?"

Ben didn't believe in coincidences. He knew exactly what it meant and didn't like it one damn bit. "Syntax told you that it was handled. Leave it alone."

"Clearly, Syntax doesn't have it under control. Otherwise, whoever this is wouldn't be trying to get into my house and network." She whispered almost to herself. "I must still have something they want. And how can I *leave it alone* when I've got them?" She pointed toward something on her monitor that regular people would never understand. "I've got them! I will use the trail they left as a backdoor to get into their system and unravel this mess!"

That was not what Ben wanted to hear. His fear for her safety was masked as anger, “You don’t even know if it’s the same people!”

Dillyn tilted her head and gave him the, *yes, I do*, look. They both knew it.

“Okay, for argument’s sake, let’s say they are the same. Don’t get involved.” *They most likely kidnapped Selah!* Ben didn’t say the words out loud because he knew Dillyn carried that guilt, but his frustration got the better of him. “They’re murderers!”

“They hacked into *my* system!” Dillyn released her own righteous anger. “They were on my property! They’re already coming after me. If I don’t try to figure this out, everyone I love could get hurt.”

Ben knew his words sounded hollow even before he finished saying them. He returned to his original argument, “You don’t even know who’s behind this.”

“You just said ...” Dillyn stopped in midsentence and softened her tone, “I can end this. *Safely*. No one will even know I was in their system. I’m *that* good.” She pleaded with Ben, “Have a little faith in me.”

He had faith in her, but this situation was like a made for a TV movie. He suspected none of them really knew what they were truly dealing with.

It was evident by the look in Dillyn’s eyes that Ben had lost this round. She was determined. Her mind was made up. He rolled his head around his shoulders, hoping to loosen his muscles. “Set up a meeting between Syntax and me.”

*That's impossible.*

He could read the expression on her face and barked his response, "Make it happen!" Ben immediately regretted taking out his frustration on Dillyn. He ran a roughened hand down the back of his head. "Please." He added the last part to soften his tone.

Ben held her gaze for a moment more to make his point before pivoting and walking back toward the bed.

"I can end this," Dillyn whispered.

*Or it can end you.* "I heard you the first time." Ben would never recover if anything were to happen to her or their baby. Ben had his back facing Dillyn, which meant she couldn't see the anguish on his face. He placed his hands on his hips and dropped his chin to his chest. Dillyn was stubborn. If Ben pushed too hard, she would do the opposite, probably to spite him. That much he knew. She would try to untangle this mess with or without his approval; there was nothing he could do about it. But Ben could be with her every step of the way while doing everything in his power to keep her safe.

*How?* That was the problem. They were already doing everything humanly possible, yet someone still got on their property and into her network.

Dillyn remained silent. She understood his worry, but Ben needed to trust her. All she had to do was put the pieces of the puzzle together. Dillyn was confident it could be done without anyone even realizing it. Then, Syntax and his team could handle the rest.

Ben got back into bed. There was no falling back to sleep tonight. His mind was too busy with thoughts about what to do next. “You’ve quarantined the bastards. It should keep until tomorrow morning, right?”

“I-I guess, but ...”

“Is there anything I can say to convince you to work on it in the morning?”

“I won’t be able to sleep.”

“Figured.” He shut his eyes. “It’s not just you anymore. Someone else is depending on you. *I’m* depending on you.”

His words felt like the ice bucket challenge, temporarily dousing her red-hot curiosity to unravel the clues left behind. Contemplating her next move, Dillyn pressed her lips together while staring at the back of Ben’s head. She glanced back at her monitor and then back over to him.

Ben was right. Whoever attempted to enter her network was caught dead to rights. Now that her security was back in place, with a few more keystrokes, the offender could do nothing.

Dillyn *should* go back to bed. This was a high-stress moment for them both, and stress wasn’t good for her. Dillyn wondered if this was the beginning of having to put her child first. *Wouldn’t unraveling this mess be doing just that?* She sighed before typing in a few more keys, then begrudgingly got up from her seat.

Ben felt the bed dip as soon as Dillyn got back into it. She pressed her cheek against the heated skin of his back and

wrapped her arms around his waist. She whispered, “It’ll keep until morning.”

He breathed a long sigh of relief.

Dillyn could feel a little of the tension leave his body. She figured he probably wasn’t going to sleep a wink. Then again, neither was she.

## Chapter 19

Ben hadn't been able to sleep a wink. Shortly before sunrise, he'd slipped out of bed and left Dillyn sleeping, or at least pretending to be. Ben figured if he hadn't been able to get some shut-eye, then Dillyn probably couldn't either.

Whisper was going to get a heck of a workout. Ben trudged up the stairs to his bedroom. He needed to shower and get changed. His mind had been so preoccupied that he failed to skip over the squeaky step.

*Shit.* He hoped it didn't wake the house, but Wyatt and Lucas were light sleepers. Especially, Wyatt.

Like clockwork, his door cracked open. He smiled mischievously, "You're home early."

Ben spoke in hushed tones. "Yeah. I need to go for a ride."

Everyone knew what that meant. Wyatt's brows grew together with concern. "Something else happened that I should know about? Did Dillyn talk to Cat and Palmer about us moving over there for the short term since you kinda just sprung it on them?" He opened his door a little wider.

"Whether they agree or not, it's safer for all of us to be together." Ben finished climbing the stairs and came to stand in front of him. "Have your contacts found out anything about Syntax? Can they enhance the security video more so that we can identify who is on it?"

"Not yet to either question. You think he's behind this?"



“I don’t know, but we must look into everything.”

“True. Syntax is like a fuckin’ ghost. There is nothing on the man. I’ve resorted to a basic internet search. I’ll even take rumors at this point. At least they are usually steeped in some truth.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck, “Somebody tried to hack into Dillyn’s network last night.”

Wyatt didn’t believe in coincidences but didn’t want to worry Ben more than he already was. His ears perked up as he downplayed the breach in Dillyn’s security, “In her line of work, that is kinda routine, isn’t it?”

“According to Dillyn, last night was different.”

“How so?”

“She said there has never been a successful attempt over the last twenty-something years to get into her network. She thinks it’s connected to Selah’s abduction and maybe even Steven’s death. Honestly, so do I.”

Wyatt figured there was no point in sugarcoating it. “Yeah, no such thing as a coincidence. Did they get in? Did they get what they were looking for? What were they looking for?”

Lucas opened the door to his room and walked out into the hallway, rubbing his eyes. “Y’all loud as hell.” He yawned. “Your whispers would wake the dead. What’s up *now*?”

Wyatt quickly brought Lucas up to speed. “Somebody hacked into Dillyn’s network.”

Whatever fog of sleep Lucas had cleared up real quick. Concern was evident in his eyes. “First, the property, and now her computer. They want something bad.”

Ben was afraid of that.

Lucas asked a follow-up question. “Were they successful?”

Ben shook his head. “I don’t think so. Dillyn said they got through her first line of defense but couldn’t get inside fully. We all know this shit is connected. We need to figure this mess out and fast.”

Wyatt and Lucas could see the tension all over Ben. Wyatt touched his brother’s shoulder, hoping to offer a little comfort. “I promise. We’ll get it sorted. In the meantime, it’s almost like Fort Knox over there.”

“Almost is not good enough. Is there anything else we can do?”

Wyatt could understand his frustration: “The team is working as fast as possible to install additional security measures. They are also working on another analysis for weaknesses in our security and more ways to shore up where we might be exposed. I know it’s hard, but we need to try not to worry.” Wyatt continued to reassure Ben. “We’ll get these bastards.”

“We have to.” Ben paused, wondering if he should tell Wyatt why there was a new urgency. “It’s not just Dillyn and Selah I’m worried about. Dillyn’s pregnant.”

Both Lucas and Wyatt’s eyes widened. They hadn’t heard correctly. Lucas needed Ben to repeat himself. “Did you

just say that Dillyn is pregnant?”

Ben nodded.

Wyatt was knocked clear on his ass. He wouldn't have expected that in a million years, especially from Ben. “I don't mean no offense, but I can't imagine this was planned. Was it?”

“It's unexpected but not unwelcome.” Ben admitted.

Wyatt looked skeptical.

Lucas didn't think Ben would ever get married or have children again. He was shocked.

Ben could read his brother's faces like a book. “I know everything between Dillyn and me is happening fast. I won't lie and say I don't have concerns, but not about her or the pregnancy.”

“Then what?” Lucas asked.

“There's just so much shit that could go wrong. There's been too much death in this family. I can't ...” Ben couldn't finish his sentence.

Lucas slapped Ben on his back. “C'mon dude. Dillyn's strong. Nothing is going to happen to anyone.”

Wyatt nodded. “Not on our watch. We won't let it.”

“Every second that we can't figure out what the hell is going on is another moment that I can't keep my family safe.”

Lucas folded his arms across his chest and turned to Wyatt. “Nothing on Syntax or the people who tried to take Selah, huh?”

“No, but I just had a thought. I’ll make a few more calls in a couple of hours. It’s too early now.”

Ben was wound tight as a drum, and Lucas wanted to ease his mind. “Whisper’s probably pissed at you for making her wait this long.”

Ben raked a hand through his hair. “Yeah. I will shower quickly and take her out for a run.”

“You better do something nice.” Lucas chuckled. “Damn, horse might not be so friendly when she finds out you knocked Dillyn up, and she won’t be your baby anymore. I mean, damn, dude. That was quick.”

Wyatt laughed. “Has it even been a hundred and twenty days?”

“Shut-up. Both of you. Imma go get that shower.” Ben brushed past his brothers and headed toward his bedroom.

As soon as Ben was out of earshot, the upbeat and jovial Lucas was replaced with a seriousness that this moment deserved. “We’ve got to figure this shit out.” Lucas turned to Wyatt. “It would break him if something happened to her. He would never recover from this one.”

There was no way in hell Wyatt or Lucas would let anything happen to anyone. Wyatt spoke quietly as he stared in the direction that Ben had gone. “We’ll keep them safe. I know I’m missing something and keep hitting a brick wall. Getting information out of Dillyn about Syntax is like squeezing blood from a turnip. I have a feeling he is the key.”

“Do you think she knows more than she’s letting on?” Lucas asked.

“About Syntax? Absolutely. She seems loyal to him, but not in a nefarious way. About the other shit? I doubt it. Dillyn wants to solve this as much as we do.”

“That’s the vibe I get too.”

Wyatt looked thoughtful, “I have one more favor I can call in.”

Lucas nodded. He knew better than to ask any questions. Wyatt never had any answers anyway. Everything with him was always super-secret. This was one of those times when Lucas just had to trust him. “Call it in then, and let me know if there is anything I can do.”

## Chapter 20

Ben had left early. His warm lips tenderly touched Dillyn's before he slipped out the door. She figured he was going to ride Whisper to gain some clarity about how to handle her decision. It was probably best that Dillyn pretended to be asleep. Most likely, it prevented an argument. There was no doubt Ben would have tried to convince her to stay away from the breadcrumbs she had found. It would have been a pointless discussion.

Dillyn's mind was made up.

Shortly after Ben left, Dillyn threw on a pair of sweats, got out of bed, walked over to her computer, and powered it on. Dillyn plugged her laptop into the computer as a backup to record her work. Then she set about the painstaking work of tracing the cyber attacker's movements. As the hours passed, darkness morphed into early morning light, and Dillyn began to feel a dull ache in her lower back.

*How long have I been sitting in this same position?*  
Hours. She stretched, hoping it would give her some relief, only for Dillyn to need to use the bathroom.

*I'll go in a minute.* It was a refrain Dillyn repeated over and over. Every time she glanced at her computer's lower right corner, an hour passed. The lack of sleep and the stress of trying to find any possible clues began to weigh on her.

Dillyn rolled her shoulders back and massaged them to remove the tension.

What she was attempting required the precision of a surgeon. One wrong keystroke could destroy everything and tip off her intruders. Dillyn was making progress and, fortunately, had captured most of what the hacker left behind in her network. At least, she hoped so.

After a meticulously slow process, Dillyn finally made it to the metaphorical front door of the enemy. Getting inside would require even more focus. Her cell phone vibrated just as she was about to follow her next breadcrumb.

Dillyn glanced down to find that Syntax had sent her a text. She groaned, “Ugh.” His timing was unnerving. Dillyn wondered if he knew what she was doing. She wouldn’t have been surprised if he did. The man knew everything and seemed to be at least two steps ahead. Dillyn could only read the top-line of his message.

Syntax: *Need to connect ASAP!*

Dillyn texted back: *Can't talk.*

Syntax: *Explain?!*

Dillyn: *In the middle of a job. Will connect when finished.*

Syntax: *IMPORTANT!!*

Technically, Dillyn was in the perfect place to stop. She hadn’t actually entered the enemy’s domain. The clock would only start ticking once she was inside their network. Still, Dillyn didn’t want to tip Syntax off if he didn’t already know what she was up to. She decided to text him a little white lie.

*Dillyn: In sensitive place. Can it wait an hour or two?*

Syntax: *IMMEDIATELY after.*

Dillyn: *Will do.*

Her stomach was in knots. *Get it together.* Dillyn didn't have time to allow Syntax to fluster her. *What could he possibly do? A lot. What would he do? Give her grace ... maybe.*

Just as she was about to enter the unknown, Dillyn's stomach growled, and it dawned on her that she was starving. The sound was so loud that Dillyn thought anyone from anywhere could hear it.

Hunched over her desk while leaning into the screen, her hunger pangs would not be denied. Not when her stomach felt like it was caving into her back.

Dillyn didn't want to stop, but Ben's words echoed inside her head. *Someone else is depending on you. I'm depending on you.*

*Ugh!* Dillyn typed a few codes into the keyboard to save her place and begrudgingly got up. She would grab something quick and then get back to work. What happened to the days when she could pull an all-nighter and things like food and a bio break could be controlled? Father time had a way of reminding her that she wasn't twenty-two anymore.

Dillyn placed a hand over her stomach as she dragged herself down the stairs and into the kitchen.

As usual, Cat was already there with her head bowed over a mess of papers. She seemed to have a sixth sense that Dillyn was about to enter because she immediately glanced up. Cat lowered her reading glasses to the tip of her nose and



looked over the top to study Dillyn. “I get it. We’re dealing with a crazy amount of shit, and you and Ben are still in the honeymoon phase, but why is your hair all over your head?” She was only half-joking as she cracked a sly grin, “Slip that bonnet on after he falls asleep.”

Self-consciously, Dillyn smoothed down her wayward curls. “That sounds like something Palmer would say.” *I need food and coffee.* “Anyway, Ben has seen the real me. The good, bad, and ugly. I’m now a *what you see is what you get* kind of woman.”

Cat pushed her glasses back up onto the bridge of her nose. “Truth is, Ben didn’t fare much better than you when I saw him leave this morning. Dude looked just as worn out.” Cat laughed quietly. “Even with a crisis, you two know that a bed can also be used for sleeping, right?”

Dillyn was surprised that A, Cat had been up that early, and B, her demeanor. “I see you can still make jokes.”

She shrugged, “beats the alternative.”

“True.” If Cat only knew the real reason, Dillyn looked tired and worn out. Dillyn hated keeping secrets from her friends, and she was starting to feel the weight of hers piling up. But after everything they’d learned over the past 24 hours, Dillyn decided to keep one more. “Are you okay with Wyatt and Lucas staying here for a little while?”

Cat mulled it over. “If I’m honest, I’d feel better knowing they are here than if they weren’t. One more added layer of security can’t hurt. When are they coming again?”

“Ben said they would probably bring their things tonight. They wanted to let us talk about it alone before they came. Is that why you’re all dolled up? You thought Wyatt was going to be here?”

Cat rolled her eyes, “Girl, bye. Absolutely not.”

“Mmm. Okay. If you say so. If you saw Ben leave this morning, you’ve been at it for hours. I feel guilty at the amount of work you’re putting into getting this Orchard up and going.”

“Just pulling my weight.”

“You don’t have to kill yourself to do it.”

“I’m not, but you invested a lot of money. The least I can do is provide the expertise.”

“I don’t care about the money. Never did. I care that my friends are *safe*.”

“You don’t have to worry about that either. I’m fine. I’ll be better once we find the creeps who are harassing the shit out of us. However, I’m managing the stress. I couldn’t sleep, so I got up early and did an hour of yoga. No going back to sleep after that so I figured I might as well come down and get some work done. Coffee’s also been my saving grace.” Cat pointed toward the coffee maker and then began reviewing the documents she’d been reading. “There’s a fresh pot. I just made it a few minutes ago.”

Dillyn was drained. It was noticeable as she slid her feet across the room toward man’s greatest creation. First, she opened the cabinet above it, removed a mug, and then lifted the carafe. Dillyn was about to pour it when she remembered,

*I'm pregnant.* Slowly, she put the carafe back into its place. "I think I'll have a cup of black tea. Do we have any more?"

Cat never glanced up, "Should be. You know how Palmer is about her teas."

"I wonder if she has decaf?" Dillyn asked absentmindedly.

Cat lifted her head slowly, "*You're* looking for decaf tea?"

Dillyn was rummaging through the canister where Palmer kept the packets. Not realizing she had just dropped a curiosity bomb.

"Mmmhmm." Dillyn never looked Cat's way as she kept sifting through the container.

"Decaf?"

"Yep. Decaf."

Cat placed the document she had been holding on the table and gave Dilly her full attention. "Dillyn Denise Anderson." Cat was staring a hole into her back. "What is going on?"

Her tone caused Dillyn to glance up. *Shit. What did I say? Cat is way too perceptive.* Dillyn's brows knitted together as she played dumb. "Huh?"

"Simple question. Easy answer. What's up?" Cat's tone was nothing short of accusatory. "In all the years I've known you, you've detested tea. Sweet tea. Peach tea. Mint tea. Green tea. ALL TEAS." Her eyes narrowed. "You love coffee as

much as you hate tea, and now you're asking for *decaf* tea.”  
Cat folded her arms across her chest. “What’s up, chicka?”

Dillyn dropped her shoulders before slowly turning around. Her body language said *guilty as charged*. She gave Cat a small one-shoulder shrug. Her voice was soft. “I-I don’t know what you mean.”

Cat’s stony expression gave way to a wide grin. “That man has got you sprung. I know Ben is an organic health nut, but I never thought in a million years that anyone could convince my friend to give up caffeinated coffee.”

Dillyn stood frozen and unable to utter a sound. She thought for sure that Cat had figured it out.

Cat laughed at Dillyn’s expense. “Don’t let him turn you into a vegan. We like steak around here. Organic, I can do, but vegan? Absolutely not!” Cat realized Dillyn wasn’t laughing. “I mean, that is it, isn’t it?” As if to answer her own question, Cat responded. “What else could it be? You’re either becoming more health conscious or knocked up.”

Dillyn bit her lower lip. *Welp. One of her two secrets was almost out of the bag.* No time like the present to come clean.

Cat stopped talking and stared blankly at Dillyn as Palmer entered the kitchen.

Palmer was not actually *up*. “Hey y’all.” Her eye mask was pushed onto her forehead as she dragged herself in from the hallway. “I’m tired as hell. The Sandman couldn’t find my ass. I didn’t get to sleep until this morning.” Palmer was still wearing her white terry-cloth robe and matching slippers. “I’m

just going to grab a cup of peppermint tea and return it to her room. Maybe it will help calm my nerves.”

Palmer was oblivious to the energy bouncing between Cat and Dillyn. She had no idea what was unfolding before she walked into the kitchen. She hadn't glanced at either of them as she went over to the stove to pick up the teapot.

“*Gawwwwwd*. Why y'all up so early?”

Cat responded to Palmer. “It's two-thirty.”

“It's that late? Damn.” Palmer took the teapot over to the sink to fill it with water. While it was filling, she finally noticed the uncomfortable silence between them. Palmer looked at her friends and realized something was up. “What *now*?”

Dillyn was having difficulty admitting what she knew Cat had come to believe.

When neither Dillyn nor Cat responded, Palmer got even more concerned. “Are we under attack? She looked around the room. “Is Selah okay?”

“No, we are not under attack. Selah came down earlier and went back to her room about an hour ago.” Cat pressed her lips together and looked over at Dillyn, who looked like a deer in headlights.

“Then what's up?” Palmer narrowed her eyes as she studied Dillyn.

Instead of outing her, Cat threw out a lifeline. “I'm just reviewing some things for the vineyard and tossing a few ideas. We're going to need more money. Dillyn was probably about to confirm that she's all tapped out.” Cat laughed, but it

sounded forced. “In all seriousness, it’s going to be planting season soon, so we’ll have to start making some decisions.” Cat continued to ramble. “The grapes won’t be ready for winemaking for some time. It’s a year’s long process, meaning it will be a while before we can start making money from them. So, I was thinking, maybe we can use the peaches from the orchard. We might be able to get those on the shelves in a year or two.”

“Hmm.” Palmer was skeptical as she looked between them. “That’s what you two were talking about?”

Dillyn took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “Actually, I have some news.” Dillyn looked gratefully at Cat, then smiled nervously as she clasped her hands together. “I know this might come as a complete shock ...” She forced excitement in her voice, “Since we’ve been talking about babies and starting families ... how do you feel about becoming aunties in the next six or seven months?”

## Chapter 21

Palmer put the teapot down before she dropped it. “Girl. Are you seriously trying to tell me that you’re pregnant?”

She nodded, “Yeah.”

“You. Are. Pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t a joke. I’m not being punked?”

“No.”

Palmer’s face was filled with disbelief, “Did you know that when I was talking about having a baby?”

“Yes, I did.”

Palmer was in complete shock, “why didn’t you say something?”

Dillyn’s eyes became glassy, “Honestly, I didn’t know what to say. I think I am still processing.”

Cat got up from her seat and went to hug her friend. Palmer hugged her too.

A tear slid down Dillyn’s cheek as she sniffed, “I don’t know how this happened?”

Palmer pulled back. There was a devilish gleam in her eyes. “I can tell you how it happened. You and Mr. Cowboy couldn’t keep your hands off each other, but why the tears? This is a joyous occasion!”

“I-I ... initially thought so. Now, I honestly don’t know.” Dillyn’s dream about her parents had messed with her head. They were a shitshow, and she was terrified of becoming a version of them and passing that bad juju to this child. However, she didn’t want to admit that. Instead, Dillyn revealed the obvious. “Ben and I just started dating a few months ago. We’re still in the getting to know each other stage.”

Palmer waved her words away. “True, but you and Ben have something special. It will be fine. Honestly, I am so excited for you. Our biological clocks *are* ticking. We’re in our mid-thirties, and if I had a Ben, I would pop out as many babies as possible.”

Cat rolled her eyes. “You have a Ben that you won’t acknowledge. Granted, all men are shit, but I have a soft spot for Ben and Lucas. They’re the exception.”

Palmer responded thoughtfully, “Lucas is ... too young.”

Mischievously, Cat grinned. “Didn’t keep you from sleeping with him.”

“Oop! No, you didn’t.” Palmer laughed. “You know he’s the first younger man I’ve ever dated.”

“Hey, I get it.” Cat giggled. “I’ve shown a younger man a thing or two myself, and man-oh-man, did they return the favor in stamina.”

“Girl, you know that’s right!” Palmer high-fived Cat as she laughed heartily, then lifted four fingers. She mouthed *four orgasms*. She sounded wistful, “The last time we were



together, I had four in the same night! I couldn't believe it. That's more than I've had in last three years combined."

"Sounds like he has things figured out alright." Cat giggled.

Palmer playfully swatted her arm as she agreed. "That part. He absolutely has." Slowly, her laughter died on her lips. "Still, I would never try to lock him down at this age."

"My friends are sex addicts." Dillyn smiled, but it didn't fully reach her eyes. "Anyway, Lucas jokes around a lot, but he does seem to be mature. Look at me trying to solve your problems when I have my own."

Palmer responded, "You're about to become a mom! That's my dream. I will admit something I don't want to for obvious reasons. I *do* like Lucas. Probably more than I should."

"Shocker." Cat laughed.

"Hush!" Palmer nudged her. "He says he wants more than a sexual relationship, but I can't afford to take the risk."

"Just have casual sex," Cat advised. "Then you might not need a sperm bank."

Palmer said sarcastically. "If I didn't already have a plan, I would consider your suggestion." Palmer wasn't serious. She had made up her mind, and Lucas wasn't an option.

Dillyn could see the yearning on Palmer's face.

Cat was usually so good at hiding her thoughts, but not today. Her expressions were loud, "You do realize you've

already broken the cardinal rule?”

Palmer was genuinely baffled, “what’s that?”

Cat was matter of fact, “You’ve already formed emotional ties to him.”

At this point, there was no need for Palmer to be anything but transparent, “Maybe, but I will just have to let it burn. I want kids, and I’m too old to mess around hoping to find the right guy, so sperm bank it is.” Palmer wanted to inject a little lightheartedness into the room because it had taken another turn for doom and gloom. “C’mon Cat. Come with me,” she joked, “We can all be pregnant at the same time.”

Cat wrinkled up her nose. “Um ... no. Not everyone wants to have a tribe of badass kids. I certainly don’t.” Sheepishly, Cat glanced over at Dillyn. “Well ... not all kids are badasses.”

Dillyn sat quietly, listening to Cat and Palmer, wondering which road was right for her.

“So, how does Ben feel about it?” Palmer asked.

Distraction time was over. Dillyn wrapped her hands around her coffee mug and held it tight, “I don’t know. He seems to be fine.”

“No, you have to give us details,” Palmer said excitedly. “Start with how did y’all find out.”

“We’ve known for a few weeks.”

Cat and Palmer yelled at the same time, “Weeks!”

“Yeah,” Dillyn responded sheepishly. “Ben suspected. I had no idea. I guess I was exhibiting the classic symptoms. I just figured with everything going on and the stress of it, maybe I was a little run-down. We took a test, and it came back positive.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.” Palmer was hanging on to Dillyn’s every word.

“Is it?”

“Yes! It really is. You and Ben will be fantastic parents.”

“Ben will be incredible. I’ve already witnessed it first-hand. Me? I don’t know.”

Cat didn’t say a word. She just watched Dillyn’s body language.

“When I first found out, I was excited. I could imagine Ben and me and our little family.” *Then reality hit. How can I be a good mother? It would be impossible.* “I just don’t think motherhood is right for me.”

Palmer suspected the root of her self-doubt. She said softly, “Dillyn, you’re not your parents.”

Dillyn was riddled with guilt and shame. She couldn’t face her friends and turned her back to them. “I know that. I-I just ... motherhood is not for everybody! I would never have considered it if I weren’t so insecure and desperate to save my marriage to Steven. I am stronger now. I don’t have those same insecurities.”

Palmer thought back on it. Dillyn had never really talked about wanting children or seemed particularly fond of

them until Steven pushed her. Palmer just assumed all women wanted to be mothers.

“Well, you’re pregnant.” Palmer tried to laugh through the tension. “Nothing you can do about it now.”

Dillyn could not look either of them in the eyes. “I haven’t decided what I’m going to do.”

Cat knew immediately what Dillyn was referring to, but Palmer seemed a little slow to get it. “What do you mean, *what you’re going to do?*”

Slowly, Dillyn turned to face them. She took a deep breath before responding. “I haven’t decided if I’m going to keep this baby. I’m not far along, and termination is still an option.”

The horrified look on Palmer’s face made Dillyn sick to her stomach. She could only imagine how Ben would feel if she felt this way. It was then that Dillyn knew she would have to make a choice. Ben or the baby. She would not be able to have one without the other.

“You can’t be serious?!”

Dillyn focused on her hands, “It’s my body. My choice.”

“Are you going to stand there and play in my face like that?”

“Palmer, my decision has nothing to do with you.”

“Girl! I just made an appointment with a sperm bank. I want a baby so bad that I’m willing to use a stranger’s sperm to do it! And here you go, taking the gift of life for granted!”

Dillyn was fighting back tears, “You, of all people, should understand why I would never want to have children.”

“C’mon guys,” Cat said, hoping to calm the rising temperature in the room. “Each of your situations is different. There’s nothing for us to do but support one another regardless of how we might feel about it.”

Palmer spoke as if Cat hadn’t said a word, “You’re not the only person who had a fucked-up childhood.”

Dillyn raised her eyes to Palmer’s, “Fucked-up childhood?! Is that what you call it? That’s rich coming from you.”

Palmer didn’t know what Dillyn was talking about. “What does that mean?”

“You had the perfect childhood. The perfect parents. You can’t even imagine the horrors ...” Dillyn’s voice broke, and the tears started to overflow, “Your daddy took you to daddy-daughter dances and shit like that! He didn’t rip your innocence away from you like mine! Mine destroyed me before I could even have my first period! It’s unbelievable that I can even conceive a child. How the hell am I supposed to raise one?” Dillyn’s heart was about to explode. She didn’t need Palmer judging her. Anybody else but not Palmer. Her throat was about to close. She felt like she was suffocating. *I’ve got to get out of here.*

Dillyn rushed out of the kitchen before she had a full-on meltdown and said something she might regret.

## Chapter 22

Dillyn had never fought with Palmer or Cat. Not like that. She worked hard to keep her emotions in check but didn't think she would succeed.

*Focus. Focus on work.* It had always been her saving grace. Instead of replaying their argument over and over again in her head, Dillyn went into her bathroom and splashed some cool water onto her face, hoping to gather her composure. She closed the lid on the toilet, sat down, and hugged herself while taking several deep breaths.

*This is your life and your choice.* She reminded herself. *No one else can make this decision for you, and you don't have to make it now. Take things one step at a time.* She spoke the words softly, and hearing them out loud helped Dillyn to feel a bit more in control. After another minute, she left the bathroom and returned to her computer.

How often had Dillyn used her talents to help her through a tough time? Too many to count, and today was no different. Codes, patterns, and numbers had always been her savings grace. Probably because there wasn't any ambiguity in them. They were what they were.

It didn't take long to find her place and resume from where she'd left off. Dillyn immersed herself in this problem, making everything else fade away. She retraced her earlier footsteps and carefully entered the network of her cyber attacker, making sure to catalog and screen-shot everything along the way. She had no idea what might be useful later.

Dillyn sat up straight as an arrow. “What is this?” It was an encrypted file marked with Steven’s last name—*Havenhurst*. Tentatively, Dillyn clicked on it, and when the folder opened, she almost fell out of her chair. There were a shit ton of photos of both her and Steven from before they met and once they had become a couple. There was a copy of their marriage license, birth certificates, financial records, and even photos of Steven’s mistress!

Her hands shook. *These bastards have chronicled our entire lives in these pictures! Why did they have all this stuff?* Why had they built a dossier on them? Her fingers paused over the keyboard while her mind tried to keep pace with everything she’d seen. Then, a thought struck her.

*What if they found my connection to Syntax?*

Dillyn’s heart was racing. She snapped out of her haze and started typing as quickly as possible. If she was going to figure out who was behind all of this, the smoking gun had to be in these files.

Slowly, she inhaled and then exhaled.

*You’ve got this.* Dillyn quickly skimmed the information in the files. She was familiar with the financial records except for ... *Was that a hidden folder? Who would hide it from themselves?* This shit was getting stranger by the minute.

Dillyn moved her mouse to hover over it. She clicked the file, and it immediately opened. Inside was the name of a bank Dillyn had never seen and an account number. Just as she was about to dig a little deeper, the timer on her watch chimed.

*Has it been five minutes already?* The chimes were the first warning signal that she needed to hurry up. She only had another five minutes to be inside. Getting in and out quickly was the key to not getting caught. Still, Dillyn wondered, *if they had that, what else did they have?*

Dillyn held her breath, hoping they did not find the connection between her and Syntax or anything else that could lead back to it. She made sure to digitally record everything for analysis later. So far, they could only glean information regarding her cover business. They had not found the accounts from her work with Syntax. The bulk of the financial information they had was about Steven. He seemed to be the target. After a quick review, Dillyn didn't see anything that was alarming. However, that didn't mean there wasn't anything.

She just hadn't found it.

Dillyn was about to start exiting the network when she saw another folder titled *Fertility*. She swallowed hard. *Get out. Get out now.* She told herself. *But you might not be able to get back in again. Look at it now.*

Dillyn couldn't help herself and opened it.

Her eyes widened. She felt sick. "How the hell did they get this?!" There were documents chronicling her and Steven's fertility journey. They had their complete medical histories. Dillyn's records looked familiar, but Steven's ... did not.

She squeezed her eyes shut and threw her head back, releasing a guttural howl.



“That bastard!” Hot tears streamed down her face. “How dare he allow me to go through three rounds of in vitro treatments only to get a vasectomy after the first one!” *Why?! What the actual hell?* Dillyn was so confused. If neither of them wanted to have children, why would he let her go through the process? What was his end goal?

“None of this makes any sense.” Dillyn was thrown for a loop, and her head was spinning. She had to get it together, or she would make a mistake. Dillyn had spent more time than she should have to try to make heads or tails of what she’d seen.

“*Goddammit!*” She swiped away angry tears, “I’ve got to get out of here.” If Dillyn stayed much longer, anyone with a basic security system could detect her.

Dillyn wasn’t sure it was possible to become more frustrated than before she got on her computer, but somehow, she had. Discovering another one, Steven’s mind-boggling betrayals and not finding any obvious clues as to why someone attacked her system took that frustration to stratospheric levels.

*Don’t completely lose your shit.*

Dillyn had to remain hopeful that she had gathered enough information to analyze later. Maybe she would find something she had missed.

Five rapid successive high-pitched bells sounded. Her final alarm went off. It notified her to get the hell out of the system just as she came across another file.

Against her better judgment, Dillyn clicked on it. Immediately, she wished she hadn't, as images of her mother and father's mugshots appeared.

*Who would want those?!*

Dillyn's head was pounding. She couldn't handle anything else but managed to catalog it before closing out of the file and exiting the system. Careful not to leave any trace that she had ever been in it.

When Dillyn was finally out, she was emotionally and physically drained. Her mind couldn't process another thing. If being on autopilot had a human face, it would have been Dillyn's. She genuinely felt like she was standing outside her body.

Robotically, she got up and left her workstation, crawled onto her bed, and curled up into a ball, barely blinking or even breathing.

Her life didn't make any sense. It was rapidly falling apart, and she couldn't think of one thing to stop it. At least nothing that wouldn't break her very soul.

## Chapter 23

Ben walked into Dillyn's bedroom and found her lying on her side, curled up in a ball with her hands sandwiched between her thighs. She looked stressed even in her sleep, and after a closer look, Ben could see the dried, tear-stained streaks running down her face.

He wondered what caused them.

Ben swallowed hard. He felt helpless. It was a feeling he was all too familiar, and he hated it. He was careful not to wake her as he sat down on the bed. Gently, he caressed the side of her cheek. Hoping she would feel his strength, which would give her some comfort.

*What am I going to do?* It was the million-dollar question and one that Ben had wrestled with since Selah was abducted. A question he and his brothers were trying to solve for everyone. The problem was they had no idea exactly how to go about it safely when the forces they were dealing with were completely unknown.

Ben and Lucas were cowboys. He'd had some weapons training and experience. Some have even called him a skilled weapon's expert, but he wasn't a trained operative like Wyatt. Lucas had even less experience than him. It felt foreign to have to put his trust in their security team.

How the hell had he found himself in this situation in the first place? Briefly, Ben closed his eyes. *You know how. You were drawn to this beautiful woman and all her vulnerabilities* like a moth to a flame. It was cliché and as old

as time. Ben was in love, but lately, he wasn't so sure how Dillyn felt. If he were honest, Ben was starting to see Dillyn more like a beautiful bird who had clipped her wings. Was he just a rebound? A person to help her get over Steven? Those thoughts lead to a Pandora's box of insecurities.

Did she love Steven? His death was still so fresh. *What would she do once she was healed?* Ben didn't have second thoughts about her. He was sure how he felt, but maybe they had moved too quickly. Ben wanted everything with Dillyn. He could see building a family, but did she want the same?

Lately, they just hadn't been on the same page. At first, Ben could chalk it up to nerves and hormones, but maybe it was more.

Dillyn stirred. Her eyes slowly fluttered open. She stretched as she stared up into his eyes. Ben's heart wanted to explode when a slow smile spread across her face. He was in bad if her smile could make him feel this way.

His voice was gruff, "Hey."

Her voice was still husky from sleep, "Hi."

"Nice nap?"

A swirl of emotions played across Dillyn's face before she masked it. "I don't even remember falling asleep."

"You haven't been resting very much. I need you to start taking better care of yourself."

*Here we go.* "I know." Dillyn couldn't keep the sound of irritation out of her voice. "The baby is depending on me.

"And me too."

Dillyn felt like the biggest ass. After all, Ben had been through, she never wanted to cause him pain. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take my frustrations out on you.”

*Maybe now is the time to talk about the elephant in the room.* Ben hoped Dillyn would trust him enough to share her feelings with him. “Want to talk about what had you crying?”

“Crying?” Dillyn glanced away.

“Yeah,” Ben said softly as he placed the tip of his thumb underneath her chin and gently turned her face toward his. “The tear marks kinda give it away.”

Dillyn released a loud sigh, “Not really.”

Ben couldn’t keep his frustrations at bay this time, “Ya gotta work with me, Dillyn. I’m trying my damndest to be here for you. Why won’t you let me? Talk to me about what’s going on in your head?”

*Because it’s so ugly and disgusting, you wouldn’t look at me the same.* Dillyn wouldn’t utter those words. Instead, she deflected. Dillyn sat up. “Is this really about me or you?”

“What do you mean? Of course, I am worried about *you*. You’ve got a lot on your mind. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that out. And men who love their women care enough to want to fix whatever’s wrong if they can. It’s kinda what we do. We fix shit.”

“Ben, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then explain it to me because I’m not following.”

“You can’t fix me. Only I can do that.” Dillyn’s words trailed off. “And you can’t ...”

“What?”

She whispered, “Nothing.”

“Trying to get you to talk to me is like pulling teeth! I guess I’ll have to go down the possibilities until you spill because you have a terrible poker face.” Ben would start off with simple questions because if he asked about the pregnancy and Dillyn told him she didn’t want their kid, it would gut him. “Were you crying because of something you found in that computer?”

“No. Yes! It’s everything.” Dillyn was about to combust. Her hormones were all over the damn place. She felt out of control and overwhelmed and blurted out her jumbled thoughts. “Palmer and I fought. One of the biggest we’ve ever had. Steven let me go through three rounds of IVF only to get a vasectomy after the first round, and someone has collected more information about me than I even know about myself. None of those things you can fix!” She decided to keep her uncertainty about the pregnancy to herself.

Calmly, Ben sat back against the headboard and rested on it. *How the hell can I kill a dead man* were Ben’s initial thoughts. He sat quietly for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. “Why were you and Palmer fighting?”

There was zero chance of Dillyn telling him that. “We just didn’t see eye to eye on something.”

Cagey. Dillyn was being fuckin’ cagey, and he hated that shit. Ben decided to try to tackle her issues from the easiest to hardest. “Sisters fight. Before the night is over, you two will patch things up.”

Dillyn hadn't wanted to unload on Ben. She was embarrassed for allowing her emotions to rule her. She responded sheepishly as she absentmindedly climbed into the crook of Ben's arms, "I don't know. Maybe." She loved the way he held her. It was the safest place on earth.

"What else did you find in your computer?" He felt her body tense up at the question as he waited for an answer. After what felt like an eternity, Ben prodded her, "Dillyn, whatever is going on doesn't just affect you. It affects all of us."

"I know." She didn't want Ben to blame her for bringing this madness to his doorstep. The sad part was he wouldn't be wrong. Dillyn had to tell him. There was no way to keep it a secret. "It might be easier to show you." Dillyn hopped off the bed and unplugged her laptop before bringing it to him. She booted it up, and after a few minutes, it came to life. "These are some of the files I found."

With each keyboard stroke, Ben's body stiffened. "All of this was in there?"

Dillyn nodded.

Ben was at a loss for words. Until finally, he said the first thing that came to mind, "What the actual fuck?!"

## Chapter 24

Dillyn wasn't surprised to see Syntax's number pop up on the screen of her cell. This time he was calling. Not messaging. That meant whatever Syntax wanted may not have been top-level important, but it was close.

*He couldn't possibly have found out about my hack this quickly. Dillyn was nervous. Actually, he could.*

Ben watched Dillyn closely. He could tell she didn't want to answer her phone and had a suspicion as to why. "It's him isn't it?"

She nodded as her phone rang again.

"I want to talk to him."

Dillyn released a long sigh, "It doesn't work like that."

Ben was fed up with the games, "Make it work like that." If Syntax could help them figure out what the hell was going on, he was the perfect person to speak to.

The phone was on its third ring. Inhaling deeply, Dillyn pressed the accept button on her cell. "I was just about to call."

Syntax was usually a master of keeping emotion out of his voice, but today, his irritation was on full display, "What took you so long to answer?"

Dillyn made an excuse, "I was downstairs and had to run up to my room."

"Hmm ..." Syntax didn't sound as if he was buying her excuse.



*Shit. He doesn't believe me. Maybe he knows what I've been doing?* Syntax would eventually find out, but Dillyn hoped she had more time. Just in case she was wrong, Dillyn didn't plan on outing herself. She would wait for him to tell her what he wanted and then, if necessary, plead her case.

Each passing moment led to more silence and an uneasiness that made Dillyn want to word-vomit everything. She was a hacker, not an Operative. She wasn't built for that level of secrecy and stress. Her job was to be invisible and to find information from digital footprints left behind.

Dillyn watched the time on her phone change, and Syntax still hadn't spit out whatever he wanted to say. *This isn't like him.* This is a man who didn't have any problems reprimanding her over a case. *What is really going on?* Maybe it's not about her late-night hack.

Dillyn stiffened at a thought. Maybe he had some new information about Selah's abduction or Steven's murder. *Was that it?* Dillyn's impatience got the better of her. She glanced at Ben and then decided to prod Syntax a little. "I don't think I ever remember a time where you haven't said exactly what was on your mind. Is this about Selah or Steven?"

He released a heavy sigh, "Neither."

"Oh." What the hell was it then? Dillyn had exhausted all of her *shoulda, woulda, coulda*s. Whatever it was had to be big, which only intensified the dread in the pit of her stomach.

"Are you sitting down?"

Nervously, Dillyn nibbled on her lower lip, "N-n-no."

"You might want to."

Heat rose up the back of her neck and quickly traveled throughout her body as she gripped the phone. Slowly, Dillyn sat down on the edge of her bed.

“What I have to say is . . . personal.”

“Personal?” Her heart started to race. What could it be if it wasn’t about Steven or Selah? What could Syntax have to say to her that was personal? They didn’t *do* personal.

“Okay. I’m sitting.”

It was as if Syntax decided to rip the Band-Aid off the wound as he forced the words out of his mouth. “Your parents were released.”

Dillyn’s face went ashen. She didn’t blink or even dare breathe. Instead, she sat frozen like a statue, sure she had misheard.

Ben immediately noticed the change in her demeanor, and his concern grew by the second. He didn’t plan to remain the innocent bystander for much longer.

Syntax waited for Dillyn to process his words. When she didn’t respond, he wondered if they even registered. “Did you hear me?”

*There. Is. No. Way!*

Dillyn was stunned. She would never have expected to hear that phrase from Syntax. Her mind was moving around like a whirlwind. Her thoughts were everywhere at the same time. It took a second before her mind slowed down enough to string together a coherent thought. When she finally spoke, Dillyn could only utter a single word, “When?” Surprisingly, she sounded much calmer than she felt.

“They were paroled two weeks ago.” Syntax tried to keep the sound of worry out of his voice. He wasn’t successful.

Dillyn was sick. Suddenly, it was difficult to breathe as she clutched her chest. Her breaths came out in short, choppy bursts, and she broke into a cold sweat. She was light-headed and gripped her cell phone so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

“Breathe, Dillyn. Breathe through it.” Syntax tried to coax her through this round of panic. He’d always known that she periodically had them.

Ben had had enough. Angrily, he reached for the phone, but Dillyn raised his hand and mouthed, “I’m okay.”

Ben backed off somewhat.

Dillyn struggled to calm down, but she closed her eyes and began to take several deep breaths. Slowly, she inhaled, allowing her lungs to fill with air before releasing it. It took a few times, but she eventually got it together. *I thought I had more time.*

“Dillyn?” Gently, Syntax prompted.

Dillyn closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her chest. The pain was so intense she thought she might be having a heart attack.

“Give me the phone!” Ben attempted again to take it, but Dillyn waved him away. Her voice was strained, “Ben, please ...” She pleaded. “I’m okay! I’ve got it.”

She wasn’t okay.

Like in years past, when Dillyn was dealing with trauma, she switched into survival mode and was now moving on autopilot. Slowly, she sat up straight while her eyes begged Ben to let her handle this.

Ben felt helpless. He didn't know what to do, but sitting idly by was not the answer.

“How were they granted parole?” Dillyn asked Syntax. “Why wasn't I informed?”

Syntax was surprised to hear Ben's voice in the background. “Ben is there with you?”

“Yes.” Dillyn had never broken protocol. That was a big deal and one he would address later. Dillyn glanced around the room as if looking for her parents. Her cool exterior exploded, “What do you mean you don't know why I wasn't informed? You know everything! Why didn't you know this? *Where are they?*”

There was another long pause.

Almost hysterical, Dillyn asked again. “Where are they?!”

Syntax remained calm. One of them had to be, “I don't know. They're off-grid, but I'm using every resource I have to find them.”

*This can't be happening. This cannot be happening.* Dillyn couldn't sit still any longer. She shot up and began pacing.

*I'm an adult woman. They can't hurt me.*

She stopped in mid-stride as a thought occurred. “My parents are literal nobodies. NOBODIES! Not only did they have sex trafficking on their resume, but they also had murder. How in the hell were they granted parole?” Frustrated beyond belief, Dillyn ran a shaky hand down her face.

“I promise, I’m looking into it.”

It was one of the few times Dillyn found Syntax to be clueless. He didn’t have the answers. “You know what I’m getting at, and you can’t tell me the thought hasn’t occurred to you. And, if it hasn’t, I’d say you’re losing your touch, and we both know better.”

Syntax sighed, “Your parents would have to be completely crazy to come sniffing around you.”

Dillyn pressed her hand against her forehead, “That’s not what I mean, and you know it! This is my *life*!” Ben, his family, Cat, and Palmer flashed before her eyes. “These are the lives of my friends.” Her voice cracked. “I can’t let anything happen to them.”

“You must calm down. You’re pregnant. Don’t allow yourself to get worked up over this. I don’t know where your parents are, but that’s temporary. Now, take a deep breath, calm your nerves, and focus on having a healthy baby. Anything else is not productive. Let me handle this.”

“Are you kidding?” Dillyn glanced heavenward as her eyes filled with tears. “By the grace of God, Selah was rescued, but we don’t know who was behind it. Steven was murdered, and we still don’t know by who or why. Now you tell me my parents are out of prison. Do you realize I’m the

common denominator in all of this? How am I not supposed to worry about my friends or me?”

Ben had heard enough. “Give me the *GODDAMMED* phone!” This time, he refused to take no for an answer.

Dillyn didn’t want to hand it over, but by the look in his eyes, his patience had worn out. Against her better judgment, Dillyn slowly handed her cell over to Ben.

His fury lay just beneath the surface. “I think it’s time we have a little chat.”

Syntax was cool. “I’m listening.”

“We both know this is all connected to Steven and Selah. And from the scant details I can get out of Dillyn, I’ve come to believe there isn’t much that gets past you.”

“Hmm.” Syntax wasn’t going to confirm or deny.

Ben continued, “I will spell it out even if Dillyn won’t. If her parents can get paroled and something like *that* got past you, that means the cast of characters in this shit pond is powerful. We need to meet if I’m going to keep my family safe. Face-to-face. Tell me when and where?”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“You’ll be in touch?”

“Yes.”

Ben hated his responses, but for now, he would have to accept Syntax’s answers. “Make sure you do.” Ben handed Dillyn back her phone.

Tentatively, she accepted it. She knew Syntax would be angry for breaking a cardinal rule. She had allowed Ben into

their inner sanctum. Dillyn would deal with the consequences of that later. For now, she had to focus on the problems right before her. Namely her parents.

“What’s the plan?” She asked Syntax.

“Ben.”

“Excuse me?”

“He won’t allow anyone to hurt you. I can hear it in his voice and see it when he looks at you.”

“What?!” Dillyn looked up and around, “Where? When?”

Syntax responded, “Ben lost everything once. With you, he has a chance to start over. *You* have a chance to start over. Not many people get a do-over. Embrace it, and let me figure this out.”

Was Syntax not going to answer her question? Was he also giving her dating advice? Dillyn was reeling and needed some time to digest this conversation. “Will you at least keep me in the loop?”

“I promise. I will tell you what you need to know.”

*What I need to know?* Dillyn hated that answer but knew Syntax wasn’t prepared to say more.

He disconnected the call.

Dillyn didn’t have to accept that answer. She had developed her own contacts over the course of years. She would do her own digging. No way would she sit idly by while madness ensued around her.

Dillyn fell into Ben's arms, and he held her tight as she replayed her conversation with Syntax. Her boss made an effort to reassure her. Only there was one problem. Dillyn *knew* without a shadow of a doubt that it was only a matter of time before her parents found her. If they hadn't already. It was quite possible she had heard her father's voice at Franks.

Someone had wound them up and sent them her way. Someone was playing a game, and she was either a target or a pawn. The question was, who were all the players, and what was their end goal?

Maybe something she found in those hacked files would provide the answers.



## Chapter 25

Ben didn't have time to process everything he'd learned since he entered Dillyn's bedroom. It would all have to wait until he tended to her emotional needs. For now, he just held her close. Whatever she needed, he would make sure she had it.

He pressed his lips against the top of her head. "It's going to be fine."

Dillyn knew better. Everything wasn't going to be fine. She had to deal with reality and get the hell out of La La land. Good things didn't happen for her. Maybe to other people, but not to her. The sooner she realized that, the better. *Hadn't she always known? Hadn't she only pretended to believe in rainbows? They weren't really real either.* If the last few weeks had shown her anything, it was that she couldn't afford to keep her head stuck in the clouds.

Her words came out softly, almost like a whisper. "It's just a [dispersion](#) of light in water that looks like colors in the sky."

Ben wasn't following. "What? I ... I don't understand."

*Rainbows. There isn't a prize or pot of gold at the end of it.* Dillyn knew Ben was trying to understand what she'd said, but her words weren't meant for him. *Soon ... it will all be clear.* Deep down, Dillyn had always known this moment would come no matter how hard she fought against it. Dillyn took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out.

Ben watched every emotion play across her beautiful face. Physically, she started to wiggle out of his arms, and emotionally, Dillyn was even further away.

*How do I reach her? “Dill ...”*

Everything was crashing down, and no matter what direction Dillyn turned, there stood a huge steaming pile of shit. Ben couldn't save her. She had to face this situation and her demons on her own. It was the only way to keep everyone safe.

Dillyn sat up straight. Her voice was thick with emotion, “I can't do this.”

Instinctively, Ben knew what Dillyn meant but refused to acknowledge it. “Yes, you can. You can do anything. Let's talk it through.” He just needed a little more time to prove her wrong.

Silence stretched out between them. He waited patiently for Dillyn to speak and did his best not to push and allow her to move at her own pace. Only that approach backfired.

She spoke in a strangled whisper, “No, I can't.”

Ben knew what he said next might shape his entire future. He was measured and confident when he responded. “*WE* can do anything.” He would not let the love of his life and the mother of his unborn child slip through his fingers. *Not again.*

Her eyes were brimming with both unshed tears and love. They locked with his. “This isn't about you, Ben, or even us. It's about me. You and I know I'm the common denominator in this confusing web of craziness. Selah was

taken, and someone tampered with Cat's breaks. *I'm* the reason someone is coming after my friends and everyone I love."

"We don't know that."

The look on her face said, *yes, we do*.

Ben forged ahead. "Don't allow your fear of becoming your parents destroy what we're building."

Dillyn hated herself for hurting him. "My parents are coming for me. It doesn't matter who put them up to it or even why. I'm not strong enough to fight them. They've destroyed the best parts of me."

"That's bullshit! You're amazing. You've built an incredible life for yourself. You're surrounded by people who love you." Ben knew he was fighting for his future. He began to rattle off a list of reasons to fight for the life she wanted. "You're strong. You're smart. You're thoughtful and loving." He caressed her face, "You've become my *everything*."

The guilt Dillyn felt for dragging him into her life felt even heavier. A tear rolled down her cheek. Her throat was going to close. She had to say it before it was impossible to speak. "I don't feel strong, or smart, or thoughtful ... I feel hollow."

"I love you."

His sincerity was breaking her heart. "Don't. You can't love me."

"You're wrong. I already do, and contrary to what you may think, I can love you through anything."

Dillyn could no longer hold his gaze and turned away. “Please don’t make this harder than it already is.”

Ben was losing her. How was this even happening? “Dillyn, this is crazy. I know you love me. Trust that we can get through this together.”

Dillyn’s mind was made up. “We can’t be together. It’s the only way I know how to keep everyone safe.”

“You can’t just shut feelings off.”

Ben wasn’t listening. Dillyn had to try another tactic.

She reached for his hand. “I don’t know how to be the best version of me. I can see her but don’t know how to be *her*.” The well of emotions was too hard to overcome, and Dillyn’s tears overflowed. “I’ve been trying so hard to do what I think is right for everyone—for you, our baby, our friends and family but it all feels like that rainbow. It’s an illusion. It’s not real.

People are gunning for me, and I don’t know who or why. I’m outside my body watching everything unfold, and I can’t stop any of it.” Dillyn linked her fingers with his and placed it over her heart, “I won’t ruin your life. I won’t allow what happened to Steven to happen to you.”

“How many times have I told you I’m not Steven!” *This is crazy*. “You don’t want to do this. I can feel your heart beating a mile a minute. I have no idea why you keep bringing up rainbows, but what we have is real. It’s not an illusion.”

“You’re not hearing me.”

“I hear you loud and clear, but what you’re saying is bullshit. It doesn’t make sense. I know you’re scared ...”

Ben understood that Dillyn had a gumbo of issues, but he was only focused on two. Protecting her and keeping their relationship intact. It was a tall order but one he was willing to do anything for. “I’m not ignoring anything. I think we’re stronger together than apart. And for the record, I know you’ll be a good mom.”

Dillyn spoke through tears, “I want to be a good mother, but I don’t have the tools, and I don’t have anything to give.”

He shook his head no. “That’s not true. Please, just trust me.”

“What happens if I stay? I would never forgive myself if something happened to you, Selah, Lucas, Wyatt, Cat, or Palmer.”

“Running away is not going to solve anything.”

“Ben, I’m floating without an anvil. You saw me today, I lost my shit at the mention of my parent’s name. I’m not whole.”

Her words hit him hard. He immediately had flashbacks of Lana and Rylee. Suddenly, he felt sick to his stomach as he recalled Lana saying something similar. *Dillyn is stronger than that ... isn't she?* It made him hear the words she’d spoken differently.

What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to fix this? How could he make sure history didn’t repeat itself? “I’ll be your anchor.”

Dillyn could see the terror all over his face. “Ben, let me be clear. I would never physically harm myself, but I’m not in a place where I’m any good to anyone, including this baby.

She was surprised to feel a strong sense of loss for their unborn child. “I would be passing too much emotional trauma, and this baby deserves so much more than that.”

*Didn't she realize she was already being a good mother?*

Ben wanted to pull Dillyn into his arms and pour all his love into her, but that was what *he* needed. It wasn't what *she* needed. As much as it felt like tearing away a piece of his own body, he was going to have to let Dillyn figure it out ... *alone*.

Mentally, Ben understood that it wasn't him per se, but it was killing him that Dillyn was destroying their future. He made one last-ditch effort. “I won't pretend to agree with you on any of this. You may not trust that I can keep you safe, but until we know more, the ranch is the safest place for you to be. As far as our baby ... if you don't want to be a mother, you don't have to be. Give our child a chance. After he or she is born, give them to me.”

Dillyn wasn't going to argue. She couldn't maintain eye contact. “Ben ...” Her voice broke, “I can't be a mom.”

He was gutted. Angry and hurt couldn't begin to describe it. Dillyn was operating out of fear and making suck ass decisions. He wanted to shake some sense into her because she was throwing everything away. He needed to regroup and a little more time to change her mind. Dillyn wasn't in the right headspace to listen.

Instead of saying something he might regret later, Ben could only nod. “Got it.” For now, there wasn't anything left to say. He stepped away from Dillyn and back toward the bed where he'd placed his Stetson. Stoically, he placed it on top of

his head. “Promise you won’t do anything without talking to me first.”

Dillyn wrapped her arms around her body as she stared at her feet, “Okay.” She hated herself for hurting him but also knew she was doing the right thing.

There would be no goodbye kisses or hugs or making love until the sun came up. It was a bookend to a chapter that started before the messes in her life had been fully resolved. Dillyn placed her hand briefly on his forearm and felt it bunch underneath her touch. Ben was a good man who didn’t love easily. She could only hope he didn’t hate her, but Dillyn had to do what was best for her. Eventually, Ben would realize she was also doing what was best for him.

It hurt too much to look at her. Instead, Ben kept his eyes laser-focused on a picture on the wall. “How are we supposed to manage the sleeping arrangements?”

“The guest rooms on this floor are good. We’ll get them ready.”

He nodded. “That’s it then?”

Dillyn whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Ben turned and walked out of the door. It took everything within him not to bust back inside and shake some sense into her. Instead, he placed his palm against it. He felt helpless, defeated, and heartbroken. Maybe if he’d let Lana go, she and Rylee would be alive.

The stabbing feeling in his chest returned. As much as Ben hated it, he would have to give Dillyn the mental headspace to figure things out. The million-dollar question

was how he would balance that and untangle the mystery behind everything that was going on.



## Chapter 26

Dillyn wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting in her room staring out into space when there was a knock on her door.

She moved like a robot as she got up to answer it.

Palmer was standing on the other side.

Dillyn sighed, "I'm done fighting with you."

"So am I." Palmer lifted a carton of vanilla ice cream and a jar of dill pickles in one hand. "Peace offering?"

Dillyn stepped aside so that Palmer could come inside. "I'm not going to eat that. It's gross."

"Okay." Palmer placed them on Dillyn's day table. "I was an ass to you."

"Yes, you were."

"I'm sorry." Palmer's own eyes started to water. "I just ... I was thinking about me and what I wanted and not you. I said some pretty harsh shit and didn't mean any of it."

"This isn't easy for me either." Dillyn blinked back tears. "I didn't come to this decision lightly. I've been thinking about it for weeks. Trying to do what's best for everyone when I realized I needed to do what was best for me."

"You're right." Palmer held up her hands in surrender. "Only you can make this decision. It was unfair of me to do anything but support you."

“Ben’s going to hate me.” The tears Dillyn had been holding back began to overflow, and Palmer pulled Dillyn into her arms.

“Shh ... it’s going to be okay. No matter what. You’re going to be okay.”

“I love him, Palmer.”

“I know.”

Dillyn sniffed, “I can’t have this baby, and I know that’s a dealbreaker.”

Most likely, but Dillyn didn’t need Palmer to say it. “Have you told him?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“How’d he take it?”

“I broke things off with him.”

“Dillyn ... are you sure?” Palmer had to ask at least one more time.

“I couldn’t see any other way.”

“Are you sure he accepted your decision because he’s here?”

Dillyn pulled back. “I know. They are going to take up the guest rooms.”

“It’s crazy. The whole family moved in. Lucas, Ben, and Wyatt. They are all here.”

Dillyn released a frustrated sigh. “This is going to be awkward.”

Palmer nodded. “A little bit. Should we kick them out?”

“No. I won’t play with anyone’s safety. They are here to keep us safe until this nightmare is over.”

Palmer rubbed her hands up and down Dillyn’s arms. “Okay. I should get back and help Cat get the rooms ready. You need anything?”

Dillyn shook her head. “No. Thanks for asking and Palmer ...”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry too.”

Palmer gave Dillyn a sad little smile before walking out of the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

No sooner had Palmer walked out of Dillyn’s room did her phone chime with a text notification. She walked over to her bed, picked it up, and clicked on the message.

*555-571-3232 - Anonymous: Urgent*

Dillyn didn’t recognize the number. Curious, she opened the text.

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: I know who killed Steven.*

Her stomach dropped. She wondered if this was some kind of sick joke. *What if it wasn’t?* Dillyn’s fingers began to move a mile a minute.

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: Who is this?*

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: I’m a friend. Do you want to know or not?*

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: I need proof you’re not a weirdo.*

Dillyn saw those dreaded three dots as she waited for a response. Several long moments went by without any response. She wasn't sure if they'd stopped communicating, so she sent an additional text.

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: Hello? Are you there?*

She almost ran over to her closet and threw the doors open. "I know it's in here somewhere." Dillyn had used her special device in forever. Until now, she had forgotten she even had it. She bent low and started throwing items out of her closet while searching for them. While looking, Dillyn held her phone in one hand while waiting for a response.

*Where is it?*

When she was about to give up on finding the device and getting a response, Dillyn found the indexed-sized silver box. It was inconspicuous looking. Quickly, she took it back over to her computer. Dillyn wiggled the mouse to bring her monitors to life, then plugged the device into one of the USB ports.

Finally, her phone chimed with a new notification.

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: Click on the attachment.*

Dillyn attached her cell phone into that device, then clicked on a program on the home page of her computer, and it began to run a diagnostic on the call.

Dillyn also did as instructed. She clicked on the attachment, and it opened to a video. She was surprised to see the current New York Attorney General sitting at a desk in what could have been a home office. Across from him sat someone Dillyn didn't recognize.

Her knees got wobbly when she heard them speak Steven's name.

*Attorney General David Swanson: "You were supposed to make it look like a fuckin' accident! You've got Steven's name splashed across every goddamned national newspaper and television platform in the country!"*

*Unknown man: "He's dead. Why does it matter how?"*

*Attorney General David Swanson: "It matters because it looks like he was murdered. Do you know what I had to do to squash that investigation?"*

*Unknown man: "We could have blamed it on the wife."*

*Attorney General David Swanson: "No, we couldn't have. I had to send cleaners to his house and remove all traces that might have led back to me. I had to make it look like he was involved with some shady people."*

*Unknown man: "He was involved with shady people."*

*Attorney General David Swanson: “Yes, he was, and they have deep pockets. Never mind that they are also crazy as fuck. I don’t need those knock-off Opus Dei nuts gunning for me.”*

*Unknown man: “I told you, none of this will blow back on you. We’ve covered your tracks too well.”*

*Attorney General David Swanson: “It better not. If I go down, so do you. What about the wife? What does she know?”*

*Unknown man: “We took care of it. She’s too consumed with finding out he was cheating on her to give a shit.”*

*Attorney General David Swanson: “Isn’t she a forensic IT investigator? That sounds dangerous for us.”*

*Unknown man: “She’s oblivious. Plus, we need her alive a little while longer.”*

*Attorney General David Swanson: “And the mistress?”*

*Unknown man: "She knew too much. Let's say she and Steven can now live happily ever after."*

The video cut off. Dillyn was horrified. Her phone notification went off again.

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: Turn on the news. Right now.*

Dillyn walked over to her television and turned it on.

**BREAKING NEWS: NEW YORK STATE'S  
ATTORNEY GENERAL DAVID SWANSON WAS  
FOUND DEAD IN HIS NEW YORK CITY  
PENTHOUSE APARTMENT.**

"Oh my god!" Dillyn's hands went to her throat. "What the fuck was Steven involved in?" Again, her phone chimed with another phone notification.

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: "You have what the people who were bankrolling Steven want. They are coming for you."*

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: "I don't have anything!"*

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: "Yes, you do. I know what they want, and so does Syntax."*

"Oh shit!" Dillyn almost peed her pants. *Syntax? How would he know? And how did they know about him?*

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: "Who is this?"*

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: "Meet me at the Nashville International Airport in two hours, and I'll give you the information. Come alone. No bodyguards."*

Dillyn checked her computer to see what information she could get from the call.

“Damn.”

Not surprising at all. They had used a burner.



## Chapter 27

Dillyn checked the time on her phone. It would take an hour and a half to get to the airport. That meant she only had thirty minutes to disarm the security system. Otherwise, there would be no way she could sneak without tripping any of the alarms.

She could do it, but her first order of business was to order a car. Because it would take some time for them to reach the orchard, Dillyn needed to get that done immediately and then pray it would arrive in time. Once she took care of that, she set about disabling the alarm system.

It took ten minutes.

The clock was well and truly ticking as the alarm would rearm itself in twenty minutes. Dillyn set the timer on her Fitbit, then shot up from her desk and hurried to the closet. Quickly, she threw on a pair of dark jeans and a sweatshirt, found her most comfortable pair of gym shoes, and put them on. Now ... she only needed her backpack, aka go bag. Next to disarming the alarm, it was one of the most valuable pieces in her crazy scheme, and Dillyn couldn't leave without it.

Having the backpack might be the difference between life and death if her anonymous messenger was more foe than friendly as it hid a locating tracking tag inside of it. The bag also had extra tags that could be hidden inside, like her shoes. Dillyn was already taking a risk but wanted to be ready in case something went sideways. Syntax or someone else would be able to find her.

“Goddammit! Where is it?” Dillyn found everything under the sun but her pack. She pulled many items out of the closet and threw them around the room without a care, leaving clothes and everything else strewn about.

*Finally!* She breathed a huge sigh of relief. There it was, glowing at the very back of the closet like a beacon or the North Star.

Dillyn pulled the backpack out, dusted it off, and threw one of several untraceable cell phones inside of it.

Now that Dillyn had her gear, she just needed to make sure that she looked as inconspicuous as possible. Quickly, Dillyn pulled her hair back into a ponytail and threw on a Chicago White Sox baseball cap.

*I'm ready.*

Dillyn took another quick look around the room, mentally ticking off items on her checklist. She couldn't think of anything else that she might need. Well ... there was one more thing, but it wasn't in her room.

Seven minutes. Dillyn had burned seven minutes, and that brought her total to seventeen. She had thirteen minutes to grab one final item and get the hell across the yard and down the bottom of the ravine where, hopefully, her car would be waiting.

Dillyn had to move fast and prayed Selah wouldn't ask too many questions. Slowly, she opened the door and peeked her head out. Nervously, she bit down on her lip as she looked to the left and then to the right.

Fortunately, the hallway was empty.

Quietly, Dillyn closed her door and began walking toward Selah's bedroom. Dillyn made three quick taps on the door.

She could hear Selah moving around on the other side. Dillyn shifted from foot to foot while waiting for Selah to open the door.

"C'mon. Hurry up," Dillyn whispered to herself.

Dillyn prayed that she didn't get caught. The stress of it all would do her in as she realized she was not cut out for all this cloak-and-dagger stuff.

The door creaked open. Selah looked tired, as if she'd been taking a nap. "Hey, Dillyn."

Dillyn glanced at her Fitbit. She had wasted another two minutes.

"I have a really big favor to ask, and I need you to promise you'll keep it between us."

"Of course." Selah nodded, "What do you need?"

"Can I borrow your gun?"

Selah's eyes widened in surprise. "What?"

"It's a strange request, but I need to borrow it."

"D-d-do you know how to use a 9MM?"

Dillyn had never shot a gun in her life but hoped she wouldn't get on-the-job training. "It can't be too hard. Point and shoot."

Selah started to waffle, "Dillyn, I don't know ..."

"Please! It's important." She begged.

Selah began to rattle off questions, “Why are you dressed like that? Where are you going? Is Ben going with you?”

“I don’t have time to answer now, but I’ll explain later.” Dillyn was getting impatient. “Can I borrow it or not?”

It was clear from the look on Selah’s face that she didn’t want to give Dillyn her gun. “How long are you going to be gone?”

“Just long enough to get to the airport and back.”

“You’re flying out somewhere?”

Dillyn hadn’t meant to drop that bit of information. She told a little white lie. “No. Just picking up a package.”

“Oh. Okay, but you must promise to be careful.” Selah went back to the side table next to her bed to retrieve it.

She hastily returned, “It doesn’t have a safety feature per se, so be very careful.” Selah pulled it out of its case. “However, it’s easy to use. Inhale when you point and exhale when you pull the trigger.”

Dillyn paid close attention to the impromptu lesson. “Got it. I’m sure I won’t have to use it, but it’s better to have some protection as a safety precaution.”

Selah replaced the gun back into its holster and handed it to Dillyn.

Dillyn put the pistol in her pack. The stressed-out look on Selah’s face confirmed to her that she was doing the right thing. Dillyn grabbed Selah and pulled her into a bear-like

hug. “I promise I’ll explain it all when I get back, and hopefully, this entire nightmare will be over.”

Quietly, Selah nodded as she watched Dillyn bolt away from her door.

Dillyn moved as quickly as she could, albeit trying to be stealthy was proving to be more difficult than it seemed in the movies, especially when the floors were so old that it whined and made a terrible creaking noise.

She held her breath as she passed by one of the guest rooms. Dillyn could hear voices inside that sounded like Palmer and Lucas. Dillyn may not have been able to figure things out with Ben, but she hoped they might make things work.

Speaking of Ben, despite being non-religious, Dillyn began to pray. *God, please don’t let me run into this man* as she tiptoed down the stairs. Without incident, Dillyn made it to the main door.

So far, so good. She hadn’t run into anyone.

*Five minutes left.*

Dillyn hoisted her pack onto her back and ran out the door and across the yard. For a second, she had to hide behind a tree to avoid being seen by security.

Her heart was pounding. *Please let the car be down the ravine.* If she could get to it in time and drive away, by the time the security system went back live, it would not have captured her getting inside of it.

Dillyn waited one extra minute for the team to become preoccupied with a text message she had sent them. When

their heads bent low to read it, that was her signal to run, and run she did. Dillyn ran as fast as her legs could carry her.

She could see the lights of the Uber. *Thank God!* Breathing heavily, she opened the door and got inside.

The driver smiled. “You’re Dillyn Anderson, right?”

“Yes, I am.

“You’re going to Nashville International Airport?”

Again, Dillyn confirmed. “I’ll give you a hundred-dollar tip if you can get me there inside of an hour.”

The young man turned around with a twinkle in his eyes. “No problem. I can make that happen.”

## Chapter 28

*How the hell did I end up here?* Ben glanced around the guest bedroom, feeling dazed and confused. It was clean but dated, and the wallpaper was so old it was faded. This was where Ben was supposed to sleep while Dillyn was just down the hall.

*No fuckin' way!*

He had no idea how they arrived at the place of breaking up or how Dillyn decided she wasn't ready to be a mom.

Had she really just snatched his heart out of his chest and stomped on it? Was Dillyn literally throwing away their happiness because she was too afraid to grab hold of it? The more Ben thought about it, the more absurd the situation seemed. Pissed, Ben decided to give Dillyn twenty-four hours to work through her shit because there was no chance he would let go of their relationship. And Ben, for damn sure, wasn't letting go of their child.

Wyatt could be heard calling out to Ben before aggressively knocking on Dillyn's door. Wyatt had no idea that he was now sleeping in a guest room.

Wyatt continued to bang on it. "Ben! We've got a big ass problem."

Palmer and Lucas came out of her room. Both looked concerned. Palmer asked nervously, "What now?"

Lucas nodded.

Cat came out of her room too. "Is everything okay?"

Ben wasn't sure he could deal with anything else. Still, he got out of the chair he'd been sitting in and quickly entered the hallway. "What's up?"

Wyatt turned around and, for a split second, wondered why Ben was coming out of that room. However, it wasn't important enough to ask. They had bigger issues to deal with. He figured he'd answer everyone's question at the same time. "I got a call from one of my contacts."

Irritated, Ben was short. He didn't want to play guessing games, "About what?"

"Did you know that Dillyn's father and mother have been released from prison?"

Palmer's hand went to her throat.

Cat was equally shocked. "Weren't they supposed to be in prison for quite a few more years?"

Wyatt nodded. "Yeah."

Ben wasn't surprised. Dillyn had told him earlier. He rubbed the growing stubble on the bottom of his chin, "yeah, I just found out. I didn't have a chance to tell you."

"Given the severity of their crimes, they've been denied parole the past couple of times they went before the board. Melvin wasn't up again for another two years."

Palmer asked, "So, how did he get out?"

Wyatt continued to explain, "A man by the name of Carlyle Hastings pulled some strings."

This time, Lucas asked, "Who is that?"



“My source said he was a low-level paid shill for some powerful people.”

Ben was confused, “What would he have that they would pull strings to get him released? To my understanding, Melvin wasn’t a big-time crime boss. He wasn’t even big-time in the city of New York.”

Wyatt nodded, “No, he wasn’t. He worked for shady people and mostly followed orders. Men like him should never see the outside of a prison cell.”

Ben agreed, “Or, a grave.”

Wyatt didn’t want to drop this last bit of information on him but had no choice. “They don’t want Melvin. They want Dillyn. He’s the key to get to her.”

As much as Ben hated to admit it, Wyatt was right, “I know.”

Wyatt was matter of fact. “I need to talk to her.”

Ben shook his head no. “She not in any shape to have this conversation tonight.”

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that you two are fighting, but this is bigger than any disagreement you might have. We’re trying to save lives.”

Ben snapped, “I know that!”

Wyatt dropped another bomb, “One of the men in the video was ID’d. He was also seen at Frank’s grand re-opening with Melvin.”

Ben’s head snapped up. “What? He’s here. In Summer?”

“Yeah. My guess is he’s one of the men we haven’t been able to identify. He fits the physical description. You gotta know, at some point, he will try to make contact.”

Ben would move heaven and earth to keep Melvin from getting anywhere near Dillyn. All these years later, the mere thought of him gave her panic attacks, “Wyatt ... we’re missing something. Think about it. If Melvin is looking for Dillyn because she has something someone wants, then who tampered with the cars? That would mean someone else wants her silenced.”

Wyatt was hoping Ben didn’t come to the same conclusion he had already come to. He glanced around at all the anxious faces waiting for him to respond, “I know. We’re dealing with two competing interests.”

Ben and Wyatt turned at the loud commotion coming up the stairs. It was Mike and a couple of men from his team.

There weren’t any niceties exchanged. Mike got to the point. “We’ve had another security breach.”

Ben was close to losing it. “You’re supposed to be the best!”

“This one came from inside the house,” Mike said.

Ben and Wyatt exchanged a confused glance.

“Security was down for approximately thirty minutes.”

Ben didn’t wait for Mike to finish. He knew who could take it down if the breach came from inside the house. He didn’t waste a second before bursting into Dillyn’s bedroom, finding it completely empty.

“*Dammit!* She hacked it!” This day couldn’t get any worse. “Search the house from top to bottom.”

“She’s not here.”

Everyone turned around at the sound of Selah’s voice.

Selah repeated herself. “Dillyn’s not here.” She looked nervous. “I should have said something earlier after she came to my room.”

“What are you talking about?” Ben asked.

Selah’s eyes were wide with fear, “Dillyn was dressed to leave when she asked to borrow my gun.”

“Your gun!” Ben yelled. “And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“I-I didn’t know what to do. I’m sorry!”

Ben hadn’t meant to lash out at Selah. “It’s not your fault.”

Calmly, Wyatt asked, “Did she say where she was going?”

“No.” Selah thought about it for a second and then remembered something Dillyn said. “Wait. Dillyn said she would only be gone long enough to get to the airport and back. She said she had to pick up a package.”

Ben asked, “How long has she been gone?”

“Maybe thirty minutes?” Selah answered.

“She has a thirty-minute head-start,” Lucas spoke his thoughts out loud. “Let’s get moving.”

Mike didn’t miss a beat. “I’ll grab a couple of my men.”

Wyatt nodded. "I'll have my contacts circulate her picture to airport security and Homeland Security."

"Lucas, we need you here," Ben said. "If someone were going to make a move against this house, with us being gone, it would be the perfect opportunity."

Mike agreed. "I have my best men guarding the house."

Ben was pissed and was quickly losing faith. He snapped, "Your best men were guarding the house when Dillyn left."

He stalked to his bedroom to retrieve his weapons. "Give me five minutes, and I'll meet y'all at the door."

## Chapter 29

Dillyn arrived at the airport in just under an hour. As soon as she exited the car, she texted her anonymous messenger.

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: “I’m here.”*

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: “Alone?”*

She was starting to have second thoughts about being alone, but it was too late now.

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: “Yes.”*

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: “Good. Go stand by United Flights baggage claim number 5.”*

Dillyn didn’t waste any time making her way to baggage claim number 5. Again, when she arrived, she texted.

*312-719-0036 – Dillyn: “Here.”*

*555-571-3232 – Anonymous: “Now make your way over to the lockers to your right.”*

It wasn’t the most well-lit area in the place. It was close to the exits; however, it was still fairly public. Tentatively, Dillyn walked towards the lockers while checking over both shoulders. Once she arrived, Dillyn understood why someone would want to meet there. It gave the illusion of being a public place while in actuality, it was most likely an airport blind spot. There weren’t any cameras in the area that she could see, and it was much more private than it looked.

“Hello, Dill.”

The vein at the base of Dillyn's throat pulsed like crazy. It would have been visible to anyone standing within a few feet. On the fear scale of one to ten, Dillyn was a thousand. Her heart rate accelerated to dangerous levels as goosebumps broke out all over her body.

*Impossible.* Her mouth moved, but words didn't come out. Dillyn was light-headed and suddenly felt like everything in her stomach would come up.

"I can see you're shocked to see me." A grin spread across his face, "Understandable since it's been a while."

It took a moment for her brain to realize she didn't imagine him. Melvin Anderson was real. He was not a figment of her imagination, and his indecent leer brought it all home.

Melvin undressed Dillyn with his eyes as he looked her up and down, "Been watching you for the past couple of weeks, but seeing you up close is a whole other ballgame. You turned out to be one hot piece of ass."

*You are a disgusting pig! Prison was too good for you!* Dillyn found her voice. She croaked out the words that were burning inside her, "How are you here? Why are you here?"

"I got out early for good behavior, thanks to you."

"Me?" Dillyn didn't understand.

"Yes, you. Apparently, you have friends, if you want to call them that, in high places."

There wasn't anyone Dillyn knew who would have helped her father get out of prison. It would have been quite the opposite. Dillyn's feet were still rooted to the floor. The

only thing she could move was her mouth. However, her brain was slowly catching up, “You should still be serving time.”

The darkness that surrounded Melvin when Dillyn was a child was still present. Maybe even more so. She imagined it was hard to bury that kind of evil, “how did you get out?”

“You have something they want, and in exchange for my freedom, I told them I could get it. So here I am. You sound unhappy that your father is no longer rotting in prison.”

*Father. You must be kidding me.* Dillyn didn't say what was on her mind. She couldn't, not when part of her still felt like that terrified little girl who didn't want to provoke him. Dillyn had to remind herself that she wasn't that child! She was a grown-ass woman. Dillyn forced herself to ask the obvious question, “What do you want? I told you in my texts that I have nothing to give.”

“I'm telling you that's not true. You might not know it, but you do.”

Murderous rage bubbled to the surface surprising even her. Dillyn spoke through clenched teeth, “You took everything I had including my innocence! I have nothing left to take or give!”

“I took everything?” His eyes smoldered with anger. It was clear that he was doing everything in his power to keep it at bay, “I took everything!? It was your testimony that sent me to prison!”

“It was your actions that sent you to prison! I was a kid!”

“Lower, your goddamned voice. You’re going to get us both killed!”

Dillyn was confused. “What?”

“Do you think the people who need that information sent me here alone? At this very moment, they are around and watching. So if you want to stay alive and get back to your lil cowboy, you better go along with the plan.”

For some strange reason, Dillyn believed him. Someone who had power had to arrange Melvin’s release. Nervously, Dillyn glanced about, wondering if any of the people milling about were part of Melvin’s crew. “Then, you’re going to get us both killed because I already told you I don’t have anything. And even if I did, I would never give it to you. So, if I’m the reason you’re in Summer, you might as well leave.”

Melvin stepped into Dillyn’s personal space. She tried to back up a step not realizing how close she was to the lockers and smacked right into them.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and wrapped it around his fist and yanked her close. Dillyn could smell the rank odor of his breath every time he blew out a breath.

In the past, Melvin had allowed men to violate her, but he never had. This time she wasn’t so sure he wouldn’t. Dillyn wasn’t going to take any chances. Subtly, she pressed the secret distress button.

He spoke in hushed tones, “You have quite a few assets worth a lot and I plan to collect.”



## Chapter 30

“Let her go.”

Dillyn didn't recognize that voice. Immediately, her head snapped toward the sound to see who spoke in such hushed tones but with so much authority. It was impossible to get a clear view because Melvin stood in the way.

His eyes filled with hatred. There was an unspoken battle brewing between the two of them. Dillyn had no idea who would win or what Melvin would do. After several intense moments, Melvin released her and stepped back.

Dillyn breathed a huge sigh of relief. With Melvin off to her side, she now had a clearer view of the person who ordered him to let her go. He wasn't very tall or muscular. One might even say he was unassuming until she got a good look at his dark brown eyes, sizing her up behind wire-rimmed glasses. Those eyes were calculating. One might even say cunning. Dillyn didn't know what to make of him.

*Is he a friend or foe?* She wasn't sure.

He stepped a little closer. “Ms. Anderson, I've been waiting a long time to meet you.”

Dillyn gripped her backpack tightly. “I-I don't know who you are or why you want to meet me.”

A corner of his thin lips lifted. “I told you I have some information you want, and you certainly have something I need.”

Dillyn shook her head. “I don’t. I honestly have no idea what Steven was into.”

He laughed. “Steven had his hands in a lot of shit, and ultimately he got what he deserved.”

“So, you just had him killed? And the Attorney General? Whatever they were into, neither deserved to die!”

His eyes narrowed as he loosely clasped his hands together, “You think I had something to do with that?”

Dillyn was confused. “I don’t even know who you all are. But, if not you? Who?”

“I thought you would have figured it out by now. It wasn’t me or the people I work for.”

“Please stop talking in riddles and tell me what you want.”

“Turns out you are more valuable than we ever imagined.”

Dillyn wracked her brain. “I own an orchard. I help corporations investigate former colleagues for corporate espionage. I live a simple life. I have nothing of value. Everything Steven had of value is gone.”

Melvin laughed. “You sound like a broken record.”

Her father had been so quiet that Dillyn had almost forgotten he was around. She turned her head to take a really good look at him. Melvin was like the boogie man for as long as she could remember. The thought of him would make her stomach turn. However, today, he just looked like an old man who was weak and pathetic.

Dillyn returned her gaze back to the stranger, “You sent those messages to me.” She realized Melvin didn’t have the sense God gave a chicken. There was no way he would have sent them.

“Yes, I did.”

Dillyn responded, “I didn’t figure out whatever game is being played. So make it plain. Tell me why Steven was killed, and what do you want from me?”

He seemed to be mulling over her words until he finally spoke. “Everything is not what it seems. Steven was killed to get closer to you. You *are* the key.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. I’m the key? To what?”

“Who is Syntax?”

Dillyn went pale. “Syntax is a myth. He doesn’t exist.”

“He’s not a myth, and you know it.”

“No. I don’t.” Ben had told her that she had a terrible poker face. This situation called for her to play the role of her life. “Are you seriously telling me that I’m standing here because you want to know the identity of a hacker who could be anyone or even a group of people or no one?”

Melvin angrily interjected, releasing spittle as he spoke, “He exists!”

Dillyn snapped. “How would you know?! This is stupid.”

The man handed her a manilla folder, “Maybe I need to give you a show of good faith.”

Tentatively, Dillyn accepted it.

“Open it.” He demanded.

Dillyn did as she was told and pulled out the contents. Her eyes widened in shock as she read the first page of documents. She couldn't believe what was staring her in the face. “Are you trying to tell me Steven arranged Melvin's parole?”

“Yes. He somehow figured it out. That's why he was killed.”

Dillyn glanced up. “This isn't true.”

“Isn't it?”

“No! It's not. Why would he? There's nothing to figure out!”

“Steven was a foreign asset.” He sighed as if Dillyn had disappointed him. “His assignment was to get to know you. Meeting you in college was not an accident. His job was to find out who the man behind the myth was. Somewhere down the line, he wanted out and decided to go rogue. That's right around the time Steven had the vasectomy.”

Dillyn thought she might want to throw up as she listened to a stranger tell her more truth about her life than even she knew.

“He got involved with the wrong people and thought they could protect him. A person would need lots of money to disappear, so he began embezzling millions from his law firm. Those people didn't kill Steven, he was killed because he didn't finish the assignment. I'm here to finish it.”

Dillyn's mind was buzzing. He had to be lying. Only Syntax would benefit from keeping his identity hidden. *There*

*was no way Syntax would do that.*

“Foreign asset?” Dillyn whispered mostly to herself. “Even if everything you said was true, Steven never shared anything with me. *I’m an IT forensic specialist, not a mind reader.* He never left any clues supporting anything you’ve just said.”

“The people who kidnapped Selah are the same people who want information on Syntax.”

Dillyn froze, “You know who they are?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me. Please!”

Just as he was about to open his mouth, Dillyn felt a splash of warm liquid hit her in the face. She glanced down onto the white floor to see droplets of red liquid surround her. Her eyes and her brain were not in sync. Her mind was slow to process that Melvin and the man just about to reveal who kidnapped Saleh crumpled to the ground, with bullet holes in the head and chest and blood pooling around them.

Before Dillyn could release the scream caught in her throat, she felt something warm and fast wiz past her ear. Someone was shooting at her! Before she could run, Dillyn was tackled to the ground.

She would have to fight for her life just as a hail of gunfire erupted.

Ben growled into her ear. “It’s me. Stay down until we get the all-clear signal.”

“Ben?” At the sound of his voice, Dillyn immediately stilled. The relief she felt was indescribable.

He had never been so scared in his life. Actually, he had. To see her covered in blood almost sent him over the edge. “Are you hurt?”

Dillyn shook her head.

Quickly, Ben pulled Dillyn into his arms and slid her across the floor as he crawled into a corner. He was frantic as he checked her body for wounds, “Were you shot?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

Another person joined them.

Ben aimed his gun at the stranger’s head.

Instantly, Dillyn recognized him and placed her hands on Ben’s arm so that he could lower his weapon. “No! He’s okay.”

“Who the fuck is this?!” Ben whisper-yelled.

His dark brown eyes sparkled as if he was enjoying the melee, “Nice to meet you finally.”

“What?” Ben was confused.

As the sound of bullets flying eased, Dillyn performed the introductions, “Ben, this is Syntax, Syntax, this is Ben.”

## Chapter 31

“What are you doing here?” Dillyn fired off her questions to Syntax. “How did you know I was here?”

“Ben demanded a meeting.” He glanced at Ben’s icy eyes. “I was already en route when I got the emergency alert from your watch. I tracked your movements.”

Almost as suddenly as the sound of automatic rifles raining down bullets had begun, mere seconds later, it was over, and the airport was quiet. Still crouching low, Syntax spoke quietly, “We don’t have much time.” Holding his semi-automatic, he glanced around before explaining, “Steven is why your mother and father were released.”

Dillyn nodded, “I know. They told me. Do you know why?”

“I don’t.”

Ben studied Syntax’s body language. There weren’t any telltales, but he didn’t believe Syntax for a second. Ben had a feeling that he was the reason for all the bullshit that was happening around them. Ben couldn’t hide his skepticism, “Are you sure about that?”

Dillyn glanced between Ben and her mentor. It was clear Syntax didn’t like being challenged, and she didn’t blame Ben one bit for not trusting anyone. Still, she wanted to diffuse any negativity before it escalated and redirected the conversation. “I just met that man lying next to Melvin. So,

it's hard to tell if he was a friend or foe. He was just about to tell me something important when he was killed.”

“Do you think any man connected to Melvin could be your friend?” Syntax scoffed.

Dillyn couldn't disagree with that assessment. While she didn't think he was a friend, was he really a foe? Dillyn remembered the words he'd said about Syntax. They echoed inside her mind. *He knows what they want.* For the first time in Dillyn's life, she wondered if Syntax was telling her the whole truth.

“Quickly, tell me exactly what he said?”

Dillyn did as Syntax asked. She told him everything she could remember.

Syntax listened intently, “Did he give you anything?”

Dillyn realized she was still gripping the manilla folder in one hand and the now bloody dossier about Steven in the other. “Yes, he gave me this.” She handed it all over to Syntax.

He scanned the contents. Then, slowly, he raised his eyes to meet Dillyn's accusatory stare.

“Is all of that true?”

Syntax ran a frustrated hand across his chin, “Yes. I didn't want to tell you until we neutralized the people Steven worked for.”

Ben chimed in, “His murderers?”

“Yes, but rest assured, they are no longer a problem. The threat has been neutralized.”



None of this was making sense. There were too many missing pieces to this puzzle. Something else was bothering him. Finally, Ben asked, “If the threat was neutralized, who shot them? They weren’t working for the same people as Steven.”

Dillyn wondered the same thing.

Syntax, “There were multiple interests here tonight. Let’s say two of them have been removed. Ours remain standing and on the ready if necessary.”

“So, it’s over? I can go back to living my life?” Dillyn asked.

Syntax responded, “Every threat has been put down. No more looking over your shoulder. It’s finished.”

Dillyn wasn’t convinced. “Are you sure?”

He gently touched her shoulder, “I promised all those years ago to take care of you. So far, I’ve kept my word. I will always watch over you and keep you safe. Only now ...”  
Syntax turned serious eyes onto Ben, “I hope to have some help.”

Ben looked him straight in the eyes, “I’ll give my life to protect Dillyn.”

She swallowed hard. Her heart was about to explode. Ben had already proved his words true. Every man in her life had let her down, except for the two men before her. Dillyn could see the truth in both their faces. She was ashamed that she doubted Syntax and even more so that she’d almost thrown away real love with Ben.

Dillyn threw her arms around Syntax's neck. "Thank you for keeping Ben and my friends safe."

Ran appeared out of nowhere. "Sir, we've got to get moving. The authorities will be here in less than two and a half minutes."

Wyatt rounded the corner with his weapon locked, loaded, and ready to take care of business. The second Ran saw him, he aimed his weapon at his head.

Wyatt and Ran were in an intense face-off.

"Whoa ...whoa ...whoa." Ben held up his hands to stop them. "These are friendlies."

Slowly, Wyatt and Ran lowered their weapons. Wyatt made eye contact with Ben and then Syntax. For a second, he was confused as recognition hit him square in the gut, "Supreme Leader Evans?"

"At ease, soldier." He responded.

*Supreme Leader Evans?* Dillyn didn't know Syntax's legal name nor title, but apparently Wyatt did.

Anxiously, Ran glanced over his shoulder, "one minute," he said to Syntax.

Syntax stood. Ben stood as well while gently pulling Dillyn up, keeping her close to the inside of his body.

Syntax extended his hand. "Til we meet again, take good care of her. Dillyn's a rare find."

Ben took his hand and shook it. "I know, and I will."

Finally, Syntax turned his attention to Dillyn. "I approve. Don't self-sabotage."

Dillyn gave him a shaky smile. "I won't."

Syntax directed, "Now, go. Get out of here."

Wyatt spoke up. "We can't just leave. There are dead bodies everywhere. The cops are going to want a word."

Syntax smiled. "Our cleaners are already doing what they do. It's handled. There won't be any trace of you or your security team. Get our girl home."

And just like that ... Syntax and Ran turned and left the scene.

"Well, you heard him." Wyatt responded, "If Evans said get the hell out, we need to do just that! Fill me in on what happened on the way home."

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It was late by the time they pulled up to the house. Dillyn had fallen asleep in the truck's back seat while leaning on Ben's shoulder. He'd never wanted to kiss and kill someone so much in his life. She'd aged him at least a decade.

Dillyn's eyes popped open when their car stopped. Every part of her body was stiff, and she didn't want to move.

The porch light popped on. The door to the house opened, and suddenly, the whole gang was standing outside on the porch.

Ben helped Dillyn out of the car. Palmer, Cat, and Selah almost died when they saw her face covered in blood. The horror on their faces couldn't be contained. They immediately bounded down the steps to make sure Dillyn was okay.

As they performed a thorough inspection, they fired off a million questions.

Dillyn held up her hands as if to ward them off. “Guys, I’m fine. I promise. I’m just tired.” She stifled a yawn, “Can I explain in the morning?”

Begrudgingly, Selah and her besties let Dillyn give them a thorough retelling after a hot shower and a good night’s rest.

Dillyn’s eyes softened as she looked at Ben, “Thank you,” she gave him a small smile before turning and walking inside the house.

He watched her go. Selah followed closely behind.

Palmer and Cat started to head inside too, when Lucas touched Palmer’s elbow. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Cat winked at Lucas and continued inside.

Lucas leaned down and spoke into her. His words for her only. “I hope you stop running from me after tonight, but if you don’t, I won’t give up the chase.”

Palmer seemed to ponder his words. After a moment, she stood on tiptoe and gently pressed her lips against Lucas’s cheek. “Tomorrow is another day. Let’s see how we feel in the morning.”

The grin on his face spread from ear to ear. Lucas felt like levitating as he watched Palmer walk into the house.

Wyatt and Ben closed ranks around him.

Wyatt spoke first. “Score one for Lucas.”

Lucas bit his lower lip as he stared after Palmer long after she’d gone inside the house, “Damn straight. It’s just a

matter of time.”

Wyatt turned serious. “Not to bring down the energy, but what was Supreme Leader Evans doing at the airport?”

Ben had no idea who that was.

Wyatt could read in Ben’s face that he was clueless. “I’ve never met him personally, but the man is the biggest Psy-Ops contractor on the planet.”

Lucas shrugged. “That doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Wyatt continued to explain, “When the world goes to shit, world leaders answer to him.”

Ben responded, “You’re bullshitting. Like the President?”

Wyatt reaffirmed, “No, I’m not, and yes, even the President.”

Ben spoke quietly and out of earshot of security. “I don’t think Dillyn knows him as Supreme Leader Evans.”

Wyatt asked the obvious question, “Who is he to her?”

“Her handler.”

Lucas and Wyatt both spoke at the same time, “What?!”

Ben continued to fill in the blanks, “She knows him as Syntax.”

It all clicked for Wyatt. “That’s why I couldn’t find anything out about that man. Dillyn must be pretty high up the chain if she has a relationship with him.”

Ben had doubts, “Maybe. Not sure. I’ll ask her tomorrow.”

“If Evans said the threats are over,” Wyatt spoke, “That means we’re in the clear.”

Again, his gut told him that they were missing something. Not all of his questions to Syntax were answered satisfactorily. “Something tells me that’s not true.”

Lucas was thoughtful, “How much longer do you think we’ll need to stay here before we know we’re all good?”

Ben shrugged, “As long as it takes.” He placed a heavy hand on each of his brother’s shoulders. “In the meantime, I suggest y’all use this time wisely.”

Mike walked up to them. “It appears all is clear, and security is fully online.”

Ben had lost faith in Mike, but that was another conversation for tomorrow with his brothers. He didn’t even look at him, but his tone gave away the ballgame, “make sure it stays that way. I’m going to bed.”

Wyatt and Lucas could understand why Ben was so gruff. Dillyn was in real danger, and only by the grace of God was she wasn’t hurt.

Lucas was beyond tired too. “I’m a cowboy. I ain’t no military dude. I’ve had enough of this cloak-and-dagger shit. And now I have to go to bed when my woman is right across the hall. It’s going to be a long ass night.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck and smiled as he walked up the porch steps. “Like I said, use this time wisely.”

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Ben didn't even knock when he entered Dillyn's bedroom. She was nestled underneath the covers as he took off his clothes.

She sighed, "I was wondering what was taking you so long."

"Had to make sure everything was all settled."

Dillyn flipped over onto her side. She spoke softly, "I'm sorry ... for everything."

The bed dipped as he got into it, "I know. But if you run around half-cocked like that again, I promise I'll strangle you myself." Ben reached for her, and Dillyn went willingly into his arms. It felt good to hold her. He was scared out of his mind that he wouldn't ever get the chance again.

Dillyn rested her cheek on his chest. She whispered into the darkness, "I slayed a demon tonight."

Ben ran his hand up and down her bare arm, "Yeah?"

"Yeah. His name was Melvin Anderson."

Dillyn raised up on her elbow and looked Ben in the eyes. "I am *not* my parents."

"No, you're not."

"Now I know it too." Her head tilted slightly, "You want to know what I was thinking when everything went crazy?"

"What? That you will never ever sneak out and put your life in danger again?" Ben was only half-joking.

"That *did* cross my mind, but it wasn't the first thing."

Ben sighed. "Then what?"

“I saw our child. It hit me so hard.” Dillyn stood up on her knees. “Ben, I want a life with you, and I want our *baby*.”

His throat was thick. He wasn't sure he could speak. Being choked up was an understatement. However, he forced out a few words, “Are you sure?”

Dillyn nodded, “I don't think I've ever been surer of anything. Well, maybe one other thing.”

Ben held her eyes captive, “What's that?”

Dillyn had never looked more vulnerable, “You. I love you, Benjamin Cash.”

Ben reached up and pulled Dillyn to him, crushing his lips against hers and pouring his entire soul into the one kiss.

He pulled back slightly from fear he might hurt her, “I don't think I'll ever get enough of kissing you.”

Dillyn's eyes were glassy, “I hope you never do.”

Caressing his face with her hand, Dillyn whispered, “Me and you, we're not just a team, we're family.”

Ben felt he could take on the world and win. He pulled her close and kissed her again, this time with a need that was both powerful and hungry. It almost felt desperate. Maybe it was given Ben could have lost Dillyn tonight.

He feasted on the sweetness that was unique to her and her alone before kissing a scorching hot trail down the side of her neck. He attempted to exercise some measure of control and stopped himself. Before Ben went any further, he needed to know Dillyn was okay.

“Are you too tired or hurt?”



Dillyn was breathless, “No. Please don’t stop. I need you. I need to feel *connected* in all the ways that matter.”

Ben felt the same and was determined to grant her wish. The heat in her eyes matched his. Once Ben knew that Dillyn needed him as much as he needed her, he wasted no time recapturing her lips in another scorching hot kiss.

He took his time before moving lower and planting feathery light kisses down the length of her body. Giving special care to her stomach. He brushed his lips tenderly against the life they created together before continuing his descent.

Dillyn’s arousal was so sexy. It was driving Ben crazy. He lingered at her pussy for just a moment before cradling her ass with his hands, squeezing it, and pulling her body closer to his lips.

Ben moaned, “I can’t wait to taste you.”

The moment the heat from his mouth touched her, Dillyn arched into him, and her eyes fluttered closed.

She gripped handfuls of his hair as the heels of her feet dug into the mattress. “Pleassssse.”

Her eyes were shut tight, but Ben could see the need all over her face. He took pride in knowing that he put that passionate look there. It was impossible to describe this level of possessiveness. Dillyn was his. Forever and always.

She had been anxious for his touch, and Ben didn’t disappoint. He buried his mouth against her sex, taking a good long lick and parting her folds before completely devouring her.

Dillyn squealed and opened her legs wider, “Oh, God!”

“Mmm. Delicious.” He stroked her with good long licks going back and forth and up and down until Dillyn couldn’t stand it. Just when she was at the edge of sanity, Ben quickened the pace and then sucked her clit, twirling his tongue around it.

Dillyn felt the beginning tremors of what she knew would be an explosive release. The first of what she suspected would be many on this night. Being close to death made her feel and want more of everything, and the way Ben was greedily devouring her, she assumed it was the same for him.

He was working his magic.

Dillyn started shaking as the tempo increased. She pulled her knees up, sandwiching his head between her thighs while rocking her hips into him. Her release was building. Ben knew her body well at this point. He was focused on loving her until she couldn’t breathe.

Dillyn was so close.

One more stroke. One last lick, and she exploded. Her body splintering into a million pieces.

It was Ben’s turn. He was needy and wasted no time climbing up her body and positioning himself at her entrance. He guided his cock into her opening and surged inside.

*Damn, he was home.* Her body welcomed him. She coated him with heat and moisture. Dillyn’s vaginal walls contracted around and gripped him so tight Ben’s eyes rolled back into his head.

Dillyn moaned, “Yes! God, yes!” as she dug her nails into his shoulders.

Ben drove into her over and over again, completely losing control, and Dillyn matched him stroke for every powerful stroke.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and tilted her hips so that he could get a deeper penetration, and deeper he went.

Ben captured Dillyn’s mouth in a searing, hot kiss. Their tongues moved in almost perfect rhythm as he pummeled into her, giving Dillyn everything he had to give and more.

It wasn’t long before he felt his own releasing building.

Ben buried his head into the side of Dillyn’s neck, willing himself not to cum before she did. His baby didn’t disappoint. She exploded all over him, and moments later, so did he.

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The house was dark and quiet when Wyatt finally descended the stairs to his bedroom. He was still buzzing with energy. Just as he was about to open the door and go inside, he could hear the whine of another door opening.

Wyatt turned.

Cat leaned against her doorframe wearing a sheer, barely there teddy, “I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to come upstairs, cowboy.”

Her sexy little smile was everything. Wyatt wasn’t sure if he hadn’t actually fallen asleep and was dreaming. If so, he

did not want to wake up. Wyatt returned Cat's smile with one of his own. "Why? Was there something you wanted to say to me?"

Coyly, Cat lifted a shoulder. "Depends."

Wyatt moved a little closer. "On what?"

She reached a handout and placed the tip of her long fingernail at the base of his neck, dragging it down the length of his chest, "Depends on what you want to do with *and* to me. If the answer is nothing ..." Cat moved as if she was going to turn around and go back into her room. "I'll just go back to slee—"

Wyatt didn't let Cat finish speaking before grabbing her waist and pulling her back into his chest. His voice was husky when he placed his lips inside the curve of her neck, "Think I can be pretty creative in the things I can do with *and* to you."

Cat didn't doubt it for a second, especially if just the heat of his breath made her shiver all over. When Wyatt's mouth touched her heated skin, her head automatically fell backward to give him better access as they walked into her bedroom, closing the door behind them.

## Epilogue

Syntax and Ran were on the private jet returning to Chicago. It was a long day and too close for comfort. Syntax took a long sip of whiskey, hoping it would relax his fraying nerves.

"I don't know how you do it," Ran responded in awe.

"Do what?"

“How you managed to take out the cell without telling Dillyn your secret.”

“I told you, Dillyn is on a need-to-know basis. She doesn’t need to know.”

“Today, she came close to knowing everything. Did you destroy the papers in the envelope?”

“Yeah, I destroyed them. Fortunately, she only discovered that Steven was an asset. It was like Melvin to think he was smart enough for this little caper. The asshole got himself killed.”

“It’s not like he didn’t deserve it.”

Syntax took another long drink of the dark, fiery liquid. “Yes, he did. But, if he was going to die, I wanted it to be by my hand.”

“I can understand that.” Ran reclined into his chair. “At least Dillyn is safe.”

That was true for now. However, Syntax wouldn’t rest until he knew who the other players in this game were. He took out that cell, but it was clear there was another. Someone might have an ace in the hole. And, if they know the truth, it would be like having a weapon of mass destruction in their hands, and the name of that weapon is Dillyn Anderson.

Tonight was a win, and he would enjoy it. Tomorrow, however, he would begin planning for the bigger battle brewing. “Ran before you retire for the night ... I need you to do two things.”

Ran sat up, “Of course, name them.”

“Send orders for Wyatt Cash to remain on leave for the next year. Ben’s going to need him.”

“Okay, and the other?”

“Send Ben a note to expect secure equipment from me so we can communicate.”

Ran frowned out of confusion, “Sir? Why?”

Syntax leaned against the headrest and closed his eyes, “He’s going to need it.”

## WINE, WHISKEY, & LIPSTICK 3

I thoroughly enjoyed writing Ben and Dillyn’s love story! However, it is by no means finished not when there are still so many unanswered questions, but it will take a back seat to Palmer and Lucas as they will be the focus of Wine, Whiskey, & Lipstick 3!

Look forward to the release in March of 2024!

If you enjoyed this story please share your thoughts with your friends and leave a review.

LaShawn

## FULL THROTTLE 2

### CHAPTER 1

The club was packed with wall-to-wall people. The DJ had the place rockin’ as the music blared through massive speakers placed strategically throughout the room. The base was pumping so hard it was bouncing off the walls. Anthony Luccesse could even feel the vibration beneath the soles of his

feet as he and a group of friends sat at a corner table in the VIP.

Anthony lit a cigarette and took a long pull while looking less than enthused at the bevy of beautiful, half-naked women dancing and all vying for his attention. Franco Milani wasn't having the same problem. He enjoyed every ass that wiggled and jiggled in front of him. He leaned over toward his friend. "I don't know how you can sit there looking bored with all that good good staring you in your face." He laughed, then placed a hundred dollar bill into the g-string of one of the dancers.

Anthony blew out a breath releasing white smoke. "You have more than enough excitement for the both of us."

"Hell, yeah. And, if you ain't going to celebrate your twenty-seventh birthday, I certainly will." Franco pulled a busty blonde down onto his lap. She was excited to be chosen and gave him an enthusiastic lap dance.

Anthony had been forced by a few of his friends into coming out. He wasn't exactly in the mood for celebrating. It had only been a few short months since his older brother was killed, and it hit him hard. Nick's death had thrown their businesses into complete chaos since he ran them. The natural order of succession should have been for Anthony's other brother, Gabe, to step up and take over. Gabe knew the business but didn't have a head for it. Gabe's talents lied in being the muscle. With the FEDs breathing down their necks, Gabe and his hot head would probably end up getting their assets frozen, or worse, sending them straight to prison.

Anthony took another pull on his cigarette. He couldn't shut off his brain. *What am I going to do about our money?* It was all he could think about. Their cleaner had been playing footsy with the FEDs, and Gabe had to drop him into the bottom of the ocean. It would have been cool if Gabe had found a new one first before leaving millions to be laundered.

Anthony sighed.

If their businesses were going to survive, he had to take the reins. His first order of business had to be finding a new cleaner. Someone with a company and reputation beyond reproach. That eliminated damn near ninety percent of all the businesses they dealt with, including the legitimate ones.

A commotion near the bar caught Anthony's attention. That's when he spotted a stumbling Brian Lockwood. Anthony hated the man. They couldn't have been more opposite. Brian was the fair-haired Prince of the Lockwood Empire who had been handed everything on a silver platter.

On the other hand, Anthony had come from a long line of criminals. His family had a reputation for being unscrupulous and unsavory characters. Anthony couldn't lie. The Luccesse family was one to be feared. After Nick's murder, they were mistakenly seen as being in a weakened position. That ended when he and Gabe massacred the people who killed Nick and everyone connected to them in a single day. Most days weren't as bloody.

Anthony watched in disgust as the club owners fell over themselves to roll out the red carpet for Brian. His jaw clenched with irritation. *Damn pretty boy wouldn't know anything about hard work.* Unfortunately, Anthony didn't get



the same treatment when his group entered the VIP. It disgusted him that the Luccesse's massive fortune wasn't enough to be welcomed into the elite circles of society. Those people treated them with such disdain as if their money wasn't green or if most of them didn't have businesses with shady beginnings.

Anthony continued to silently brood as he watched Brian and his rowdy group walk over to their table. They were surrounded by many women, including a few celebrity models. Suddenly, Anthony sat up straight. It was like being punched in the gut. The answer to his problems was quite possibly just across the room as the beginnings of an idea popped into his head. The smile that had been so elusive began to slowly creep across Anthony's face. He crushed the end of his cigarette into the ashtray and stood. "I'll be right back."

Anthony strode over towards Brian's table. Immediately, Brian's security blocked his path. Anthony put up his hands as if to say *I come in peace*. "What? Can't say hello to an old friend?"

Brian looked around his men. He might be drunk, but he wasn't *that* drunk. "What do you want, Luccesse?"

"It's been six years since I last saw you. The way I figure it, that's enough time to lick your wounds and for us to call a truce."

"I don't think eternity is enough time for that." Brian said.

"C'mon. You can't still be mad over Lila?"

“Who?” Brian said casually. And, yes. He was still mad over Lila, but he for damn sure wasn’t going to let Anthony know it.

“Exactly! Let me buy a round of drinks for you and your friends to celebrate our shared birthdays.”

Despite Brian’s brother’s warnings about the Luccesse family, Brian and Anthony were once friends—in college—at least *he* had been a good friend. Unfortunately, Brian had realized too late that Anthony wasn’t to be trusted.

However, tonight, Brian’s ego got the best of him. He couldn’t let Anthony think that his betrayal cut deep. He shrugged. “If you’re spending your money, then I don’t have to spend mine.” Brian motioned for his security to allow Anthony entrance into his space.

Anthony yelled out over the music. “Bring my man a bottle of Asombroso Del Porto Extra Anejo and his friends too.”

The waiter nodded.

Anthony sat down opposite Brian. “Seriously, this is my peace offering.”

“You think a few bottles of \$4000 tequila is going to erase all the shit you did?”

“Look, I told you. Lila was a mistake. It never should have happened.”

Brian cut him off. “I’m not talking about Lila.”

“We both know you’re definitely talking about Lila. We were young and stupid back then. We did stupid shit. After all

this time, we've grown up, right?"

Brian would neither confirm nor deny Anthony's thoughts.

The waiter returned with their tequila and poured each of them a shot. Anthony raised his glass. "To old friends. Salute."

Anthony was a snake. One Brian probably shouldn't let within striking distance. Still, he lifted his glass. "Salute."

They tossed their glasses back. Anthony grinned. "Forgiven?"

"Let's just say it's my birthday, and I plan to enjoy it."

"Cool. Then, let's get it!" Anthony stood, pulling a curly-haired beauty up with him.

They partied hard over the next couple of hours, and Anthony continued to order more drinks. Brian continued to toss them back, not realizing that Anthony wasn't doing the same.

"Just like old times, huh?" Anthony asked as he sat back down at the table, taking a break from the dance floor.

Brian had to admit. It was like old times. At least before he realized that Anthony was a no-good son-of-a-bitch. "The only difference is you're not trying to con me."

Anthony frowned. "You calling me a con?"

"I'm sure you've been called a lot worse."

Anthony's face grew tight, and he stood from his seat. "I came over to make amends, bought you drinks for your

birthday, and this is how you repay my gesture? By insulting me? Calling me a con?!”

Brian stumbled to his feet. “Hell yeah! You’re a con and a bum! Always have been, and no matter how much money you have, always will be!”

“Be careful, Brian. This ain’t college where you were the man. I’m not going to take too many any insults from you, and words like that have been known to get men killed.”

Brian slurred. “You think your threats scare me?”

“They should.”

Brian narrowed his eyes. “Nothing about you scares me. Nothing!”

“Well, well, well ... look at little Brian. Flexing?”

Brian stepped into Anthony’s face. They were nose to nose. “If that’s what you want to call it. I beat your ass in college, and even drunk, I have no problem repeating the lessons you clearly didn’t learn.”

Security for both men inched a bit closer just in case things got out of control.

Anthony really wasn’t a fighter. He hired people for that shit. Still, he tried to hit Brian with a low blow. “I stole your woman.” Anthony shrugged. “I didn’t need to fight.”

Brain lunged at Anthony, but his people held him back.

Anthony laughed. “You’re seriously trying to write a check your ass can’t cash. If you didn’t know, you’re in the deep end, Brian. You might want to call Liam to save you on this one.”

Brian's voice dropped to a low menacing growl. "I can handle my own business. Unlike you, I don't hide behind my brother for shit!"

"Oh really? Well, if you really think you're a better man than me, prove it!"

"I don't have to prove a gaawdamn thing! But, just so we are clear, I'm a better man than you 365, 24/7, Monday thru Friday and twice on Sunday."

"We'll ask Lila about that." Anthony laughed. Playing Brian Lockwood was too easy. He had him exactly where he wanted him. This was going to be like taking candy from a baby.

# THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading WINE, WHISKEY, & LIPSTICK 2.

If you enjoyed Ben and Dillyn's story as much as I enjoyed writing them, please leave a review on [Goodreads](#) and all digital E-book platforms of purchase.

Looking for more LaShawn Vasser Information? SIGN-UP to my newsletter at

[www.lashawnvasser.com!](http://www.lashawnvasser.com!)

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## INSPIRATIONAL PLAYLIST

1. The Road – *Madeline Edwards*
2. Hangover Blues - *Amythyst Kiah*
3. Colors – *Black Pumas*
4. She – *Stokley*
5. Someone, Somewhere – *Nelly, George Birge*
6. In Case You Didn't Know – *Brett Young*
7. I Been Searching – *King South*
8. Mirror – *Madison Ryann Ward*
9. Looking for Love – *Mul-Ty*
10. One More Reason – *Stonekeepers, LaKeshia Nugent, Revel Day*
11. Do Me Right – *Wildson, LaKeshia Nugent*
12. I Still Love You – *Leon Timbo*
13. I Swear – *Leon Timbo*
14. Falling Out – *Calvin Richardson*
15. Best Thing That Never Happened – *Sacha*
16. The Flame – *Camille Parker*
17. Tryna Make Sense – *Madeline Edwards*
18. Let's Make Love - *Coffee Anderson*
19. Cowboys Like Me – *Coffee Anderson*
20. Hard – *Shy Carter*
21. Made for These – *Jimmy Allen/Tim McGraw*
22. HER – *Isaac Carree*
23. Love You A Little Bit – *Tanner Adell*
24. Something About Ya – *J. Howell*

25. Lessons – *Eric Roberson*
26. Naked – *Ella Mai*
27. Thank You – *Kane Brown, Katelyn Brown*
28. That’s How Love Is Made – *The War and Treaty*
29. Ain’t No Sunshine – *O.N.E. The Duo*
30. Whiskey Talk – *Tanner Adell*
31. My World – *Seckond Chaynece*
32. Never Let You Go – *Seckond Chaynece*
33. Love Like Never Before – *Seckond Chaynece*
34. Country Love Song – *Justin Champagne/K Michelle*



## OTHER BOOKS BY LASHAWN VASSER

### [WINE, WHISKEY, & LIPSTICK \(Seduction in Summer #1\)](#)

Secrets are hard to keep and even harder to hide. Dillyn Anderson understands this better than anyone. So how did she miss the signs? Every. Single. One. Her heart exploded the day she uncovered her ex-husband's infidelity. As if that wasn't enough, his affair was just the tip of the iceberg. Presented with an opportunity to escape the embarrassment and drama, Dillyn jumps at the chance to leave the big city for a small town in Summer, Tennessee.

Benjamin "Ben" Cash can't stop thinking about the one decision that changed his life. That choice haunts him daily and caused a devastating chain of events. He won't forgive himself for making the ultimate mistake. His family's ranch is the only place that offers peace, calm, and a place to lick self-inflicted wounds.

When Dillyn and Ben's worlds collide, they stumble upon the power of healing and an undeniable connection—until more secrets are revealed. The kind that could destroy everything and everyone.

Find out if Ben and Dillyn can rediscover trust, love, and happiness in Wine, Whiskey, & Lipstick.

### [HIS BABY HER GIFT \(The Slow Burn Duology #2\)](#)

Harlem Thomas' world has crumbled into a million little pieces, and she's been left to deal with the aftermath—*alone*. Maybe not exactly alone. But she is single, pregnant, and wondering how she can fall in love with a completely off-limits and emotionally unavailable man.

Carter Owens has made a vow and plans to keep it. He will make sure that Harlem and her baby are well taken care of no matter how many times she pushes him away. *The problem*—he isn't supposed to fall for her. She's forbidden.

Find out what happens in the shocking conclusion to **Her Baby His Gift**, an enemies-to-lovers romance!

### [HER BABY HIS GIFT \(The Slow Burn Duology #1\)](#)

Harlem Thomas has a plan for her life, and it is quickly falling off the rails. She's pregnant. The situation isn't ideal, and

that's putting it mildly. Mommy, daddy, and baby make three, right? Try four.

Could one call her predicament a love triangle when love isn't really involved? Harlem has no idea how she's fallen so far down the rabbit hole, but she has to climb up and out.

After the clouds of confusion lift, Harlem finds that she more than welcomes motherhood, but will she also find her soul mate?

### **FULL THROTTLE**

Colby James can't seem to escape the world of stock-car racing, her father's first love. She wanted out and at the first opportunity, left it all behind. She needed to put as much distance as possible between that life and the pain it caused. But, after years of running, her father needs her. It was time to come home and well past time to lay old ghosts to rest.

Billionaire businessman Liam Lockwood does not like the unknown and usually has two or three plans for everything. He also hates being out of his element, which is where he found himself after being thrust into the chaotic world of stock-car racing.

Events place Liam and Colby on a surefire collision course. Find out what happens in this sexy, high-octane romance-*Full Throttle*.

### **SNOWBOUND**

Novah Bankston's days are long, her nights are lonely, and her world is getting much too small. Still, her life isn't a complete dumpster fire. She has great friends. One in-particular makes her feel safe and protected, even if a bit sexually frustrated!

The thought of settling down has never appealed to Aiden Lawson. At least it hadn't until he met the smart, sexy, and utterly irresistible Novah Bankston. Every time she is around, crazy thoughts of forever pop into his head. It's too bad that she is *off-limits*.

No one could have predicted that a shared vacation among friends would turn into a fight for survival. The threat of death forces Aiden and Novah to confront their very real desire for one another. With temperatures dropping well below zero, and no shelter in sight, will the heat of their passion be enough to keep them alive?

### **REMINGTON'S SKY**

Sky Kirby is independent, arrogant, emotionally closed off, and owns it. She doesn't need anyone to fix or save her and makes no apologies—even when her choices may explain why love has been so elusive. Remington Kneeland is Sky's mirror image—only he is done with love. Cynical and bitter, he focuses on the one person that means the world to him—his daughter. When a terrible accident brings him and Sky together, fate steps in with a different idea. Find out what happens when an immovable object meets an unstoppable force—the results are soul-stirring, heart-pounding, and orgasmic.

he loves at all costs. His mettle is being tested, not only from strangers but from friends and foes alike. Austin and Bo will face the challenge of their lives. Will they survive? And if so, will they survive it together? Find out in *Magnetic Heat* – the FINAL book in the Hot Voltage Series.

### **The Right Side of My Pillow**

Cricket Anderson and Cole Thornton were throwaways. The outside world didn't have room for them. Yet, from the tender age of nine, all they had was each other...until they didn't. Not only were promises broken but so was Cricket's heart. Focused and driven to create a life made of dreams, Cole Thornton succeeded only to be left feeling empty and alone. Ten years later, a chance encounter brings him together with the one person he's ever felt connected to – an angry, disconnected, and broken woman. They say time heals all wounds. But, can two damaged souls discover love and mend their hollowed hearts? Find out in *The Right Side of My Pillow*.

## **CREE**

Cree Jacobs has ever only loved one man, and for years she's worked two jobs, sometimes three to support his dreams. Her entire world centered around Cameron Jacobs. What happens when his world no longer revolves around her? Distance has kept them apart for so long that they've become virtual strangers. Feeling lost and alone, Cree realized his goals were her goals. His dreams were her dreams until tragic events forced a path of self-discovery. Sometimes you have to stop, regroup, and find your center. Will that center lead back to love? *The Stranger Next to Me*

Tasha Stevens and Sabrina Links-Horne have been best friends since high school. Everyone always wondered how their friendship stood the test of time. Especially since they were polar opposites in every way, except for one thing. They were both in love with Tim Horne ... Sabrina's husband. Although they've seen each other through the best and worst of times, one decision will change the course of their lives forever and leave them both wondering who is *The Stranger Next to Me*?

## **Out of Nowhere (Book 1)**

He is the CEO of CkR International, Inc., a billion-dollar company. She is a struggling single mother working for his company in customer service. What happens during a chance meeting in his company's elevator will change their lives forever. Take the journey with Vicky and Jason as they fall in love. Will they overcome past hurts, society's demands, and family expectations?

## **NEW BEGINNINGS (Out of Nowhere Book 2)**

Just when billionaire Jason Kincaid Rutherford was on the cusp of living happily ever after with the only woman who's ever lit a fire within him, tragedy strikes. Will it leave her so broken that her heart doesn't have room for him? Not if Jason can help it. Continue on with the journey of Jason and Vicky as they face their biggest challenge yet. LOVE, LIFE, and VOWS (*Out of Nowhere Book 3*) Jason and Vicky have fought hard for their relationship. They've overcome

differences in culture, race, and social status. They've withstood an almost unimaginable tragedy and come out on the other side stronger than ever. Or, so they thought. Follow along as Jason and Vicky's love is pushed to the breaking point after life takes a devastating turn. Will they ever find their happily ever after?

### **[Love, Life, & Vows \(Out of Nowhere Book 3\)](#)**

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Follow along as Jason and Vicky's love is pushed to the breaking point after life takes a devastating turn. Will they ever find their happily ever after?

This is the final book to Out of Nowhere and New Beginnings.

### **[Pieces of Me \(Book 1\)](#)**

Their plane crashed in the South Pacific. It was a struggle to survive. Why after their rescue did life become more dangerous? Davis Chatham wasn't supposed to be on this flight, but a crisis with Chatham Industries demanded it. There was always a crisis—granted none like this, but his name was on the building, it was his problem to solve ... right? Being an admitted workaholic was what destroyed his marriage—leaving him broken, bitter, and wishing he'd handled things differently. Life had not been kind to Nicole DonLeavy and the last year had been particularly brutal. She wanted a fresh start—a new beginning. When the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself, she jumped at the chance and all thanks to the man who made it possible—a man she'd never met—Davis Chatham. One fateful night changes the course of everything. Get to know Davis and Nicole as they fight to survive on and off an island paradise. Emotions collide, danger lurks, and ghosts of the past return. Prepare yourself; this is not your typical love story.

### **[FRAGMENTS of US \(Book 2\)](#)**

Who has the perfect love story? Certainly not Mr. and Mrs. Chatham ...

It's been five years since Davis and Nicole said their I. Dos— five years, two children, and a mansion on the hill, let's not forget ... their very own island. Perfect love story right? Wrong. Not when old habits die hard, and new ones are worse than the old.

This will be the ultimate fight for survival and takes them back to where it all started. In *Fragments of Us*, Davis and Nicole can only hope to put the broken pieces of their lives back together.