



WORTH
THE WAIT

Kristin Lynn

BOOK THREE OF THE WORTH IT SERIES

WORTH THE WAIT
(SPECIAL FORCES:
OPERATION ALPHA)

WORTH IT

BOOK THREE

KRISTIN LYNN



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

Knox Richards and Penny Russell have been best friends since they were six years old. The Navy SEAL and the high school history teacher have been through a lot together over the years: Abusive family members, school bullies, deployments, and sometimes living on opposite sides of the country. Their friendship has only grown stronger through each obstacle they've overcome. Now, Knox is ready to leave the military, hoping to confess his feelings for Penny and settle down with her.

That's when the worst happens, though, and he and his military working dog, Neo, are injured during their final mission. While Knox and Neo both make it home alive, the SEAL's hopes for a happily ever after with Penny are delayed. As he attempts to heal from his injuries and make a name for himself as an FBI agent on the Human Trafficking Task Force, two years pass, and Knox's chance to claim the love of his life begins to disappear.

Penny's conniving twin sister, Annabelle, is suddenly trying to drive a wedge between Knox and Penny. At the same time, one of Penny's favorite students has disappeared, lured into a human trafficking ring that has connections to her school. Knox promises that he and his team will find her student, and he has no intention of breaking his word. He's also realized the time has come that he has to tell Penny how he feels, and hope she loves him back, or lose her forever.

However, no one realizes how deep the human trafficking ring goes, or how much danger Penny is truly in. When she stumbles upon information others would kill to protect, Knox and his team are out of reach, and the only one left to save the day is Knox's retired, three-legged military dog, Neo.

KNOX

SUMMER 2020—TWO YEARS AGO

AFGHANISTAN

“I guess it wouldn’t really feel like our last mission briefing if we were on time,” I said sarcastically to my military canine partner, Neo.

I studied the Belgian Malinois as he walked next to me. For a seven-year-old military dog about to retire, he’d held up well, and could’ve passed as much younger. He was still lean and muscular underneath his light brown fur, and his long, dark brown face barely showed any gray hairs.

His nose snuffled along the ground, looking for that perfect spot to do his business. It never mattered how much time I gave us before we had to be somewhere, Neo usually found a way to make us late. And it seemed like the more amped up I was, the more he took his time.

Neo was, in most ways, the perfect dog, but like a little brother, he had to find at least one way to annoy me. Making us late so he could take long, lazy potty breaks was his. I knew he did it on purpose, too, because he always wore his most innocent expression as I hurried him along, but with a certain mischievous look in his eye. Over the years, I’d tried everything I could think of to break the habit, and nothing worked. If I rushed him, he just slowed down, and if I pulled on his harness, trying to force him to come with me, he’d lay down and dig in his paws. When it came to his bathroom breaks, Neo just out-stubborned me.

It wasn't as if there were any particularly good spots at the Jalalabad Forward Operating Base in Afghanistan, either: It was mostly sand, gravel, and concrete. Bagram Air Base, where we'd also spent a lot of time during that deployment, wasn't much better. There were very few lush, grassy spots to speak of. My best guess was that Neo loved the freedom and the fresh air, and I couldn't hold it against him. He got so little time to just be a dog, after all, and he handled his duties incredibly well.

Finally, Neo signaled that he was done, and we made our way towards a nearby building. Our final mission briefing would take place inside.

As we made our way down a dim hallway, Neo at my heels, I noticed a group of SEALs headed in our direction. Each of them wore the same hardened expression, the same uniform, the same posture, and each one sported a similarly unruly beard, indicating that they'd been in the country for a while. I watched as their eyes scanned their surroundings, looking for threats, and then settling on Neo and me, their scowls still firmly in place. One of them smiled.

"There's my buddy," my teammate and fellow SEAL, Fish Stick, said, his voice an octave higher than normal as he crooned to my dog. He crouched down in front of Neo and scratched behind his ears. "There he is."

Neo's tail wagged gently at Fish Stick's attention, and then the rest of my teammates knelt as well, all of them fighting over who got to pet him next, and we formed a bottleneck at the entrance to the meeting room. Everyone on my team—and everyone who came into contact with him—loved Neo. Unless he was working or using the potty, he was easygoing and got along with everyone—even kids and other animals—a remarkable trait in a dog trained from a young age to bite and attack. On top of that, I knew for a fact that he'd saved the life of every person in that hallway at least once. As a Combat Assault Dog—a step or two above a normal military working dog, with additional training essential to partnering with a Navy SEAL—Neo could handle crowd control or search and

rescue and he could also sniff out bombs and bad guys and take them down before they got the drop on us.

I'd been a normal SEAL for a few years before volunteering to become a dog handler in addition to my other duties. I'd gone on a lot of missions with other military dogs and their handlers, and really appreciated what the dogs contributed to the teams. I also just liked dogs in general. So about five years ago, when they asked for SEALs to volunteer to also become dog handlers, I'd expressed my interest, gotten the training, and was matched with Neo.

As my teammates lavished attention on my dog, a few more teams joined us in the hallway as well, including two other canine handlers and their dogs. Some of them tried to push into the room, while others stopped to chat, greeting me by my last name, Richards. Then, my Lieutenant Commander—who we all called LT—made his way towards the door, and everyone shifted to allow him to pass.

“Alright, men, grab a seat,” he instructed once he reached the door, next to which Neo and I were standing. Even my LT wasn't completely immune to Neo, though, unable to resist patting him on the head as he stepped past us. Everyone else filed in as well, and a couple of minutes later, the meeting started.

“Gentlemen, I want you to take a look around the room. Do you notice anything?” LT asked, and for a moment, the room was completely still and silent. I glanced around, seeing my teammates, and other SEALs who I'd worked with in the past, and my dog laying down at my feet. Then, the LT continued. “Everyone around you is the best of the best, and you're here because the mission you're about to embark upon requires excellence. What you're about to do will end up all over the news, the internet, and social media, if you succeed, but especially if you fail. It'll have your friends and family talking. Hell, it'll probably end up in history books.” He paused, taking a sip of water. “For that reason, I've invited a few guests to join us for this briefing.”

He waved his arm towards the door, and a man and a woman—both in civilian clothing, so most likely CIA agents

—walked in, along with a colonel, and the three of them made their way to the podium. The woman stepped up first, the LT, the colonel, and the plain-clothed man standing behind her. She shuffled her papers for a moment, then looked up, searching the room as if she were looking for something.

“We’re going after Abas Sayyid,” she said simply. They were the only words she needed to say to make an impact. The atmosphere in the room suddenly changed, and excitement and nerves, along with the knowledge of how serious the mission was, began swirling through most of us.

I’d become familiar with the name during my time in the military. At first, he’d been a low-level terrorist, but he stood out because of his reported initiative, his talent for making bombs, and his hatred for the West. As he moved up the ranks of ISIS, he began planning terrorist attacks, and also started to dabble in human trafficking of women and children. The dirt bag certainly kept busy, and all of his extracurricular activities made him a bigger and more important target. I’d heard of a couple of past operations to take him down, but they’d been cancelled at the last minute for different reasons. The LT’s speech, along with the fact that a colonel and two agents had come in person, gave me hope that this time, the mission was likely to be a go.

The male CIA agent brought up photos on the large screen behind him. They appeared to be of a compound and taken from different angles. A map of Lebanon was also displayed.

He started to speak. “We have intelligence from several sources that Sayyid is currently living in this compound in a small village in Lebanon, outside of Tripoli,” he said. “We’ve had this compound under surveillance for several weeks, and we’ve seen a lot of visitors in and out of there, most of them heavily armed. By itself, that surveillance wasn’t enough to confirm he was there. But yesterday was the nail in the coffin, so to speak. We obtained satellite footage of the inside of the compound and saw someone who closely matches Sayyid’s description.”

“We also have intelligence that several American hostages are being kept at the compound,” the female CIA agent said,

and photos of two men and a woman came onto the screen. “Their names are Dr. John Sullivan and Dr. David Miller from Doctors without Borders, and Lauren Robinson with the Christians against Hunger organization. According to our sources, about a year ago, Sayyid married Lauren—he already had three other wives—and she’s being kept in a room near him. The two men are reportedly being held in the basement of the compound.”

The LT stepped forward. “We’ve been given the green light to send you in. We’re scheduled to be on a flight in three hours. Our first stop will be at the USS Ronald Reagan, which is currently in the Mediterranean Sea about 50 miles from Tripoli. On the ship, we’ll meet up with a couple more SEAL teams and will spend the day onboard, fine-tuning the mission. Tomorrow night at zero dark thirty, six Black Hawks will transport you to an area a few miles from the compound. Some of you will be part of the QRF team stationed there with the birds, and the rest will head to the compound.”

“Your orders are to kill or capture Abas Sayyid and any other ISIS members in the compound, to rescue the three American hostages, and to gather and bring back any and all equipment and files you find,” the colonel added.

“Sayyid will have a small army inside his compound to protect him, and there will be women and children there as well.” the LT added. “The normal rules of engagement apply.”

“Any questions?” the colonel asked, and we spent over two hours getting more information and going over logistics and worse-case scenarios. I was glad we’d have more time to plan while we were on the ship.

Once we were dismissed, I had a limited amount of time to pack and get to the airfield. It didn’t take me long to gather up our gear, and as I finished stuffing everything into my bags, my alarm went off. Neo perked up, his head tipping to the side and his tail gently wagging, because he knew what that sound meant.

Every day at 1700—7:30 AM her time in Washington, DC—if we were able to, Neo and I Face Timed with my best

friend since childhood, Penelope Russell. She'd met Neo a few times when she'd visited me in Virginia Beach, and the one time she came to Coronado, California. She and Neo had formed a tight bond during those trips, and our Face Time sessions. I knew my canine partner was as excited to see her as I was.

Turning off the alarm, I checked the time and saw that I had a while until Neo and I needed to report to the airfield. I sat down on my small bunk, my dog jumping up beside me as I Face Timed Penny.

"Hey!" she answered after two rings, a sweet smile on her face.

Penny was beautiful as usual—I'd always thought she looked a lot like Mandy Moore with auburn hair, and her brown eyes were filled with warmth. I'd loved her practically since the day we met when we were both six and became neighbors. When we'd moved in, my dad had just ended his career as a SEAL, gone to the Naval Officer Candidate School, and gotten a job at the Pentagon, in an effort to provide more stability for my mom, older brother, and me.

"Hey, Pen," I replied, grinning when Neo shoved his head closer to the phone, almost pushing me off the narrow bed. I wrapped an arm around him so that we could both see her.

"Aww, hi, Neo. Are you being a good boy?" Penny greeted him, using a high-pitched voice just like my teammates did, and I felt his entire body wagging back and forth under my arm. As she focused on Neo, I studied her, noticing that her eyes were puffy and that she had dark circles under them.

"You look tired. Did you have trouble sleeping last night?" I asked. She turned her attention back to me, her face a mixture of embarrassment and defiance.

"My favorite author's newest book released at midnight," she admitted sheepishly.

"Did you stay up all night reading?"

Penny didn't exactly have the best family—most of her parents' love and attention went to her twin sister, Annabelle,

who had cancer as a child. Penny had always tried to be perfect, in an effort to earn even a little bit of her parents' affection, but her one rebellion since childhood had been staying up late, reading under the covers, the pages lit up with a flashlight. As far as I knew, her family had never caught her, or even questioned why she was completely exhausted some days.

"Yeah, but I went to bed at 7:00 last night, and set an alarm for midnight, so I at least got a little bit of sleep," she said. "I was just going to read a little bit, but I couldn't put it down! It's *so* good, Knox. I've already cried twice."

I shook my head. "I don't know why you like reading books that upset you," I said. It was a discussion we'd had many times before.

"It just makes the happily-ever-afters even more meaningful when the couple goes through a lot to get there," she responded wistfully.

"I'll take your word for it," I said, secretly hoping that we'd have our own happily-ever-after one day soon. "But are you going to be okay at work after staying up most of the night?"

She frowned at me. "I swear, you're always worried about me. I'm just a high school history teacher. You're the one in Afghanistan being shot at."

"I'd rather be here than teaching a bunch of high schoolers," I responded.

Penny laughed, knowing I was telling the truth.

"Well, I'll be okay. I just made a huge pot of coffee, which should get me through. And you know my summer school days are short. I can come home and take a nice, long nap this afternoon."

"That sounds like a good plan," I said.

"So, how are things going there? Are you still planning to be back in the US soon?" Penny asked.

“Yep. The FBI Academy starts in a month. I’ve just got one more mission, and then Neo and I will be back stateside.” I’d already filled out the paperwork to adopt Neo, and as his first and only partner, it was pretty much a sure thing that he would be living with me permanently once we were both out of the military.

“Oh. I was hoping you’d just be hanging out at the base until your deployment is over,” she said, anxiety suddenly visible in her eyes. “Just be careful, okay?”

“Of course. I always am,” I reassured her. “And I have my lucky elephant, which has always kept me safe.”

I pulled it out of my pocket and showed it to her. Penny had given me the small elephant figurine ten years ago, right before I’d left for boot camp. The top layer of paint was worn from all the years I’d kept it with me, but it was still mostly gray, its trunk uplifted, which Penny said was the part that bestowed the good luck.

“Good,” she said, then sighed. “I can’t wait for you and Neo to be home for good.”

“Me, too,” I agreed.

She didn’t know it, but the main reason I was eager to get home was her. Once this mission was over and I was back in the US for good, my first priority was telling her that I loved her. I’d waited too long as it was.

I checked the time, realizing I needed to start heading towards the airfield. “Well, I’ll let you go. But Neo and I will see you soon, in person.”

“Okay,” Penny replied. “Be careful. And call me as soon as you can.”

“Always,” I answered before ending the call.

KNOX

Just like every mission that had come before, I had certain routines and superstitions that I'd always depended on, and my final op was no exception. The elephant in my pocket was one of them. Neo sitting at my feet was another. And listening to music during the helicopter flight was a third. For this mission, I'd settled on songs from the 1980s. As we neared the landing zone, Kenny Loggins' song, "Danger Zone," made famous by *Top Gun*, began to play. I wasn't sure if the song was a good omen or a bad one.

The song ended right before the pilot yelled at our first warning. "Three minutes until doors open!" he shouted above the sound of the Black Hawk's rotors, making a hand signal at the same time. I turned off the music and took out my earbuds, shoving them in my bag.

As my teammates each took a knee in preparation to get off the helicopter, Neo looked at me, his posture all business. He knew the routine as well as I did, and he was ready to work. And while he was normally a relaxed, friendly dog, when he was in work mode, he was brutal and merciless.

I tugged lightly on his harness to make sure it was still securely attached to my belt, and double checked that his night vision goggles were on straight, that his tactical vest was tight enough, and that the infrared live camera was mounted securely on the top of his vest.

"Two minutes!" the pilot yelled.

Time seemed to slow down as the landing zone—typically shortened to LZ—grew closer and closer, until it was finally time. The helicopter lowered to the ground, its rotors slowing. Once my team and I were off the bird, it would wait there with the QRF team in case there was an emergency, and we needed backup.

“Go, go, go!” my team leader, Laser, yelled.

As I waited, my teammates made their way towards the helicopter’s doors, one disappearing after another. When it was our turn, Neo was calm as I held him in my arms, stepping out of the helicopter and jogging a few feet away to wait for everyone else. I set Neo down next to me until everyone was ready, and once it was time to go, I released his harness from my belt.

My team and I walked along silently, near the middle of the larger group of SEALs. The moon and our night vision goggles lit the way through the darkness, and the weather was comfortable, but I was starting to get a bad feeling. I knew to listen to my instincts and not dismiss the unease I felt, but we also couldn’t call off a mission just for one person’s gut feeling. Until I noticed something off that would explain my apprehension, I needed to focus on the mission. Being distracted could be deadly for me, Neo, my team, and all the other SEALs who were with us.

Trying to concentrate on the here and now, I glanced towards my dog. In contrast to me, he seemed focused, no different from the long treks which often marked the beginning of our missions. It made me feel better that he didn’t seem skittish or scent anything suspicious along the way, and our path remained clear as we got closer to our destination.

Before long, we’d reached the outskirts of the village closest to Sayyid’s compound. And then I saw something that, in all the years of training and missions we’d done together, Neo and I hadn’t run across before. Wandering across our path, blocking our way to the compound, were what seemed like hundreds of bleating sheep and goats. I reflexively grabbed Neo’s harness, trying to decide what to do. He was

usually mature and dependable during missions. Would he still be dependable with hundreds of animals surrounding us? They probably smelled like dinner to him.

“You got him?” my teammate, Turbo, whispered from behind me.

“Yeah, we’re good,” I whispered back, reassuring him.

Thinking quickly, I grabbed Neo and lifted him into the air, settling him on my left shoulder like a sack of potatoes, while keeping my right hand free in case I needed to quickly grab a weapon. My team and I made our way through the noisy farm animals with as much stealth as possible, and I kept Neo on my shoulder until we were well past the animals. When I finally set Neo down, he looked up at me, a puzzled look on his face, and I couldn’t hold back a small chuckle.

“You’re good, buddy,” I told him, crouching down next to him and patting his head. “I just didn’t want you thinking it was dinner time. We’ve got work to do.”

Neo huffed at me as if insulted, his normal reaction when he felt as if I’d done something stupid. I thought of it as the dog version of an eye roll, and it lightened my dark mood just a little. I was glad that none of my teammates seemed to share my frame of mind, and hadn’t picked up on mine enough to call me on it. I just wanted to get this job done, take this piece of shit terrorist out, and get home to Penny.

We quietly got into position, and after some maneuvering, Taz blew the door of the wall surrounding the compound. We rushed inside, making our way to the main building while keeping an eye out for enemies. We reached the front door and Taz shot out the knob.

“*Revieren*,” I said, using the Dutch commands Neo had been taught to send him into the building to search. My team and I followed behind him, the others covering me as I kept an eye on a screen which was linked to Neo’s camera. The device would spot any tangoes before we could, making our jobs safer.

I followed behind Neo, accompanied by the rest of my team, and I quickly heard him bark, followed by quiet growling and pained yells. I knew those sounds from all the other times Neo had bitten a bad guy. I hurried towards the sounds, then saw Neo slowly scooting backwards out of a room. As more of his body came into view, I realized that he was dragging a man out, Neo's jaws clamped around one of the man's arms as he screamed in pain. When the man saw me, he spoke quickly, putting both of his hands up in a sign of surrender.

"*Los,*" I ordered Neo, telling him in Dutch to let the man go, and he haltingly released the man's arm and returned to me.

A SEAL I didn't recognize stepped forward to restrain the ISIS member, and Neo and I went around them and continued on, clearing the rooms on the first floor one by one. As we moved, I continually heard others talking over my earpiece, escorting scared women and children from the compound, and engaging with terrorists, some of whom didn't surrender as easily as Neo's first victim did. And I also heard the triumph in their voices as they announced they'd found Lauren alive and were getting her to safety. I silently shared in their excitement, proud of my brothers and of what we were accomplishing.

Once we cleared the first level, we made our way to the basement, where the two American doctors were hopefully being held. Neo found them first, and some of my team quickly checked them over before helping them upstairs, clapping me on the shoulder and murmuring a "good job" on their way.

Neo and I kept going, finding another set of stairs that led even further down. My dog went first, and, pointing my rifle, I moved more slowly behind him, checking for any enemies he may have missed. Then, we reached another dark doorway. Neo was waiting for me, but as soon as I joined him, he took off down another set of stairs. He let out a bark, telling me he'd scented someone. Instead of attacking, though, I heard Neo's paws thudding on the ground as he suddenly sprinted away from me. I stepped inside the doorway as well, taking a

few stairs down into a dark, dank space before I realized I was in a tunnel.

I pulled the device out of my pocket that would show me what Neo had found. And then I saw him: Abas Sayyid. He appeared to be crouching against a wall, as if the tunnel had a dead end and he could go no further. And then, when Neo barked twice as he'd been trained to do when he found explosives, I noticed the suicide vest on the man's torso.

"I've found Sayyid. He's trapped in a tunnel underneath the basement and is wearing a suicide vest," I said into my communication system, knowing that everyone else on the op would hear me. "Again, Neo and I have found Sayyid. He's wearing explosives on his vest, and if he detonates them in this tunnel, the entire compound might collapse."

Several voices answered, and I could hear running footsteps above me, but I returned my focus to my dog. Neo had done his job, but it was time for someone else to take over and either talk Sayyid out of the tunnel or make the decision to end his life. And I needed my canine out of there before Sayyid decided to blow himself up and take Neo with him.

"Neo, *hier!*" I called out, anxiously stepping a few feet further into the tunnel. I could hear Neo's paws pounding against the soft earth as he quickly made his way back towards me. Every second felt like a decade as I waited for him, hoping we'd get to safety in time.

And then, just as Neo appeared in my night vision goggles, running as fast as he could, an explosion ripped through the tunnel, and everything went dark.

PENNY

I was curled up in a chair in Knox's room at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, a scratchy hospital blanket wrapped around my shoulders and a book open on my lap, but my eyes couldn't comprehend the words. I'd probably read the same paragraph 20 times in the last few minutes, and still had no idea what it said. The book was one of my favorite romance novels, one I often turned to when I needed comfort, but it wasn't enough to hold my attention at that moment, with my best friend in a coma next to me.

In a chair on the other side of Knox's hospital bed, his dad—himself a former Navy SEAL who currently worked at the Pentagon—was lightly snoring. He looked like an older, but almost as fit version of Knox. And his mom, who had always been short and curvy, was next to his dad, asleep with her head on the mattress and her hand wrapped around one of Knox's. Even sleeping, she was the picture of despair, her face pale and drawn.

His parents had called me as soon as they'd gotten word he was injured and being transferred to the Maryland hospital, and I'd immediately taken time off work to be there. My heart broke for them, and their anguish was only made worse by the fact that his brother Grayson—four years older than him and also a SEAL—was deployed overseas, still in danger, and unable to do more than occasionally call and ask for an update. So far, there hadn't been any.

I'd known Knox and his family for as long as I could remember. I'd always considered them part of my family, even

Grayson, and they'd always treated me as one of their own. But in that hospital room, I was a poor substitute for their sons being home, safe and sound.

The sun was just starting to rise, reminding me we'd been in the hospital for over 24 hours. The entire time, Knox had been completely, eerily still. Tubes emerged from different parts of his body, only the sounds of the life-saving machines disrupting the oppressive silence. Knox had been injured by an explosion a few days before and had been in an induced coma ever since. When he arrived at Walter Reed yesterday, the doctors said that he had a severe concussion, one of his eardrums had blown, and he had fresh stitches from the military hospital in Germany, where they'd removed the shrapnel that had embedded under his skin before sending him on. Luckily, even with all of those injuries, the doctor expected him to make a full recovery. He'd been put in a coma to allow his brain to heal and give him time while the swelling went down.

No one had been allowed to give us details about what happened to cause the injuries, but we'd seen on the news that an important ISIS leader had been killed in Lebanon in a top-secret military mission, and that three hostages had been rescued. The news also reported that there'd been an explosion in a tunnel, injuring a military dog and his handler. Based on the timeline of Knox's procedures and his trip back to the US, and the types of injuries he had—plus the fact that one of his friends had called yesterday to let us know that Neo was being treated for his injuries at an Air Force base in Texas—we assumed that Knox and Neo had been part of that mission.

I was proud of Knox for what he'd accomplished, but at the same time, my mind was running rampant with all the worst-case scenarios. What if Knox never woke up from the coma? What if he didn't remember me, or his family, or any of his life? What if his brain was so damaged that he could no longer walk, or talk, or take care of himself, and he lost his independence? Knox would hate having to rely on other people. What if he became really depressed?

Knox was my best friend, but I'd also been secretly in love with him for most of my life. And while he'd spent the past ten years in the military, often being deployed, he'd still been a huge part of my life, and I didn't know how to survive without him. If he wasn't okay, I wouldn't be, either. And sitting and waiting was the worst kind of torture.

I tried to push my thoughts away, wiggling in the chair to get more comfortable, and I felt the trunk of Knox's lucky elephant poke me. We'd found it among the things that had been sent back with him, and his parents gave it to me to hold onto. Feeling guilty, I'd tried to give it back, saying the luck had clearly worn off, but they disagreed, arguing that it kept Knox and Neo from being hurt worse than they were. I'd given in and kept it, and it had been in my pocket ever since.

I looked back at my book, determined to get my mind off of my fears, but before long, my eyelids started to feel heavy, and I drifted off to sleep.

* * *

IT FELT like time was moving in slow motion as I stood in the parking lot of my town house, looking around. Instead of the typical city noises, though, everything was quiet. As I looked around, I noticed that instead of the apartment building that had always been across the street from my townhouse, Knox's and my childhood neighborhood was there in its place. His house was straight ahead, soft light surrounding it like a spotlight, while the other houses in the neighborhood—including mine—seemed to fade into the background.

I started to walk towards his house, drawn towards the happiness and comfort I'd always found inside, so different from the tension and despondency in my home, which was right next door. As I got closer, I saw Knox exit the front door, smiling as he walked towards me.

"Knox!" I shouted, happy to see him. Somehow, I knew that him being there, smiling and whole, was significant. I increased my pace, starting to jog towards him, and he began

running towards me as well. But instead of getting closer, Knox got farther away, no matter how quickly or how long either of us ran. Suddenly, I realized that Neo wasn't with him, and I found that strange. They were almost always together.

Then, the sound of explosions ripped through the air right behind Knox, smoke and debris making it impossible for me to even see him.

I screamed, running faster, and I was finally able to get near him. The smoke cleared away for a moment—just long enough for me to get a glimpse of Knox. He was lying on the ground, completely still, his clothes shredded, and blood quickly spreading around him. I was desperate to reach him, to somehow stop the bleeding and get him to safety. I was so close, only a few feet away, when another blast discharged, and I lost sight of Knox once more.

“No!” I screamed as I fell to the ground, debris raining down on top of me. I crawled forward, feeling my way, still trying to get to Knox. I couldn't lose him.

* * *

A LOUD KNOCK WOKE ME, and with a gasp, I sat up, looking around frantically before realizing that I'd been having a nightmare. I was still in Knox's hospital room, and his parents were there, too, looking just as groggy as I felt.

There was one more knock on the door, and then a doctor walked in. He was middle-aged, wearing scrubs and a white coat, and a nurse was with him, hovering near the door.

“Good morning. I'm Dr. Weber,” he introduced himself as he washed his hands.

Knox's parents and I greeted him in return, and I sensed that his parents were holding their breath just like I was, waiting for the doctor to give us news. His dad, Charlie, stood up, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

“Do you need me to move?” Knox's mother, Heather, asked as Dr. Weber walked towards Knox's bed.

“No, no, you’re fine. I’m just going to scoot around you here,” Dr. Weber said, maneuvering past her in the chair and then studying the equipment and monitors. “Well, I have good news,” he finally said as he turned to look at us again, and I finally took a breath. “The swelling on Knox’s brain has decreased significantly, and we’re ready to take him out of the induced coma and let him wake up.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news!” Heather said.

“Yes, that’s great. Thank you, Dr. Weber,” Charlie agreed.

The three of them spoke about Knox’s injuries for a few minutes as I listened in, my mind suddenly blank. I couldn’t think of a single question for the doctor, even though I’d had many running through my head just a few hours ago. Then, one of her questions captured my attention.

“How long will it take him to wake up once you take him out of the coma?” Heather asked, and I was suddenly very curious about that, too.

“There’s a pretty wide range, but it’s usually less than 12 hours,” Dr. Weber answered.

“Will he remember us?” Charlie asked, and I needed the answer to that one, as well.

“He may be groggy or confused at first, and there could be some memory loss, but the hope is that keeping him in the coma while the swelling went down will prevent any long-term issues.”

“That’s great,” Heather said. “How long until we can take him home?”

Charlie reached towards his wife, taking her hand. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. He hasn’t even woken up yet,” he said gently.

“The doctor might have an idea, though. I’m sure he deals with similar injuries all the time,” she responded.

The doctor shook his head, and as Heather and Charlie continued to ask questions, I glanced down at Knox, studying him. Except for the fact that his 6’3” tall, muscular frame

could barely fit on the bed—his feet were hanging off the edge—Knox looked so vulnerable laying there, when he always seemed so powerful in real life. And while he was still incredibly handsome—even with his scruffy beard, his bruised face, and gauze wrapped around his head—I missed the heart-stopping smile that he often gave me, and his warm, aquamarine eyes.

As gently as I could, I took one of his hands, relieved he would be awake soon, and hoping he could sense us waiting for him.

* * *

I MUST'VE FALLEN ASLEEP AGAIN, and for the second time in a short period, a noise startled me awake.

“Penny,” I heard someone murmur.

In a daze, I opened my eyes, and there, looking directly at me, was Knox.

“You’re awake!” I cried out, suddenly alert, even though my voice was still hoarse from sleep. I jumped up and hugged him, trying not to hurt him in my enthusiasm. “Oh, my God. You’re awake!”

“I am,” he agreed.

The sound of his voice—raspy from going unused for several days—and the tickle of his beard against my skin were the very best sensations, and I soaked them in, clinging to Knox even tighter. He wrapped his arms around me as well, holding me close, and we stayed that way for a while. Eventually, though, I noticed that I was crying, and that my tears were soaking his skin and hair. I straightened, wiping my eyes, then realized I was being selfish by keeping Knox all to myself. I looked around, but no one else was in the room.

“Your parents are here, too,” I told him. “They must’ve just stepped out. I’ll go find them,” I said, even though leaving his side was the last thing I wanted to do. Before I could move away, though, Knox stopped me, one of his huge hands gently

wrapping around my wrist, making me feel tiny in the best way.

“Stay,” he said, his eyes pleading.

“I can’t,” I said, shaking my head. “They’re dying to see you. We’ve all been so worried.”

It looked like he was about to answer, but instead, he started to cough.

“Let me get you some water,” I said, realizing that his mouth was probably extremely dry after being in a coma.

Reluctantly, I pulled my arm away from him, and he allowed it that time. I crossed the room, grabbing the nearby pitcher and a plastic cup. Once it was halfway full, I handed it to him, and he tipped it up to his mouth, his eyes closed and his hands shaky. I rested my hand on top of his, helping him hold it steady.

“Do you want some more?” I asked once he’d finished.

He shook his head. “No, I’m okay. My head is killing me, though.”

I took the cup and set it down, then turned towards him again, about to suggest that I call the nurse and get him some pain medicine—and just as important, tell her that he was awake. I lost my train of thought, though, as Knox caught my gaze, then held it. I couldn’t look away, and for those few moments, we just stared at each other. I could tell that he was in pain, but it seemed to fade for a moment as he studied me closely, watching me in a way I wasn’t familiar with. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost say he was looking at me longingly, but I knew that wasn’t right. We were just friends, and he’d never shown interest in being anything more than that.

Then, it seemed like a switch was flipped, and something changed in his expression, confusion marring his features. His eyes darted around the hospital room, taking it in.

“Wait. Where am I?” he said, struggling to sit up. “Where’s Neo?” His heart rate monitor started beeping faster,

the confusion on his face morphing into fear. “Where’s my team?”

He tried to get up, attempting to pull his IV out, but I stopped him, instead taking his hands in mine and sitting on the bed next to him.

“You’re at Walter Reed Medical Center in Maryland. And everyone is okay. I promise,” I said, trying to soothe him, but it wasn’t working. Scrambling for a moment as I tried to stay calm for him, I finally remembered the relaxation techniques my friend Harper had taught me. “Take a deep breath with me,” I told him.

Maintaining eye contact, I put my hand on his chest, silently encouraging him. After a few moments, his breathing steadied, the beeping of his heart rate monitor slowing again.

Once he was calmer, I answered his questions in more detail. “Your teammates are fine, from what we’ve heard. They weren’t injured at all. And Neo is at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, being rehabilitated from his injuries. He lost a leg, but he’s going to be okay, too.”

Knox took another deep breath. And it hit me again, as we stared into each other’s eyes, just how painful it would’ve been to lose him, and how close I came to that very possibility coming true. Since he’d joined the military when we were 18 years old, I’d always known that Knox being injured or dying was a possibility, but it had always been more of a theoretical. When I’d first learned that he was hurt and in a coma, my entire world had crumbled. He was my best friend, my biggest supporter, and the most amazing person I’d ever met, and I was desperate for him to be okay.

I’d let myself fall apart the night I’d found out, crying until I was dehydrated and out of tears. But by the time I arrived at the hospital the next morning, I’d pulled myself back together again. Knox told me all the time that he thought I was a strong person, and I knew he’d want me to be there for his family, to support them as much as I could, just as his parents and brother had always been there for me. Over the past few days, I’d done my best to be the person Knox believed I was. Now

that he was awake, though, all of the fear and uncertainty came rushing back to the surface.

Before I could voice any of my emotions, though, Knox's parents walked into the room, and their joy at seeing their son awake overshadowed everything. I tried to move away from Knox's bed to make room for his parents, but he grabbed my hand and held on firmly, intertwining his fingers with mine. He was letting me know without words that I was important to him, and that he wanted me by his side. And it was the only place I wanted to be.

KNOX

TWO WEEKS LATER...

My head pounded as I stared at my phone, squinting at the email I'd just received about Neo, and trying to decipher what it said as the letters blurred on the screen. I hadn't been allowed to visit Neo at Lackland Air Force Base, but the adoption had been approved, and one of the dog handlers there had promised to send me frequent updates until Neo was returned to me.

Penny, Grayson, my teammates, and my parents had all told me more than once that I shouldn't feel guilty about Neo losing one of his back legs. They'd reminded me that I'd kept Neo safe for years, and that overall, military dogs had a high rate of being injured, so it was extremely lucky that something hadn't already happened to him. They'd also sent me videos of thriving, happy three-legged dogs, suggesting that Neo wouldn't even notice his missing leg, and that he wouldn't be mad at me about what happened.

It was hard to maintain that positivity when I was alone, though, and I'd moved out of my parents' house and into my own place soon after being released from the hospital. Penny and my parents came to visit almost every day, and my team had even visited me since they'd gotten back into the country, but I still felt lonely and isolated. I had nothing to do until the FBI Academy started in three weeks, Neo was half a continent away, and everyone else had to work. A couple of times, I'd tried being a handyman, fixing things up around Penny's

house, and my parents'. But my brain still felt like a jumbled mess, and I couldn't even do simple tasks successfully.

When I tried to help my parents by mowing their lawn, the noise quickly caused a migraine. I tried to push through it and ended up running over a large tree limb that I should have noticed, damaging the blade so badly that I had to replace it. And when I started painting Penny's upstairs bathroom—she'd always hated the ugly pink color in there—the fumes caused another migraine. I only finished one wall before I needed to take a break, but when I laid down on her couch, I fell into a deep sleep. I still couldn't shake the look on Penny's face as she shook me awake, her face pale and her eyes teary as if she was afraid that I was dead. And I still hadn't finished the other three walls.

So instead of causing any more trauma, or damaging something else, I decided to focus on getting back to normal, in an attempt to hurry my healing along before the FBI Academy started in three weeks. I knew I wasn't exactly in the best shape for the Academy, but I dreaded having to wait several more months to start, and I vowed to do everything in my power to avoid that fate. So during the day when everyone else was busy, I began spending my time at home—with the lights off and the blackout curtains drawn—getting plenty of rest and only doing activities that wouldn't jostle my brain.

I was also doing my best to follow the doctor's instructions about avoiding screen time as much as possible, and my friends and family had been helping with that, keeping their texts to a minimum and calling or coming by instead. Emails about Neo were a priority, though, and since everyone would be at work for several more hours, I was determined to decipher what the latest email said on my own. Since the letters on the screen were blurring, I copied the words in the email, then pasted them into an app that Penny had installed for me right after I was discharged from the hospital. It would read the email out loud for me.

"Neo is healing up well," the email started, "and you'd never know he was missing a leg. He's been approved for discharge, and has been booked on a flight on Monday." The

app continued, giving me the flight number and other information for the plane Neo would be arriving on, and the handler who would be accompanying him. For the first time since I'd been injured, I started to feel hopeful, knowing I had Neo's homecoming to look forward. It was just a few days away.

* * *

Penny

“Do you think he'll be happy to see me?” Knox asked nervously, running his hand through his hair as we waited near the airport gate Neo would be coming from.

It was something Knox had asked me repeatedly in the last couple of weeks, as we waited for Neo to heal. Since the explosion and his concussion, he'd been a little bit different from the old Knox. He was less sure of himself—less calm, cool, and collected—and I'd noticed him wincing and rubbing his temples sometimes when he didn't think I was looking. I knew Knox's physical injuries were still healing, and that it would take a long time to heal from the emotional damage of what happened, but I was determined to be there for Knox and Neo every step of the way.

“He's definitely going to be excited,” I reassured him, not for the first time.

“But what if he blames me for his missing leg?” Knox asked. He ran his fingers through his hair again. “What if I just bring back bad memories for him? He might hate me.”

I grabbed his hand and interlaced my fingers with his, grounding both of us. While many of the recent changes had been difficult, I had to admit that I liked the blurring of the firm friendship boundary we'd always had in place. We were much more touchy-feely than we used to be, and I didn't know if that was because Knox needed comfort after what he'd been through, or if we were moving past just friends, but either way, I liked being able to hold his hand, or run my fingers through his soft hair.

“Neo could never hate you. He’s probably been missing you as much as you miss him. And he probably doesn’t even care about his missing leg. Dogs usually adapt to that kind of thing really well, and your friend from Lackland said the same thing.” I squeezed his hand reassuringly. “But no matter what, we’ll get through it together.”

He glanced over at me, his face full of gratitude. “Thank you for being here with me, Penny,” he said.

“Always,” I promised.

A few moments later, Neo was making his way towards us, and the handler, from the non-profit group that helped retired military dogs get adopted, let go of his leash. As soon as Neo realized he was loose, he took off towards us, his missing leg not slowing him down much at all as he darted between other plane passengers. I bit my lip, worried he’d knock someone over, but the dog successfully avoided everyone. Knox crouched down beside me, holding his arms out for Neo, and the dog almost knocked him over in his eagerness.

“Hey, buddy. Hey, Neo,” Knox embraced him.

The Belgian Malinois sniffed Knox, then licked every body part he could reach, his tail wagging enthusiastically as he slobbered all over him. My eyes teared up as I watched the pair together.

“He’s happy to see me,” Knox said, looking up at me with excitement and relief in his eyes.

“I knew he would be,” I responded, crouching down next to Neo and greeting him as well. He licked me a few times as well, and leaned against me as I petted him, before seeming to notice an interesting smell. He began sniffing near me, quickly locking in on my purse, and I reached inside it and pulled out the dog treats I’d brought along for him. “Here you go,” I said, holding one out to Neo, and he took it gently. After dedicating his life to the military and losing a leg, Neo deserved all the treats in the world.

Knox stood up, clearing his throat and greeting the handler. “Thank you for bringing him to me,” he said, the emotion

clear in his voice as he shook the volunteer's hand.

And I knew, looking at Knox and Neo together, that they'd both be okay now that they were reunited.

KNOX

TWO MONTHS LATER...

“Again!” the instructor yelled loudly enough that my classmates and I could easily hear him through our ear protection.

We were on the FBI’s shooting range, trying to prove that we were proficient with guns so that we could move onto the next stage of the Academy. Unfortunately, this had been one of the hardest phases on my way to becoming an FBI agent. My head throbbed on a good day. With the sound of gunfire added in, it felt like my skull was going to split wide open. My head pounded a steady, devastating beat, to the point that I couldn’t think clearly, my sight was starting to fuzz over, and I felt extremely nauseous, like I would throw up at any moment. I refused to give in, though, especially knowing the day was almost over, and that tomorrow would be a quieter classroom day.

I hadn’t told anyone about the lingering side effects of my injury—not my doctors, or my parents, or even Penny. And especially not the FBI. I was so close to achieving my dream of becoming an FBI Special Agent, and if I told them how bad I still felt, I’d have to wait months for another shot. I didn’t want to waste that time. I knew I’d be fine eventually, if I just kept pushing through.

Being an FBI agent was the thing I wanted most in the world—second to being with Penny. If I could call Penny mine, I’d give up everything. I’d work any job, move anywhere, do anything for the privilege of loving her.

But I still couldn't tell her that I felt that way. I owed Penny better than confessing my love and hopefully starting a relationship with her while my brain was still on the mend. Neo was still waking me up from my nightmares almost every night, bringing me back to reality with his cold nose and his wet tongue on my bare skin. Every morning, my sheets were in complete disarray, physical proof of how violent I was in my sleep—and how dangerous. I couldn't put Penny through that.

Also, I was constantly taking pain medicine—switching between ibuprofen and acetaminophen, but still taking more than the recommended dosages. And most days, I was struggling to even think straight. It was all I could do to get through the long hours at the Academy, then go home and rest for the next day. I couldn't start a relationship with Penny like that—exhausted, aggressive when I slept, and taking so much medicine I was worried that my liver or kidneys would soon give out. No, Penny deserved better than that. And I'd give it to her. Just as soon as my concussion symptoms improved.

* * *

IT WAS GETTING dark outside by the time I arrived at Penny's townhouse to pick Neo up that night. She'd been taking care of him during my long hours at the Academy, and they were forming an even tighter bond than before. I had a feeling that Penny would be his favorite before long, even above me.

I knocked on the door.

"Come in!" I heard Penny shout from inside. "It's open!"

I tried the knob, and like she'd said, it was unlocked. Even exhausted and with a horrible migraine, images of someone breaking in and hurting Penny flew through my head. Frustrated, I stepped inside and locked the door behind me, prepared to reprimand her for being unsafe. Before I could say one word, though, I was distracted by the scene in front of me. Penny sat on the couch in pink, plaid pajamas, at least a couple sizes too big for her, but somehow looking adorable and

alluring at the same time. A book was open in her lap, she held a container of ice cream in one gloved hand and a spoon in the other, non-gloved, one. And Neo was curled up on the couch next to her, resting his head on her knee. He looked up at me with his solemn puppy dog eyes, his tail thumping once as if in greeting, but he stayed where he was.

“Don’t mind me, Neo. Don’t bother getting up on my account,” I said drily. Clearly his allegiances had already changed. I switched my attention back to Penny. “And why is the door unlocked? Anyone could have walked in and hurt you.”

Penny rolled her eyes at me, swallowing a spoonful of ice cream before she replied. “I just unlocked it a few minutes ago. I knew you’d be here soon, and I was trying to make things easier. And you know Neo would protect me from anyone who barged in here.”

“He’d do his best, but he’s not bulletproof,” I lectured as I walked closer, scratching behind Neo’s ears.

“True,” Penny said. “But luckily, we’re fine.”

“This time,” I responded, giving her a pointed look.

Penny, probably knowing I was right but not wanting to admit it, quickly changed the subject. “Do you want some dinner before you and Neo head home?”

“That would be great,” I admitted.

She always offered me dinner when I picked Neo up, and I almost always took her up on it, because it meant I got to spend more time with her, and that I could go straight home and collapse into bed afterwards. It was a much better option than trying to cook myself something halfway healthy while I was exhausted and my head was pounding, or picking up fast food, which wasn’t exactly nutritious enough to keep me going through the Academy.

“Okay. I made spaghetti and salad earlier. It’ll just take a second,” Penny said, putting the lid on her ice cream and pulling off her glove as she made her way to the kitchen.

I was debating sitting down next to Neo, who was suddenly looking forlorn, when I heard a loud boom outside. While the pain in my head intensified because of the noise, my first instinct wasn't to rub my temples, but to protect Penny. I rushed into the kitchen, yelling for her to get down. She wasn't listening to me, wasn't paying attention at all as she got something out of the fridge, so I grabbed her by the waist and threw us both to the ground. I was careful not to crush her, landing with her on top of me before I rolled over, covering her body with my own and wrapping my arms around her head.

“What’s going on?” Penny asked as she lay underneath me. Her voice was slightly shaky, but she wasn't fighting me or panicking, which I was grateful for.

I listened for a moment, not hearing anything else. “I’m not sure,” I finally responded, worried I’d overreacted. I considered letting Penny go and getting off the floor, but my head had started to spin, and my nausea had returned, so I stayed where I was. “I heard something outside. I thought someone was shooting or had set off a bomb.”

At that moment, I heard Neo pad into the room slowly, clearly unconcerned with why we were on the floor.

“Don’t you think Neo would be barking if that was the case?” Penny asked gently, clearly trying not to make me feel crazy.

“Yeah. Probably,” I said, my head continuing to spin, and my stomach starting to revolt.

As I considered my next move, I heard Neo eating something, and when I glanced at him, I realized Penny had dropped the leftover noodles on the floor when I’d tackled her, and my dog was cleaning it up. That, for some reason, was my stomach’s last straw. As quickly and gently as I could, I scrambled off of Penny and rushed to the downstairs bathroom, slamming the door and then emptying my stomach into her toilet.

“Are you okay?” Penny called out, and I heard her walking closer.

“Don’t come in!” I warned, still crouched above the toilet, my head and stomach rioting. Penny watching me vomit would be the cherry on top of my disastrous visit to her house. “I’m fine. I’ll be right out.”

Thankfully, she listened, her footsteps moving further away again, and a few minutes later, I made my way back to the living room. I didn’t see her anywhere, and I no longer had the strength to remain upright. I collapsed onto the couch and closed my eyes.

Seconds—or hours—later, I heard Penny come down the stairs.

“I went upstairs to look outside just in case—you know the view’s better up there—and everything is quiet. You probably just heard a car backfiring,” she said. Then, I heard her walk towards me. “Are you okay?” she asked. I opened my eyes long enough to see her hovering over me, a concerned look on her face. She and the rest of the world were spinning, though, and I groaned, quickly closing my eyes again. A few moments later, she was back, laying a cold washcloth on my forehead, and then I felt her taking off my shoes and socks and spreading what felt like a blanket on top of me. I was too weak to move, to speak, or to even look at her. “You need to stay here tonight,” I heard her say, and then the room was dark, and I was asleep.

* * *

WHEN I BECAME aware of my surroundings again, it was morning, and sunlight was streaming through windows that I quickly realized weren’t mine. I couldn’t remember where I was at first, until I sat up and noticed Penny asleep on the smaller couch, Neo curled up on her feet. That was when everything came rushing back to me.

Trying not to wake her up, I stood, noticing that my dizziness and nausea were much better than they’d been the previous night—I actually felt better than I had in days.

Hopeful, I made my way to the kitchen to start the coffee maker.

As it finished brewing, I turned around to grab a couple of coffee mugs. At that moment, Penny was walking into the kitchen, her face creased and her pajamas ruffled. She was completely gorgeous, and it took all my willpower to keep my hands off of her. *Wait until your brain is fixed*, I reminded myself.

“Did you sleep on the small couch all night?” I asked as I poured the coffee, adding some creamer to one mug and handing it to her.

“Yeah,” she answered, still sounding sleepy. “I didn’t know what was wrong with you, and I didn’t want you to die in your sleep or something.”

I opened my mouth to say something—I wasn’t sure what, other than thank you—but she spoke again before I could.

“I’m really worried about you,” Penny said seriously, studying me. “Is your head injury still causing issues? Be honest with me.”

I sighed. “I think so,” I admitted.

“What did the doctors say? It seems like it’s getting worse.”

“I haven’t told the doctors. Or anyone, other than you.”

“Knox!” Penny scolded, and I could tell that she was about to get worked up. I held out a hand to stop her.

“I just need to get through the FBI Academy, and then everything will be better. I promise.”

She looked at me skeptically, her eyebrows raised. “That’s, what, four more months? What if you get worse?”

“Hopefully I won’t,” I answered.

“Hopefully?” Penny repeated. “You can’t play around with brain injuries. You could end up in really bad shape.”

“I know. But this morning I feel good. Completely normal. And I don’t want to put my career on hold because of this.”

“It’ll be on hold longer if you’re brain dead,” Penny responded, her voice sassy.

“I know,” I responded, hating that I was on the receiving end of her lecture, but admiring her pluck. “Would it make you feel better if I promise to get checked out if I get worse?”

“Not really, but it’s better than nothing,” she answered, her tone resigned.

She knew me better than anyone, and she knew that if I was determined to finish the FBI Academy before addressing the complications from my head injury, she wouldn’t be able to talk me out of it.

“Thank you,” I said, and she glanced over at me, rolling her eyes.

God, I loved her.

PENNY

JULY 2022—PRESENT DAY

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Neo followed me with his eyes as I paced back and forth at my front door, impatiently waiting for Knox to arrive. He'd dropped the dog off a couple of days ago, saying he had to go out of town for a work emergency. He couldn't give me any details at the time, but I also knew that my friend, Harper—and our new friend, Cassidy, a Finnish diplomat who'd recently begun dating one of Knox's coworkers—had gone missing a few days ago, and I had a feeling that Knox's work emergency and my friends' disappearance were connected. It was mid-morning on a Sunday, and Knox had texted me a few minutes ago, saying that he was back in DC and headed to my house. I'd been pacing ever since, anxiously waiting for news.

Abruptly, Neo hopped off the couch, stretched lazily, and ambled towards me, his ears perked up and his tail wagging slowly.

“Do you hear him?” I asked, hoping that was the reason for Neo's sudden alertness.

I opened the door, and sure enough, Knox's SUV was pulling into a parking spot in front of my townhouse. I watched as he got out of the car, exhaustion clear in his posture, the dark circles under his eyes, and his messy hair—which was probably from running his hands through it over and over. As I stood on my front stoop, my arms itched to wrap around him and offer him comfort. I wasn't sure if that was what he needed, though, so I stayed still, glad when Knox hugged me instead. He pulled me close, burying his face in my

hair and releasing a deep sigh. I melted into his hard chest, and we stood like that for a few moments, just breathing each other in. Much sooner than I was ready for, he stepped back, breaking the contact between us.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I studied him. My worry grew, unsure if the state he was in meant he had good news, or bad. I hadn’t seen him look so tired since the first couple of months after his concussion two years ago.

Knox sighed, running his hands through his hair. “Yeah, everything worked out. I’m just tired.”

“Come inside,” I said, holding the door open for him. I gestured towards the couches and he made his way towards the bigger one, Neo happily sniffing him. “Do you need anything?”

“Coffee would be amazing,” he said as he sat down, and as I went into the kitchen, I heard him talking to Neo quietly. I knew they were happy to see each other after being apart.

When I returned with coffee a few minutes later, Knox’s head was leaning against the back of the couch, his eyes closed and his breathing steady, and Neo laid at his feet, his eyes closed as well. I quietly set the mug down on the table next to his side of the couch, trying to decide if I should wake him up, when the decision was made for me. Knox abruptly straightened, his body tensing, and his eyes darting around the room, looking for threats. When he made eye contact with me, he seemed to remember where he was, and his posture relaxed.

Neo must’ve picked up on Knox’s distress also, standing up and licking his hand a couple of times.

“I’m okay. Sorry,” Knox said, and I knew he was talking to both Neo and me. He glanced at me, shaking his head as if to clear it, then picked up the mug and took a sip. “I’m a little out of it. I don’t even remember the last time I slept.”

“No need to apologize,” I assured him, and he smiled softly at me, then took another sip of coffee.

I hadn’t seen Knox wake up like that in years, probably since he was active duty in the military. Back then, he could

take a nap pretty much anywhere, and sometimes when he'd come home on leave, or when I went to visit him, he'd fall asleep unexpectedly, then wake up that same way, as if he was in the middle of a war zone. I wondered if it was exhaustion suddenly causing him to revert back to old habits, or if something traumatic had happened during his trip.

Knox stayed silent, drinking his coffee, so I finally decided to just ask him what I wanted to know about my friends, while also trying to avoid the topic of his work trip.

“Any news on Harper and Cassidy?” I asked.

I sat down on the couch, leaving room between us for Neo like we normally did. As soon as I was settled, Neo jumped up onto the couch, curled into the smallest ball a 60 pound dog could make, and rested his head on Knox's thigh.

“Yeah. We found them.”

Relief washed over me at the news. “Can you talk about it?” I asked, unsure if it was classified because of his job. After graduating from the FBI Academy, he'd been assigned to the Human Trafficking Task Force with nine other agents.

“I can tell you some of it,” Knox said. He began petting Neo, his hand sliding through the fur on his back over and over, as if attempting to soothe both of them. I noticed Neo scoot a tiny bit closer to him, soaking in the attention. “Kassidy discovered that a company she was working with was using trafficked workers on their cruise ships. The company found out she was looking into the trafficking, and kidnapped her from a restaurant, but Harper happened to be with her at the time, so she was taken, too. They were both being held on a cruise ship, being treated like slaves. They were in the bowels of the ship and pretty much being held at gunpoint and forced to work 18 hours a day. We found them both, and a lot of other trafficking survivors from all over the world.”

“Wow,” I said in dismay. “Are they okay?”

“Physically they're mostly fine, other than Cassidy having a small chemical burn on her arm.”

“What about emotionally?”

Knox hesitated, and I could almost see his brain working, trying to decide how much to tell me. I knew part of his hesitation was that his job required him to keep a lot of things confidential, but I also had a feeling that he tried to protect me from the most disturbing things he witnessed at work. I had mixed feelings about that—in all honesty, I really didn’t want to hear about all the terrible things he’d seen while investigating human trafficking, because I knew it would horrify me. But I also worried about Knox, because he had a tendency to bottle things up. As a protector, he never wanted to ask for help or to burden anyone else, especially with his emotions.

“They’re okay,” he answered. “I think they realize how lucky they were. And Cassidy was fired from the embassy, but she helped get asylum in Finland for a lot of the trafficked workers. And they saved thousands of people. They’re trying to focus on the positives.”

“Cassidy was fired? For saving people?” I asked.

“Well, the way she went about it was pretty unethical, if I’m honest. She pretended to date someone she had a work relationship with, so that she could spy on his company and get information about the trafficking ring they were running.”

“It sounds like she deserves a promotion,” I argued.

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “But she was already thinking about quitting, since if she continued working for the Finnish embassy, she’d have to move to another country in a year for her next assignment. She’d pretty much already decided to stay in DC with Evan, and they both seem pretty excited about that. So other than needing to find a different job sooner than expected, I think it worked out how it was supposed to.”

“Oh, my gosh, that’s so sweet!” I gushed, my anger replaced by delight. “I love them together.”

It was a happily-ever-after, just like the romance novels I loved to read, and I was thrilled for them. At the same time,

though, a small part of me flared with jealousy. I was starting to worry that a fairy tale ending wasn't in the cards for me—especially since I was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with my best friend, who didn't show any romantic interest in me. Sometimes I imagined that the hugs we shared meant he also wanted more, and other times I fantasized that the looks he gave me weren't just fondness and familiarity, but love and adoration. I knew it was all childish make-believe, though.

Surely if Knox had feelings for me, he would've said so by now—after all, we'd been best friends for over 20 years. I'd thought we were moving in that direction after his concussion, when he became more affectionate with me. But as he healed, the lingering hugs and the hand holding faded away, and his withdrawal stung.

Before his concussion, and again once he seemed healed from it, I'd considered being brave and voicing my feelings first. But every time I considered it, I imagined how depressing and lonely my life would be if he rejected me. If things became awkward between us, I wouldn't just lose him—I'd also lose his parents, his brother, his teammates, and their significant others. They were my entire support system, other than the teachers and staff I worked with, who I considered acquaintances more than anything.

And I certainly wouldn't count my own parents and sister as part of my support system. If my life was a fairy tale, they'd be the villains—my mom and sister would be the wicked step-mother and step-sister from *Cinderella*, and my dad would be the evil priest in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, or maybe the scheming uncle from *The Lion King*.

So, as painful as it was to keep my feelings for Knox quiet, I was willing to tolerate it. Putting myself out there was just too risky, and I had too much to lose.

I was so lost in my thoughts that when my phone suddenly rang, I jumped. Embarrassed at myself, I grabbed it off the coffee table in front of me, and saw my twin sister's name on the screen, trying to Face Time me. "Speak of the Devil," I muttered to myself, then glanced up at Knox. "It's Annabelle," I said in a whisper, as if she could already hear me. I hit

ignore, knowing that most of my conversations with my sister usually started *and* ended badly, but she immediately tried again. With a frustrated huff, I answered it.

Her face popped up on the screen, so similar to mine. We weren't identical twins, but we still looked a lot alike—or we would, if not for her always-perfect makeup and her wavy, platinum blond hair. Since it was the weekend, I was makeup-free and my hair—still our natural shade of auburn—was in a messy bun.

“Hey, Sis,” Annabelle greeted me, her voice sickly sweet.

“Hey, Annabelle,” I answered apprehensively.

“FYI, Mom and Dad are here with me,” she said, turning the phone so that I could see them.

“Hey, sweetie, how are you?” my mom greeted me, her face appearing on the screen briefly.

“Hey, mom, I'm good,” I answered, but I could hear that the tone of my voice was flat, even though I was trying to seem happy to see her. I was a terrible actress.

At that moment, Knox, probably sensing that the conversation wouldn't be a short one, started making his way towards the kitchen, which was behind me. His appetite was practically insatiable on a normal day, and I hoped that he was waking up enough that he'd gotten hungry. I always made sure to keep plenty of his favorite foods in the house.

My dad greeted me next, and as he did, Knox appeared in my phone's camera for a split second as he neared the kitchen. It was just long enough for Annabelle to notice him.

“Who is that?” My sister suddenly asked, interrupting my dad and me greeting each other.

“It's Knox,” I said somewhat derisively. I shouldn't have been surprised that she didn't recognize him. As kids, she'd always acted like he was beneath her, and would barely give him the time of day. “You know, my best friend? Our neighbor for most of our childhood?”

“That’s *Knox*?” Annabelle asked in disbelief. “Tell him to come closer.”

I rolled my eyes at her command, about to tell her no, and that he was a person, not a dog. Before I could, though, Knox, having heard her, walked back in my direction. He stood at the back of the couch and leaned over my shoulder, his eyebrows raised at the phone expectantly.

Annabelle’s voice was suddenly seductive.

“Hi, Knox. I don’t think I’ve seen you since high school, when you were just a lanky kid. You’ve certainly filled out in the last ten years,” she said, her voice almost a purr. “You’re *gorgeous*.”

Only someone like my sister could get away with being so bluntly flirtatious, and I’d seen it plenty of times before, but I *hated* that charm being turned in Knox’s direction. I believed—mostly—that he wouldn’t fall for her act, but I still felt an uncomfortable knot of jealousy twist inside me, even as his expression on the screen transformed from exhausted to scowling.

“Anyway,” I interrupted, moving the phone away from Knox so that he was no longer on the spot with Annabelle and my parents, and angling the screen so that they couldn’t see him, even in the background. “Why did you call? I know it wasn’t just to flirt with my friend.” Knox squeezed my shoulder as if in support, and then I heard his footsteps heading away from me, Neo padding along behind him.

“Penelope Ann Russell,” my mom suddenly interrupted, scolding me. “That was very rude. Apologize to your sister.”

“Apologize for what?” I asked defensively. “Annabelle is the one being rude.”

“I was just giving Knox a compliment,” Annabelle said, sounding almost demure.

“Stop bickering, girls,” our dad interrupted from off camera, his voice stern, and all three of us went silent. “Now Annabelle, tell your sister why you called.”

“Oh, of course! I almost forgot,” Annabelle said, the smug smile on her face letting me know that she definitely *hadn't* forgotten. “I got a new client at the salon. She’s the daughter of a Senator, and she has a huge following on Instagram. She’s really impressed with my business and wants to become a partner. She’s even talking about setting up more locations, and she thinks I should establish myself in Los Angeles and work with celebrities! Isn’t that amazing?”

“That *is* amazing!” I replied, but I could tell right away that my response sounded like I was mocking my sister, rather than enthusiastic and excited like I was going for.

And it wasn’t that I was *unenthusiastic*. I didn’t care much about hair and makeup, but I was truly happy for Annabelle’s success. However, that feeling was largely overshadowed by all the negative emotions my twin had caused in me over the years. She always had to be prettier, more popular, and date the guys that everyone else wanted. She had to be the favorite daughter. She turned most of my teen years—and my entire life—into a competition that I never signed up for.

I was the first to admit that Annabelle had it worse than me growing up. She’d been diagnosed with leukemia at the age of three, and had spent a lot of her childhood in different hospitals, receiving treatments that made her sick and caused her hair to fall out. In public, most people didn’t notice anything about her past her fragility and her baldness, and strangers often watched her suspiciously, as if worried that they, or their children, could end up with cancer, too, if they got too close to her.

And while I couldn’t fully understand what it was like to have cancer, I suffered, too. I was the healthy twin, the one who was taken for granted, forgotten and overlooked most of the time, except by Knox and his family. The smallest request or bid for attention from my parents earned me a verbal lashing, and a lecture about how selfish I was.

Annabelle was in and out of remission for years, finally going into full remission when we were eleven years old. By then, however, the damage to both of our psyches had already been done. And as Annabelle’s hair started to grow back,

being pretty became an obsession for her. Instead of being a voice of reason, or reminding Annabelle that looks aren't everything, our parents only encouraged her, giving her free reign over her body before she really understood what that meant.

After that, Annabelle was always on the newest fad diet, which I never understood, given how thin she'd always been. But she loved counting calories and drinking diet shakes, craved the attention she got when she told someone she'd only eaten one grape the whole day. My parents ate that up, hovering over her as she ate dinner and only making her favorite foods. It seemed like the three of them were stuck in a pattern—Annabelle needed to be cared for, and my parents needed to take care of her. I felt like merely an observer in my own family, like I was on the outside looking in and witnessing their dysfunction. I was incredibly thankful for Knox and his family, who let me enjoy being a child, even as Annabelle transformed into someone unfamiliar, right in front of me.

She also kept her hair long, saying her goal was to grow it as long as possible, and as it grew, she refused anything more than a trim to get rid of her split ends. She also kept her hair dyed blond, and demanded our mom schedule an appointment at the salon as soon as the first auburn root appeared. As a twelve year old, Annabelle wore heavy makeup and designer clothes, and when she was sixteen, my parents agreed to let her get breast implants and lip injections, and they paid for the procedures. My sister became beautiful, but in a fake, plastic sort of way, as if she was a heavily photo-shopped supermodel, and had just stepped off of a billboard and into the real world.

As we grew up, though, she became more than just a pretty face. After high school, Annabelle went straight to cosmetology school, then did some modeling work until she saved up for a down payment on a salon. Once she opened her business, it grew quickly. I had to admit, she was excellent at helping women look their best—she could do magic on people's hair, their nails, and their makeup, and she was also great at styling clothes and knowing all the latest trends. On

top of that, she was a natural at running a business. She'd grown her salon so much that she employed several beauticians and massage therapists, and had also recruited young models and fashion students who knew how to dress clients in stylish clothing that hid their flaws. Plus, in an effort to retain the best and most talented employees, and make her salon a destination for the rich and famous, Annabelle paid very well. She even provided child care, paid time off, and top-tier health insurance and retirement plans, and she somehow hadn't scared anyone off with her cattiness and her hatred of not getting her way.

So, while I was genuinely impressed by, and happy for, Annabelle, the business owner, I was less happy for Annabelle, the twin sister. But I didn't think my parents would ever truly understand that.

"I swear, Penelope, if you didn't look so much like Annabelle, I would think you weren't really my child," my mother said, pulling me out of my thoughts. She, angled the phone so she could look directly at me, and I could tell that she was trying to frown, but that her frequent Botox injections—which Annabelle had talked her into—were preventing her from being able to.

"You're always so gloomy and resentful, never able to be happy for anyone else and their achievements. You could learn some things from your sister, you know. She's worked very hard to get where she is, and she's overcome a lot of obstacles."

"I'm not gloomy and resentful," I argued. "And I *am* happy for Annabelle. I think it's—," I started, but my dad cut me off.

"We were going to invite you out to dinner with us to celebrate Annabelle, but now I don't think you deserve to come. You'll just ruin the celebration for everyone else with your bad attitude," he said.

With that, both my parents disappeared from my screen, and then, it was only Annabelle and me, a smirk on her face.

“I’m so sorry. I really wanted you to come,” she said. “Maybe you can come to my next celebratory dinner. I’m sure it’ll be soon.” Then she paused for a moment, before adding one last jab. “Or maybe I’ll just invite Knox instead.”

Too annoyed to speak, I hung up on her without saying goodbye, then tossed my phone onto the coffee table with a scream of frustration. A moment later, Knox appeared in front of me, squatting down until we were face-to-face.

“Are you okay?” he asked, resting a hand on my knee.

I took a deep breath. “Why do I always let them get to me?” I asked, answering him with my own question.

“Because they’re your family? And they’re terrible people who say things just to get under your skin?” Knox answered. “You know if they were happy with themselves, they wouldn’t have to tear you down like that. Deep down, they’re miserable.”

“I know,” I said in resignation. We’d had the same conversation many times before.

“The good news is that while you were on the phone, I ordered pizza for us. It’s already on the way.”

“You are an absolute saint,” I told Knox firmly, and he just shook his head at me, trying to hide his smile.

* * *

Knox

“Look at these prizes for selling Girl Scout cookies! I’m going to convince mom to let me sign up for the Girl Scouts, so I can sell the most this year and win this tent,” Penny said, showing me the brochure she was looking through as we sat side-by-side in the treehouse that my dad had built.

“What would you do if I ate them all before you could sell them?” I teased her, and she glared at me, using the glossy paper to smack me on the arm.

“You wouldn’t!” she said. “And this tent will be yours—and Grayson’s, too—if I win it. We can camp in the backyard this summer!”

It was too much fun to tease her.

“Okay, okay. I won’t eat all the cookies,” I said, pretending to be sad about it.

“You better not! But just in case, I’m going to find an extra sneaky spot to hide them until they’re sold. It’s for your own good.”

I smiled to myself, and she kept looking through the brochure, pointing things out to me. I was starting to get bored when her mom’s car pulled into their driveway, and with a shout, Penny was out of the treehouse, climbing towards the ground. I didn’t think I’d ever seen her descend so fast.

“I need mom to sign my forms, to sign me up for Girl Scouts, and to be my cookie selling chaperone,” she yelled up at me. “I get to sell them in front of the grocery store on Saturdays!”

I followed her down the tree and towards her driveway. As I got closer, though, I saw Penny’s mom scowling, her arms crossed against her chest, and her sister had an especially pitiful look on her face, which I had a feeling wasn’t completely genuine. Penny stood with her back to me, her posture slouched in defeat. I hesitated, unsure if I should move closer or stay back—if me joining them would help Penny or make things worse for her.

Even at eight years old, I knew that the other members of Penny’s family weren’t nice. Her parents and sister never seemed to laugh, or smile, or even notice that anyone else existed. I was glad that Penny was different, and that she liked laughing, and having fun, and playing with my brother and me. I tried to avoid the rest of her family as much as I could.

Still unsure what to do to help Penny, I snuck a little closer, hiding behind a tree to hear what was going on.

“No, Penny. Stop asking. Your sister is sick, and you’re worried about Girl Scout cookies? What’s wrong with you?” I

heard her mom say.

“What about Dad? Can he help me?” she asked, most of the hope gone from her voice.

“You know your father plays golf with his friends on Saturdays. It’s the only thing he has to relieve his stress. Surely you don’t want him to give that up.”

“What if I joined the Girl Scouts, but didn’t sell cookies this year? They have other stuff I could do.”

“Penny, I can’t believe how selfish you are sometimes. Your sister has cancer. She could die! And here you are asking me to take time away from her so you can sell cookies! Do you hear yourself?”

I didn’t like anyone talking to Penny that way, even her family. I stepped out from behind the tree, ready to join her, but she was already running inside her house. Annabelle was sticking her tongue out in Penny’s direction, and her mom was getting groceries out of the car, as if nothing had happened.

I couldn’t follow Penny into her house with her evil mom and sister standing in the way, but I did have an idea of something that might cheer her up.

That evening, as the sun started to set and Penny still hadn’t come back outside, I went to her window and threw a small rock against the glass. I heard her moving around inside, and a moment later, her window opened. Her hair was sticking up in different directions and her face was red and puffy, but she lit up a little bit when she saw me.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice at a whisper.

“I brought you something,” I said, pulling the large, pink flower I’d picked for her from behind my back and showing it to her.

Thank you,” she said, her smile watery. She leaned out the window and took it from me, then smelled it, closing her eyes as if savoring the scent.

“

“You’re welcome,” I said, proud that I’d done something to make her smile. “And I talked to my mom. She said she’ll do the Girl Scout stuff with you, if you want. She’s just going to talk to your mom first and make sure it’s okay.”

“She is?” Penny asked, her eyes widening with happiness.

“She’s excited to,” I replied, telling the truth. I knew my mom thought of Penny as the daughter she didn’t have.

“Oh my gosh, this is the best news ever! I’m going to win that tent no matter what!”

* * *

I SHOVED THE MEMORY AWAY, doing my best to hide my anger at Penny’s family, and joking with her instead of tearing into them like I really wanted to. Ever since we were kids, I’d watched her family mistreat and belittle her. I was too young back then to really do anything about it, other than be her friend, and be there for her. But I’d spent the past twelve years of my life standing up to assholes and bullies, and if Penny ever gave me permission, I’d happily teach them a lesson.

“Don’t listen to them, Pen,” I told her, shifting out of my crouch so I could sit next to her on the couch. “You’re a great teacher, an amazing person, and I’ve never seen you be anything but excited for other people’s accomplishments. Hell, after everything they’ve put you through, the fact that you were even the slightest bit supportive of Annabelle just now says what a good person you are. I would’ve told all three of them to go to hell.”

She huffed out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

The problem is with them, not you, okay?”

“But family is supposed to love you no matter what! They’re supposed to love you even when you’re unlovable,” she lamented.

“I know,” I said. “But a lot of people’s families are terrible, including yours. And there’s obviously something wrong with

them, since they can't see that you're the furthest thing from unlovable. To everyone else, especially me, you're incredibly easy to love. You don't deserve how they treat you."

"Thank you," Penny said, leaning against me, and I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

At that moment, I wished I could tell her that I was in love with her, but she was upset, and it didn't seem like the right time. It never seemed to be the right time—or maybe I was just afraid of her rejection, of our friendship changing because I had feelings she possibly didn't return.

For the moment, I was just glad to spend time in her presence.

"The pizza won't be here for a few more minutes. Why don't you bring a book outside and read while I throw the ball for Neo?" I suggested, and she glanced at me again.

Reading and watching Neo's antics always improved her mood. Plus, even as a nine-year-old, three-legged dog, Neo had a lot of energy, and needed plenty of exercise and mental stimulation. Most Belgian Malinois were the same.

"You're just trying to cheer me up," she pointed out, sounding almost like she was sulking.

"Is it working?" I asked, smiling at her.

"Of course," she answered, grinning back at me, and then we were on our way outside, Neo prancing happily behind us.

PENNY

TWO WEEKS LATER...

“Alright, everyone. Time’s almost up,” I announced to the summer school world history class I was teaching. The students were in small groups, working on their World War II assignment. “Make sure you get your projects done tonight, because tomorrow is presentation day.”

As I spoke, the students hurriedly began to pack their things, and as soon as the bell rang, they rushed out of the classroom as if they were on fire. I tried not to take it personally—it was their lunch time, after all.

One student didn’t rush out, though, instead hanging back, clutching a well-worn book to her chest. Brittney Powers had transferred to Green Valley High School—and to my world history class— in January, halfway through the year.

She’d seemed lonely, and I made a point of getting to know her. I could tell right away that she was interested in history and eager to learn, so at first, I was confused why her grades were so low in my class, especially on tests. Then, she handed in an essay I’d assigned, asking the students to describe their favorite time period in history. I knew that Brittney’s favorite was World War Two, just like mine, because the two of us had talked about the subject just days before the essay was assigned. We’d gotten so excited about the topic that she accidentally missed her lunch period, and not wanting her to go hungry, I’d given her my sandwich to eat in her next class.

Her essay, though, was very rudimentary, and contained a lot of mistakes, including spelling errors such as confusing B's and D's. Even more telling, Brittney barely touched on the topics she'd been so excited about a few days earlier, like the Tuskegee Airmen and the original Black Panthers, who'd played an enormous role in the Battle of the Bulge. Worried that a dyslexia diagnosis had been overlooked when she registered, I went to the office and searched for the records that had come with her from her last school. To my dismay, it appeared that she'd never been tested for *any* learning disabilities, and instead, her report cards often had notes from her teachers, all variations of the belief that she just wasn't trying hard enough.

I also learned from her records that her guardian was Arlington County Social Services. Brittney had been in the foster care system for most of her life, never staying in one place for very long. My heart broke for her, realizing that she'd changed schools so often that she flew under the radar, no one getting to know her well enough to discover why she was struggling.

With that information, I talked to Brittney, asking her what she struggled with most, and about her time in foster care—the good and the bad. She confided that she did have trouble reading and writing, and that words—especially longer ones—were hard for her to decipher. I could tell that she felt ashamed, and I reassured her that she had no reason to feel that way. The systems she'd been a part of had failed her, and that wasn't her fault.

With her consent, I referred Brittney for an evaluation by the school system, and she was diagnosed with dyslexia. With some help from the school's reading specialist, and encouragement instead of accusations that she wasn't putting enough effort in, Brittney was like a different student after that. Once she knew what the problem was, she was determined to improve her reading skills, and she asked me for book suggestions she could check out from the library. I gave her some suggestions, but I also loaned her one of my favorite childhood books, *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. I'd challenged her to finish the book, and I was hoping that

once she did, she'd want to read the rest of the series as well. I'd been obsessed with them as a girl.

Once all the other students were gone, Brittney walked closer, the spring in her step matching the happy grin on her face. "You'll be proud of me!" she said. "I finished the book this morning."

"Oh, my gosh! That's awesome!" I responded enthusiastically. "What did you think of it?"

"I really liked it!" she answered, then proceeded to tell me some of her favorite parts, making both of us laugh. As our laughter died down, though, she grew quiet, seeming almost introspective.

"Are you okay?" I asked, concerned about the swift change in her mood.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said. "I was just thinking that I wish I had a friend like Anne."

I had so much empathy for Brittney in that moment. She'd never stayed in one place long enough to make any good, lasting friendships. I felt a kinship with her—although, while I'd pretty much stayed in the same place my entire life, I'd struggled to make friends—other than Knox and his brother—because I'd been incredibly shy. Even now, there were only a handful of people I would consider a good friend, and all of them were either Knox's teammates, or in the case of Harper and Cassidy, his teammates' significant others.

"A friend like Anne is hard to find," I responded truthfully. "But I've always found that books are some of my best friends. That might sound super nerdy, but books have always been there for me, no matter what."

Brittney stared at her ragged shoes, seeming to consider that for a moment, before she looked at me, a hopeful expression slowly replaced her forlorn one. "I like that," she finally responded.

"Oh! That reminds me. I have something for you," I said suddenly, walking over to my desk and pulling open a drawer. "I've been holding onto the second book in the series for you:

Anne of Avonlea. Do you want to borrow it?" I held the book out to her.

She looked at the book eagerly, clearly wanting to take it, but I could see her reluctance as well, as if she wasn't sure she should. When she didn't answer, I spoke again, trying to encourage her.

"I've had this one since I was a kid, too. Can you tell that I've read it a bunch of times?" I asked. "It's almost as worn as the first one. I promise not to get upset if it gets messed up or lost."

She seemed to consider it, and finally, she nodded her head and gently took the book from my outstretched hand, a blush darkening her caramel skin. "Thank you," she said, then set the copy of *Anne of Green Gables* on my desk, almost reluctantly. "I'll give you the first one back, then."

I realized she'd grown attached to the book, and didn't want to let it go, even to borrow the next one in the series. I picked it up off the desk and handed it back to her, setting it on top of the sequel I'd just lent to her, deciding to give them both to her instead.

"No, no, you keep both of them," I said. "I have an extra copy of them at home."

"Are you sure?" Brittney asked skeptically.

"Very sure."

"Okay," she said, finally giving in. "Thank you. I won't take them for granted or let anything happen to them."

I smiled. "I know," I said. "And for the record, I'm glad you're keeping the books. They should belong to someone who loves them and will appreciate them."

Seeming almost shy, Brittney looked back at the door, where all her classmates had already exited, then gave me a quick hug. "Well, I better get to lunch," she said.

"Yes, go get something to eat," I encouraged her. "I'll see you tomorrow."

“Definitely,” Brittney responded, clutching both books tightly against her chest.

* * *

BRITTNEY WASN'T in class the next day, though, or the day after that. And in the six months that I'd known her, she'd never missed a day of school, let alone two in a row. At the end of the second day, as students walked toward the buses, I made my way to the school's front office, filled with worry.

I was expecting the regular secretary, Ms. Joy, but she wasn't there. In her place stood a woman I'd never seen before. Her badge identified her as Mrs. Kim.

“Are you able to look up Brittney Powers' attendance?” I asked her. “She hasn't been here for the last two days. I'm wondering if something is wrong.”

Mrs. Kim nodded, typing something into the computer. “No one answered when we called to check on her yesterday and today,” she said, staring at the screen, and I noticed she hadn't yet made eye contact with me. “But you know how these summer school kids are. They're future criminals and welfare bums, and can't be bothered to show up and get an education.”

“Excuse me?” I responded. My tone was sharp enough that Mrs. Kim finally looked up, meeting my gaze. I could tell she was surprised by my reaction. “Brittney is a very hard worker, and a good person. She hasn't missed a single day since she transferred here in January. If she isn't at school, it's for a good reason. And I don't appreciate you talking about any of our students like that.” Without waiting for a response, I stormed out of the office, even more determined to find my missing student.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, a bad feeling started gnawing at me as soon as I woke up, and I knew it had to do with Brittney. It got

worse as I walked inside the school, and as I made my way through the halls towards my classroom, I felt people's stares on me, heard whispers as I passed by. I wondered if everyone else knew something I didn't, the eerie thought causing goose bumps to rise on my skin.

And then, as if it were fate, I noticed something.

As I passed by a bulletin board I'd never really paid attention to before, I noticed a pair of eyes staring out at me from underneath flyers about sports camps, summer programs, and college admissions. Sensing the eyes were important, I stepped closer, setting down my bags. Then, I peeled the more recent leaflets back, revealing the rest of the sign that the eyes belonged to. It was from a few months ago, about a student who went missing. I vaguely remembered hearing about her disappearance at the time. As far as I knew, the student, named Adriana Luna, had never been located. The sign also stated that she'd been on the cheerleading squad, and that her foster parents had last seen her at a cheer competition back in March.

I stepped back, studying the board from a distance, and noticed another flyer about a missing girl, then a third, both of them buried underneath more recent ones. Each one was another student who'd gone missing in the past year, and based on the information on the signs, they all had similarities to Brittney. None of the girls seemed to have much of a support system, and many of them were in foster care. Each one was naturally pretty and looked older than their age. And they all seemed to have a connection to the cheerleading squad, whether it was being friends with them, a member of the team, or cheerleaders had been the last ones to see the girls before they went missing.

A memory suddenly popped up from a few weeks ago, of Brittney excitedly telling me about a popular cheerleader eating lunch with her, out of the blue.

Almost mindlessly, I picked up my bags, then made my way to my classroom in a daze. I could barely focus through my classes—which Brittney once again didn't show up for—and when the school day was finally over, I rushed down the

hall to my fellow teacher, Amelia's, classroom. She was seated at her desk, grading quizzes.

"I need to talk to you," I said as I closed the door behind me. She was about ten years older than me and had taught at Green Valley High School for her entire career. She was also a lot more outgoing than me, and always knew the latest gossip. She'd always been kind to me.

"What's up?" she asked, quickly glancing at me before returning her attention to the quiz she was checking.

"One of my favorite students, Brittney Powers, has missed school three days in a row. I'm really worried about her. And I'm just realizing that girls going missing seems to be a trend at this school lately."

Amelia didn't seem at all surprised at my statement, continuing to grade as she responded. "Was she a cheerleader?" she asked.

I was taken aback for a moment. "So people know about this?" I finally responded. "Are the cheerleaders *kidnapping people*?"

Amelia sounded resigned as she answered. "I'm not sure what's going on. But a few girls with connections to the cheerleading squad have gone missing. I've heard that they're being trafficked."

"Trafficked?" I repeated. My stomach churned, disgusted at the thought of Brittney and girls like her being bought and sold for pleasure. "Why am I just now hearing about this?"

"I'm sorry, I guess I should've said something. I figured you'd heard the rumors, same as me."

"Brittney just told me recently about a cheerleader that randomly had lunch with her. She was surprised the girl even knew she existed."

"That sounds similar to the other missing girls."

"Well, surely the police are investigating this, right? There must be a detective I can call and report that Brittney's missing, too."

“Last I heard, the police decided they were runaways and closed their cases.”

The blows just kept coming. “What?” I asked, completely stunned. “Surely the police aren’t that incompetent. It only took me five minutes to notice a pattern,” I said. It felt like the floor had dropped out from under me, and my stomach knotted with fear for Brittney. While he’d tried to keep the worst parts from me, I knew enough about Knox’s job to understand that trafficking was one of the worst things that could happen to someone.

“The girls are all poor and don’t have families. Honestly, no one seems to care enough to look deeper into it,” Amelia answered.

“Well, I care,” I said indignantly.

“Plus, the school definitely doesn’t want to announce that students are going missing, and get all the parents in an uproar. Especially since they’re all connected to the cheerleading squad. Can you imagine the next School Board meeting if that news got out?”

“Then that’s exactly what needs to happen,” I said.

Amelia pulled a school calendar from one of her desk drawers. “Their next meeting is in two months,” she said, sounding disappointed. “That’s a long time from now.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said, “but luckily, that was Plan B. Although, parents really do need to know about this.”

“What’s Plan A?”

“My best friend, Knox. He’s part of the Human Trafficking Task Force with the FBI.”

“It sounds like he’s the perfect person to report this to, then,” Amelia said, finally sounding a little bit hopeful.

“Yeah. He is,” I responded, determined. “Do you know the names of the other girls who have been missing?”

Amelia thought for a minute. “I do,” she said. “Do you want me to write them down for you?” she asked.

“That would be amazing. Will you put Brittney Powers on the list, too, so I can just give all the names to Knox at once?”

She agreed, and a few minutes later—she’d had to do some searching for one of the names—I had the list in my hand, the names written in her neat handwriting: Stephanie Vargas, Adriana Luna, and Daniella Ortiz.

I said goodbye to Amelia, and since I was done for the day, I hurried back to my classroom and grabbed my things. I remembered Knox had said he planned to be in his office all day to get paperwork done, so I headed straight there.

I attempted to hold myself together as I drove, tried repeating to myself that Knox would help, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Brittney and the other girls. I couldn’t stop imagining how terrified they probably were, how badly someone might be treating them at that exact moment, and I could no longer hold back the tears.

KNOX

I'd just finished making notes for an upcoming trial I'd have to testify at when my desk phone rang. Saving the document to my computer, I picked up the receiver, my mind already on the next task I needed to get done.

"Knox Richards, FBI Human Trafficking Task Force," I answered, using my standard greeting. I'd found that answering the phone that way encouraged people to get to the point, which led to shorter phone calls. Most of my team did the same thing.

"There's a woman here asking for you," said a voice I recognized as one of the receptionists. "I think she said her name's Jenny, but it's hard to understand her because she's crying."

"Jenny?" I repeated, trying to think of anyone I knew by that name, especially one who would be crying and asking for *me*.

"Wait. I think she said her name's Penny," the receptionist corrected.

My heart dropped. "Penny's here? And she's crying? I'll be right down."

Worried, I hung up the phone and grabbed my badge that allowed me access to the doors in the building, then headed to the elevator. As I pushed the button, I heard footsteps behind me, and glanced back to see two of my teammates, Kate and Ally, approaching.

"Why is Penny crying?" Kate asked.

I wasn't surprised that the two women on my team heard my conversation, since their cubicles were close to mine. I also wasn't surprised that they'd joined me at the elevators. While most people would only do that because they were being nosy, Ally and Kate were friends with Penny, and I knew that they genuinely cared and wanted to help.

"I'm not sure yet," I replied.

I considered just taking the stairs, but the reception area was six floors below us, and the elevator would probably be faster.

"We'll come with you," Ally said, and I nodded absently.

If it was anyone other than my teammates trying to help, I would say no, but I knew Kate and Ally just wanted to make sure she was okay.

Also, I knew they wouldn't listen to me even if I did say no.

The elevator finally arrived, and the three of us stepped in. Just as I pressed the button for the ground floor and the doors began to close, though, an arm appeared in the gap. With a barrier in the way, the doors opened again, and Wes and Liam shoved their way inside.

"What's going on?" Wes asked.

I started to explain, but Kate was faster. "Penny is downstairs in tears. We're going to check on her," she said.

"Why is she crying?" Liam asked, the worry evident in his tone.

"We don't know," Ally answered.

Then, just as the doors started to shut, the rest of my team—Nolan, Evan, Gabe, Mason, and Ryder—pushed their way into the elevator as well, crowding around us and finally allowing the door to close.

As the elevator descended, the nine of them talked quietly amongst themselves, trying to come up with reasons why Penny was crying in the FBI's reception area. I felt as if we'd been shoved into a clown car, and I would've found the

situation funny if I wasn't so anxious to get to Penny and make sure she was okay.

Finally, we arrived at the ground floor and the doors opened, and then Penny was rushing towards me, tears running down her cheeks. It always killed me to see her cry.

"I need your help," she sobbed, stepping into my embrace, and I immediately wrapped my arms around her.

"I've got you," I assured her, resting my chin on the top of her head as I rubbed her back. "Whatever it is, we'll fix it."

I felt Penny nod against my chest, her tears soaking into my suit. "Girls are going missing from my school, and there's rumors they're being trafficked. And now one of my favorite students, Brittney, is missing, too."

"We'll figure it out," I assured her, but inwardly, I was swearing up a storm.

Penny was about to get first-hand experience in human trafficking investigations, and I'd never wanted that for her. She was so sweet and optimistic, even after everything she'd been through with her family. I worried that such a close encounter with my world would tarnish her belief that good would always overcome evil. Sometimes, good could only chip away at it, a little at a time, and that lesson could be hard to swallow.

Before I could say anything else, my teammates quickly surrounded us, one of them with a box of tissues in their hand.

"Let's get back to our conference room so you can tell us what happened," Evan said compassionately, glancing around the lobby. "We're getting a lot of attention right now."

I glanced around as well, and just as he'd said, several strangers were staring at us, along with a few FBI employees, including the receptionists. I was sure we were making quite a scene, so I followed Evan's advice, and led Penny towards the elevators, the others following behind me.

"We're going to find them," Ally promised as she walked on Penny's other side. "Everything's going to work out."

KNOX

A couple of hours later, after getting as much information as we could from Penny, Liam and I arrived at Arlington County Social Services, which was housed inside a large, brick and glass building. We made our way inside and requested to talk to someone about Brittney Powers. It didn't take long for the social worker to come out and greet us, then lead us to a conference room to talk.

"I'm Brittney's worker, Lashanda Graves. What can I help you with?" she asked.

She looked young, like she'd just graduated from college, and I could tell by her shaky hands and her timid voice that she felt intimidated by us. I assumed that she didn't often have FBI agents arrive at her workplace to speak with her. I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, and keep my tumultuous emotions off of my face.

Liam made the introductions. "Thank you for seeing us so quickly. I'm Special Agent Foster, and this is Special Agent Richards," he said, gesturing to me. "We've gotten a report from Brittney's school that she hasn't been in attendance for a few days, and there's some concern that she may be a victim of human trafficking."

"Human trafficking?" Lashanda repeated, the shock evident on her face.

"When's the last time you saw or spoke with Brittney?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away, her eyebrows furrowed as she considered the question.

"Oh, I remember," she said after a moment, then began flipping through what looked like a planner. "I saw her last week when I took her to a dentist appointment. That was last Tuesday."

"Was she acting differently than normal? Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?" Liam asked.

She nodded. "Well, now that you mention it, she definitely seemed more... upbeat than usual, especially for a dental cleaning. She's usually pretty reserved, but she was in a really good mood that day."

"Did she tell you why she was in a good mood?" Liam asked.

"She just said she'd made a new friend, who was a cheerleader, and part of the popular crowd. I couldn't get anything else out of her—she just said she didn't want to 'jinx it' by talking about it."

"And you haven't heard from her since then?" I asked. When she shook her head, I asked another question. "Does she live with foster parents, or maybe in a group home?"

"She lives with foster parents. Their names are Jan and Dwight Harris," Lashanda said, then her brow furrowed. "They aren't the best foster parents, though. And before you ask, I haven't heard from them this week. But if she's missing or if there's an issue, they should've told me."

"Would you be able to give them a call and check on her?" Liam asked.

She glanced at her watch before answering. "Actually, if it's okay with you, I think I'm going to pay them a surprise visit. I have two other foster kids living there also, who I'm now worried about. And it's time for my monthly visit to the house anyways. The kids should be home, so this is the perfect time to go. Do you want to join me?"

"That would be great," Liam said, and I agreed.

A few minutes later, we were following Lashanda's car through the streets of Arlington. As we drove, the neighborhoods gradually became worse, until we parked in front of a house I could only describe as dilapidated. It was a ranch style, and had clearly seen better days—I could tell that it had been painted white at one point, but was now chipped and fading in places. The grass in the front yard was getting long, and the carport was stacked floor to ceiling with toys and junk, leaving no room for an actual vehicle. The only thing that appeared to be in good shape was the Cross hanging above the front door.

Two dark-haired little girls were jumping on a rusty trampoline next to the carport, but as soon as they noticed us, they jumped down and ran over, both of them studying Liam and me curiously as they hugged their social worker. I wasn't great with ages, but I guessed that they were both somewhere between five and ten years old, and I assumed they were sisters, since they looked alike. Their clothes and shoes were a little baggy, but clean, and they looked happy, with wide grins on their faces.

The social worker returned their hugs as the girls spoke over each other, excited for Lashanda's attention, and I heard Brittney's name at least once, though I couldn't quite catch what they said about her. Lashanda listened to both girls, appearing to be genuinely interested in what they had to say, and I could tell that she was good at her job.

Once they'd updated her on the important things they'd done since last seeing Lashanda, the two girls turned their attention to Liam and me. "Who are you?" the younger one asked curiously.

The social worker answered for us. "These are my friends Liam and Knox," she said.

She introduced the younger girl as Riley, and the older one as Susie, and as Liam and I greeted them, I heard a door squeak open nearby.

"Lashanda? What are you doing here?" a voice asked, the tone somewhere between confusion and hostility.

I turned towards the front door and saw a middle-aged woman standing there, dressed in pajamas, even though it was the middle of the afternoon. Even though it was subtle, I caught Lashanda's frown before she smoothed her expression.

"I'm here for my monthly visit, and to see Brittney," the social worker responded.

To my surprise, Lashanda seemed much more confident than when it was just Liam and me, and I could tell that she was now in her element. She untangled herself from Susie and Riley and made her way through the tall grass towards the house. The girls followed behind her, making me imagine little ducklings, and Liam and I took up the rear. I was worried when I noticed that the wooden front steps were sagging, and they creaked menacingly even under Susie and Riley's feet, but fortunately they didn't collapse, even under my weight.

The woman stood just inside the doorway as we entered the house, and I noticed that she was wringing her hands anxiously, and that she was breathing hard, her face shiny with sweat even though the air conditioning was running. I wondered if this was her normal presentation when Lashanda visited, or if her behavior was out of the ordinary.

"This really isn't a good time. I wish you'd made an appointment so Dwight could be here, too," the woman said, but Lashanda disregarded the statement, quickly cutting to the chase.

"Where's Brittney? I need to see her."

I watched as the woman visibly flinched, her face becoming pale. "Well, I've been meaning to call you, but I just can't get a spare minute with these two underfoot," she said, gesturing to Susie and Riley. "I think Brittney ran away, because we haven't seen her in a few days."

"How many days is a few?" Lashanda asked, clearly frustrated.

"Four, I think," the woman answered sheepishly.

"You haven't seen her in *four days*?" Lashanda repeated. "And you didn't tell anyone?"

“I meant to. But like I said, I’ve been busy.”

“There’s no way you’ve been so busy that you couldn’t call and report a missing child. Or, if nothing else, you could’ve at least texted me. That would’ve taken 10 seconds,” Lashanda said, then turned to Liam and me. “I’m going to step outside and call my supervisor about this. I’ll be right back.”

I nodded at Lashanda, hearing her open the door and step outside, and then I focused on the foster mother, Jan. I wanted to ask her some questions.

“Why do you think Brittney ran away?” I asked.

“Well, I doubt anyone kidnapped her. If they did, they would’ve brought her right back,” Jan responded, her tone sardonic, indicating that I wouldn’t get much help from her.

“Mind if we check out her room?” I asked instead.

“Go ahead,” she replied, pointing behind me. “It’s down that hall, the last one on the left.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I began making my way down the dim hallway, noticing the hardwood floors underneath my feet. I could tell that they had once been in good condition, and knew they’d probably been expensive to install. But just like the rest of the property that I’d seen so far, the floors were now showing a good deal of wear, with scuff marks and deep gouges clearly visible. I also made note of the religious paraphernalia on the walls, including Bible verses and a few very intricate Crosses.

As I neared Brittney’s room, I pulled a pair of latex gloves from one of my pockets and put them on so that I didn’t compromise any possible evidence in the room. From behind me, I heard some rustling, indicating that Liam was doing the same thing. I opened the door, Liam stepping in after me and then shutting it. Both of us took a moment to glance around the room.

“I feel like I just stepped back in time to boot camp,” Liam quipped.

I had to agree with him. Brittney's bedroom bore little resemblance to what I considered a "normal" teenage room, one that was messy and filled with belongings. Instead, her bed was made perfectly, as if in anticipation of a drill sergeant's inspection, the walls were bare except for a couple pieces of religious artwork, and the only other pieces of furniture were a dresser and a nightstand. Other than a stack of books and a lamp on the nightstand, nothing else was even visible in the room—not even dust. The room—the entire house, really—made me feel very uneasy for some reason.

I glanced at Liam, who wore the same look of apprehension that I probably did. Then, without a word, we got to work, each moving to a different area of the small room. I started with the closet, and when I opened it, I found clothes that had been hung up neatly, and three pairs of shoes lined up on the floor. There was nothing else inside.

"Nothing in the dresser other than clothes. I'm checking the bed," Liam said as he searched.

"It's like a museum in here," I responded. "Where's all her stuff?"

I checked the drawers of her nightstand, which were bare, then picked up the first book in the stack. "*Anne of Green Gables*," I read to myself, then flipped open the worn cover.

On the first page of the book, I noticed handwriting: "***This Book is the Property of Penelope Ann Russell***," it read in a familiar scrawl, and I was suddenly lost in memories of one particular summer during middle school. Penny had been completely obsessed with *Anne of Green Gables* at the time. She read the entire series in what must've been record time, then immediately re-read them at least once, saying she wanted to make sure she didn't miss anything.

Then, she started wearing her hair in braided pigtails every day and using some of her mom's makeup to draw large, dark freckles all over her face. She would only refer to me as Gilbert, and constantly begged me to act out scenes from the books with her. And if Grayson was around—and if he was bored or in a particularly cooperative mood—she'd rope him

into acting scenes out as well. To my dismay, my mom encouraged her, buying Penny a straw hat and finding her a few old-fashioned dresses at the thrift store.

I was just grateful that I was faster and taller than Penny by then. She'd tried several times to hit me in the head with her chalkboard, claiming it was a pivotal part of the story and promising that she wouldn't do it hard enough to hurt. I hadn't liked the gleam in her eye when she said that, though, and every time she got her chalkboard out after that, I always found a chore to do—like mowing the lawn, or scrubbing the bathtub—claiming my parents wouldn't let me hang out with her until it was done. She'd always roll her eyes at me, then keep me company while I did whatever task I'd come up with.

Smiling at the memory, I put Penny's book down, then looked through the others in the stack, all of which had been checked out from the library.

Liam interrupted my thoughts as I put the last book back on the nightstand. "Did she actually live here?" he asked, sounding baffled.

"Well, she must've spent time here," I said, grabbing the copy of *Anne of Green Gables* and holding it up. "Otherwise I don't know how this book got here. It belongs to Penny." Liam reached for the book, and I handed it to him, then pulled off my gloves. "I'm going to text Pen and make sure Brittney was supposed to have this book."

Mere moments after I hit send, she responded: "You only found one of my old books? I gave her two: *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea*."

"Penny said she gave Brittney two books," I updated Liam, and we both searched the room for the second one, but didn't find it.

"She must have it with her," Penny texted back after I told her it wasn't there. "She was really excited when I gave the books to her, and I don't think she'd lose them or let something happen to them. I have a feeling that she doesn't have much to begin with."

Looking around the sparse room, I had to give Penny credit, because she was exactly right. I figured there was a good chance that Penny was also right about the book being a treasured possession for Brittney. She probably did have it with her.

As I tucked my phone back into my pocket, I suddenly heard raised voices coming from the front of the house. Unsnapping my holster and keeping my hand on the butt of my gun, I followed Liam out of the room, making our way towards the shouting. Standing next to the door we'd come in through, Lashanda and Jan were arguing, and Jan was using her body as a barrier between the foster care worker and the two little girls. Lashanda wore a look of determination on her face, while Jan looked angry, and the girls looked as if they were near tears.

“What’s the issue?” Liam barked out, stepping between the two women in an effort to defuse the situation.

Lashanda spoke first, explaining that her supervisor had directed her to remove the girls from the home because of the foster parents’ negligence in reporting Brittney missing. She only got a few words out before Jan began to yell, though. Undoubtedly confused and scared, Susie began to sob, and as the tears rolled down her cheeks, Riley, seeing her older sister so upset, began to cry as well.

Letting Liam play mediator, I approached the girls, trying to look as unimposing as possible so that I didn’t scare them further.

I crouched down in front of them. “Will you show me your trampoline?” I asked, just loud enough for them to hear me over the commotion.

Without warning, Riley flung herself into my arms, weeping, and then Susie did as well. Still in a crouch, it took a good deal of strength to keep my balance, the weight and momentum of the girls almost sending all three of us toppling backwards. They both clung to me, and, not seeing a better way, I stood, lifting them both up with me. As I straightened, holding one girl in each arm, I cursed my knees, which ached

prematurely from the heavier-than-normal load, and the years of overuse.

I navigated my way around Jan, Liam, and Lashanda, and as I neared the door, the foster mother began to yell for me to stop. Tuning her out, I quickly stepped through the door and descended the stairs. Being inside the house had felt ominous and caused goose bumps to emerge on my skin, and I was grateful to be outside, even in the humid, miserable August heat.

I took a deep, relieved breath, then set both girls down on the grass gently. They seemed calmer, but tears were still silently sliding down Riley's cheeks, and Susie was sniffing, as if just barely holding back more sobs. They needed a distraction.

"I don't know how to jump on a trampoline. Will you teach me?" I asked.

It wasn't true, of course, but it was the first thing I came up with in the moment. Luckily, it worked, and the girls led me towards the heap of rusting metal. They both climbed onto the mat, then gestured for me to join them.

"That's okay. I'll just learn from watching you two jump," I told them.

"No! You have to jump with us!" Susie demanded.

I shook my head, but neither girl would accept that answer. When Riley started to climb off again, I glanced back at the house, then gave in.

"Okay, okay, I'll get on. Just give me a second," I said, holding my hand out, and both girls cheered excitedly.

With resignation, I took off my suit jacket and went to the car, leaving the jacket and my holster in the backseat and securing my gun in its case and locking it. Then I returned to the trampoline and took off my shoes, placing them underneath. Knowing Liam would never let me live it down, and that he'd probably film me and send the video to the rest of the team, I pulled myself up onto the trampoline anyways.

"Yay!" Riley cheered.

Then she and Susie proceeded to instruct me on the best ways to jump on a trampoline. Once they were satisfied with my basic technique, they moved onto teaching me flips and somersaults, demonstrating them for me and then pleading with me until I tried as well. What they didn't know was that as a kid, I'd practiced flips and somersaults on my trampoline until I could almost do them in my sleep, and luckily, I'd somehow retained those skills over the years. I did one of those flips for Susie and Riley, and they were amazed, clapping and cheering for me to do another, and another, and another.

And it was then, as I finished another back flip and landed on my feet, that I heard Liam's voice behind me.

"I think you missed your calling as a gymnast," he said with a laugh. I ignored his joke, and slid off the trampoline.

Lashanda had been next to Liam, and she moved towards the trampoline, addressing Susie and Riley.

"Girls, I have some bad news," she warned them reluctantly. "I need you to pack your things. We're moving you to a new home."

They became tearful again, and Lashanda attempted to console them while also trying to convince them to go back inside and pack their things.

"Not without him!" Susie said, pointing to me.

"Sweetie, he's a police officer. I'm sure he's too busy to stay here and help you pack," Lashanda replied, her tone a mixture of pleading, embarrassment, and desperation.

"I don't mind," I said with a shrug, realizing that everything would go more smoothly if I helped.

I didn't notice the foster mom anywhere as Liam and I followed Lashanda and the girls to their room. The five of us barely fit in the small space: There were a couple of dressers in the room, covered with all kinds of things I couldn't identify, a tent that looked like a castle, and a bunk bed against one wall. It was much messier than Brittney's room, with

unicorns, rainbows, and sequins everywhere I looked. Even the bedding had matching sets of unicorns on them.

“I hope we have a bunk bed at our next house,” Riley said softly.

“They are pretty cool,” I agreed. “And you know what? My best friend loves unicorns, too. She’d probably lose her mind if she saw this room, and want to decorate hers the exact same way, including the bunk bed. And I bet she’d want to sleep on the top.”

“A grown-up on the top bunk?” Susie laughed. “How would she get up there?”

“Well, I happen to know that she’s an expert at climbing things. When we were kids, she climbed trees all the time, and she was even better at it than me. So, I bet that ladder would be no problem for her.”

“Wouldn’t she break it?” Susie asked.

“Hmmm,” I answered, pausing as if I was considering it. “You know, I bet these beds can hold a good bit of weight. Should we see if it can hold me?” I asked, pretending that I was about to climb up the ladder.

“No!” The girls giggled, and I stepped away from the ladder, pretending to be offended, which just made them laugh harder.

“Well then we better get all this packed up before my friend sees it,” I said, trying to encourage them.

The two girls agreed, and that was when Lashanda stepped in, instructing them to get their clothes out and put them in the duffle bags. As I stood back and let them work, Liam’s phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked it.

“It’s Nolan returning my call,” Liam said. “Let me go answer this.”

I nodded, and he left the room. I stayed and helped the girls pack their things, and once they were done, Liam and I carried all of it to Lashanda’s car and saw them off, the girls in tears again, which I didn’t blame them for. It was a lot of

unexpected upheaval, and the afternoon's roller coaster of emotions was completely reasonable.

Lashanda thanked us both as she opened her car door, and Liam had a short conversation with her as the girls said goodbye to me again. Then, with a final wave, they were out of sight, and I turned towards Liam, anticipating that he would tell me what he'd said to Lashanda before she left, or give me an update about his phone call with Nolan.

"In case I ever need to blackmail you, I now have plenty of material to choose from. I got a *ton* of pictures and videos of you on the trampoline," he said instead, taking me so off guard that I couldn't help but laugh.

"You would've gotten on the trampoline, too, if they'd been giving *you* those pitiful, puppy dog eyes," I responded.

Liam scoffed. "I don't know about that," he said. "Everyone knows you're just a big softie on the inside. It's why your nickname is Teddy Bear."

I rolled my eyes at the absurd moniker I'd been given during my time as a SEAL, and that continued to follow me. "Anyways," I said, changing the subject. "What did Nolan say when you talked to him?" I asked, easily switching back into work mode, and Liam did the same.

"He's calling Arlington PD to run the official search for Brittney, and we're going to investigate the trafficking angle. He asked us to hang around here for now and catch Arlington up on what we know when they get here. He said they'll probably use the house as their base of operations, at least temporarily."

"I'm sure Jan and Dwight will be thrilled," I said sarcastically.

"Also, I told Lashanda that there'll be an investigation into Brittney's disappearance, and that we'd need someone from Social Services here, since they're the legal guardians. She said she'd let the on-call social worker know that they needed to head over here."

“That makes sense,” I responded, then looked around, making sure the foster mom wasn’t lurking nearby. “Do you think Jan knows something? She’s awfully indifferent about Brittney’s disappearance.”

“I’ll mention it to Arlington PD when they get here, but I’m leaning towards this being related to the school and the cheerleaders, not the foster parents. Just because she doesn’t seem to care much about Brittney doesn’t mean she did something illegal.”

I considered that for a moment. “I agree,” I finally said. “I’m getting weird vibes from the foster mom—the whole house, really—but I don’t think she’s involved in the human trafficking. Maybe she’s just feeling guilty about not reporting the disappearance.”

“Yeah. Probably,” Liam said.

* * *

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, several Arlington PD officers had arrived, along with the on-call social worker, and the foster father, Dwight. He and Jan seemed particularly on edge as law enforcement officers made themselves at home in their kitchen and living room.

A few minutes earlier, a search dog and its handler had arrived, using one of Brittney’s pillowcases to begin searching for her, just in case she was somehow still in the area. The German Shepherd reminded me a little bit of Neo, making me eager to get home to him. And I was eager to call Penny and make sure she was handling everything okay.

She was on my mind for another reason, though. She’d been the only person in Brittney’s life who’d noticed that she’d disappeared and had been concerned enough to do something about it. I admired Penny for being so caring, and for speaking up. And I was even prouder because she’d taken her own childhood experiences of feeling unnoticed and ignored, and instead of letting it harden her heart and becoming bitter or mean, she’d turned her experiences into a

skill. She took the most painful things in her life, and used it to find other kids who blended into the background and were overlooked as well.

* * *

I SAT in the high school auditorium with my parents and my brother as we waited for the band concert to finally begin. Even though I was a freshman, I was the starting catcher on the varsity baseball team, and I was missing tonight's game. They'd had to replace me with a junior who was usually a benchwarmer, and my team had given me a hard time about it for over a week. But I was willing to deal with their complaints to support Penny at her first concert. Even though, based on the ear-splitting noises I heard every time I walked past the band room during school, I'd probably end up with a splitting headache by the end of the night. I was willing to deal with that, too.

"Where's Pam and Michael?" My mom asked as the lights began to dim. We'd been holding three seats next to us for Penny's parents and sister, but they were still empty.

"Maybe they sat somewhere else," my dad suggested quietly, the sympathetic look on his face telling me he didn't truly believe that.

"They knew we were saving seats for them," my mom responded, and I could hear the irritation in her voice.

Before I could respond, the heavy, red curtains at the edge of the stage began to open, and I easily found Penny in the front row, her flute clutched to her chest. Even from my seat near the back of the auditorium, her pale face and the way her shoulders had crept up towards her ears told me that she was nervous. And while it usually took a lot for me to get upset, I could almost feel her anxiety as my own. I took a deep breath and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to fight the need to go to Penny and comfort her.

As the band began to play the first song, which sounded like something from Harry Potter, my mom rested her hand on

my arm and glanced at me, obviously picking up on my distress. I shook my head at her, not wanting to go into a long-winded explanation during the concert. Thankfully, as the band continued to play, Penny's shoulders—and then the rest of her—began to relax, and I felt myself calming as well.

As the concert dragged on, though, I became anxious for a different reason. Penny's family still hadn't shown up, and she was going to be really disappointed when she realized they hadn't come.

Once the performance was over, we waited for Penny in the lobby, and she joined us a few minutes later, still beautiful even though the heavy layers of makeup she'd put on before the concert had started melting off under the bright stage lights. She practically beamed as my parents, Grayson, and I congratulated her, but when she looked around and didn't see her family, her smile dimmed.

"Where's Annabelle and my parents?" she asked hesitantly.

My mom spoke before I could, and I shoved my hands in my pockets, dreading Penny's reaction.

"They didn't make it, sweetie," my mom said solemnly, and I watched Penny's happy expression transform into disappointment.

"Oh," she said, her gaze dropping towards the floor.

"I'm sure they have a good explanation," my dad, always the fixer, said cheerfully.

I found it ironic that even though my dad's job gave him a lot of responsibility, and he sometimes had to travel to other states or even out of the country, he still had a stronger relationship with Penny than her own dad did, and spent more quality time with her. "They're going to be sad they missed this. I hope someone took a video so they can watch it later and see what a great job you did."

"Thanks," Penny responded, blushing at the compliment, but clearly still upset.

He nodded at her. "We'll take you home, of course," he said confidently, motioning for us to head towards the door. "Who's up for a trip to The Creamery on the way? My sweet tooth is acting up."

Getting ice cream seemed to improve Penny's mood significantly, and the five of us couldn't stop laughing as we ate, and during the entire drive home. But everyone's good mood died, replaced with more negative emotions, as we pulled into the driveway. As my dad put the car in park, her parents and sister were climbing out of their car, Annabelle carrying several shopping bags. It appeared they'd taken Annabelle on a shopping spree instead of attending Penny's concert, and for the second time in one night, I came dangerously close to losing my calm.

I was glad when, once again, my parents took over the situation. Quickly engaging the emergency brake, my dad was the first one of us out of the car, striding over the grass towards Penny's house. It seemed like the rest of us were frozen in place inside the car as we watched. And I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could tell my dad was giving them a piece of his mind. Penny was sitting in between Grayson and me, and when she started shifting, as if impatient to get out, I grabbed her hand and held onto it. She glanced at me in confusion.

"Wait until my dad gives the signal that it's safe to get out," I told her, still watching my dad. The signal was something he'd taught us to do in stressful situations, and one that he'd told Grayson and me that he used as a SEAL.

Time passed slowly as we all watched my dad talk to Penny's family, but finally, he made the gesture, and I reluctantly let go of Penny's hand and got out. I helped her out, Grayson exiting the car on the other side, then walked next to her as she made her way towards her house. I noticed the barely-concealed look of frustration on my dad's face, the embarrassed expressions her parents wore, and Annabelle's triumphant smile. My dad hugged Penny tightly, then patted her on the back and started towards our house.

“I’m sorry we didn’t come to your concert, Penny,” her dad said, sounding genuine. “Annabelle was upset because of some boy troubles, and we took her shopping to cheer her up. We completely lost track of time.”

Her parents hugged her as well, then quickly made their way inside, as if afraid my dad would come back for round two of his lecture. Penny, Annabelle, and I remained standing in the driveway awkwardly, and then Annabelle spoke up.

“I got you a present. I know how much you love to read,” Annabelle said cheerfully, as soon as she heard the front door shut behind her parents. She began searching through one of her bags, then pulled out a book, thrusting it at Penny. In the dim lights coming from both of our houses, I was able to make out the title: Makeovers for Nerds: How to Change Everything About Your Hair, Makeup, Style, and Personality.

“See, we didn’t completely forget you!” Annabelle said smugly, then twirled away from us, headed inside as well. She couldn’t resist one last dig, though. “I’m hoping the book will help you stop embarrassing me when we’re in public together,” she called out.

Penny just stared straight ahead, as if in a daze, giving me a chance to snatch the book away from her. I opened it and flipped through the pages, not quite believing a book like that actually existed. I was hoping that Annabelle was joking, or that the book was just a prank.

And, it wasn’t.

“A company actually chose to publish this? And a store agreed to sell it?” I said in disbelief, then strode a few steps towards my family’s trash can and threw the book inside. “Just ignore her, Pen. If anyone is embarrassing, it’s Annabelle. She’s desperate to get under your skin.”

“I know,” Penny finally said, but I could tell my words hadn’t really penetrated. “I’m going to bed.”

“Are you sure? You can come back to my house and watch a movie first,” I offered, but she just shook her head.

“That’s okay. I’m really tired,” she answered, and feeling defeated, I watched her walk away.

PENNY

After sobbing to Knox and the rest of his team, I was completely drained, and when I got home afterwards, I went straight to bed, intending to read some of my current book, but within minutes, I fell into a deep sleep. When I woke up, I had a bunch of new messages on the group text I was on with my friends Ally, Kate, Evie, Harper, and Cassidy. I knew all of them because they were either on Knox's FBI team or were dating members of the team (or in Evie's case, should be dating one).

The first part of the text conversation I'd slept through involved Kate and Ally asking who was free to meet for a girls' night that evening to help me get my mind off of my worry for Brittney. Everyone was free, or able to move plans around so that they could come, and the rest of the conversation was discussing who would host it and who would bring what foods and drinks. They ended up deciding to meet at the house Harper and her fiancé, Knox's team leader Nolan, had recently purchased, and I was glad they also preferred quiet nights at home over going out to bars together.

They'd asked for my input several times during the conversation, and I also had a couple of missed calls from Harper and Kate. The last text, from only a few minutes ago, asked if I was okay.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I fell asleep, which is why I missed all of the calls and texts," I responded.

"Oh, good! We were about to come over and check on you!" Harper said, the first to respond, and I replied with a

smiley face, grateful that I had such good friends.

Then a text from Evie appeared. “Make sure to be at Harper’s house at 6:00 tonight,” it said. I loved Evie, and she was always well intentioned, but she could be incredibly bossy, even over text message.

“What if I already have plans?” I responded, unable to resist that small amount of pushback.

“Then get ready to be kidnapped. This is not optional,” Evie responded, and followed that up with a winking face emoji, as if trying to soften her words, even though we all knew she was serious.

“Evie, what have I told you about kidnapping?” Harper responded, then added three laughing-crying emoji’s in a row. It was especially funny since Harper had recently experienced her own, real kidnapping.

“You’re so boring!” Evie replied with a different laughter emoji.

I smiled at their banter—they’d been best friends for a really long time, and were always hilarious together.

Then, another text came in from Harper. “We’d be really sad if you couldn’t make it tonight, Penny, but we’d understand, and we *definitely* wouldn’t kidnap you.”

I shook my head in amusement, then replied. “I don’t have any plans. I’ll be there!” I said, and received several celebratory emoji’s and GIFs in reply.

A couple of hours later, I rang Harper’s doorbell, and she greeted me with a hug.

“Come in! How are you doing?” she asked, studying me. She was a therapist, and I always felt like she could read people really well, including me. I wasn’t sure what she saw in my expression.

“I’m hanging in there. It’s been a tough day,” I confided. I’d struggled to keep my mind off of Brittney and the other students as I’d gotten ready, and my mood had definitely worsened since our earlier texts.

Thankfully, Harper seemed to be in friend mode, either not picking up on any underlying issues, or not commending on them. “The not-knowing is always the worst part,” she agreed empathetically as she steered me towards her kitchen. I’d only been to the house once before. “So, to take your mind off of things, we’re having a Bad Movie Night.”

“Bad Movie Night?” I repeated skeptically as we entered the kitchen, where everyone else was gathered.

“Yes!” Evie replied enthusiastically as she handed me a glass of wine. “Harper and I have been doing Bad Movie Nights for years. We take turns picking out a movie that’s supposed to be really terrible and eat lots of junk food while we make fun of it.”

“Although lately, Evie’s main goal has been to torture Nolan and see his reactions to the movies she picks,” Harper added.

“Seeing the expressions of shock and horror on his face is priceless,” Evie laughed.

“So, what are we watching tonight?” Ally asked.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Evie teased.

A few minutes later, we’d all chosen seats in the living room, and the coffee table was covered in snacks as Harper started the movie, which was called *Tusk*.

We were about halfway through it when the plot went absolutely crazy, and everyone started talking and laughing at once, unable to believe what we were seeing. Harper hit pause so that we could calm down before watching the rest.

“I can’t breathe,” Cassidy said, hunched over and holding her stomach, as if she’d laughed so hard she was in pain. “This is too much.”

“This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” Kate agreed, wiping tears of laughter from her cheeks. “Who comes up with this stuff? Who sits around and brainstorms the idea of someone being held hostage and then turned into a walrus?”

“Someone must’ve gotten high and gone to an aquarium or something,” Evie quipped. “There’s no other way.”

“Do they even have walruses in aquariums? I’ve never seen one,” Ally questioned.

“You know, I haven’t either,” Kate agreed thoughtfully.

“Well, whoever thought up this movie, they’re an evil genius,” I added.

“I’m looking it up,” Harper said, unlocking her phone. “I’ve got to find out the background of this movie. How did it get made?”

“And *why* did it get made?” Ally added. “We need to know that, too.”

By then, my stomach was aching from laughing so hard, and I could definitely call Bad Movie Night a success in terms of mostly getting my mind off of Brittney for a while.

“I found it,” Harper said with excitement, and we all got quiet as we waited for an explanation. “So, as a joke, a man in England posted an ad online offering a free room in his house, but the tenant had to be willing to sometimes dress up in a walrus costume and behave like one. It got a lot of attention, apparently, and Kevin Smith was inspired enough by it to write a movie script.”

“But why a *walrus*?” Kate laughed. “Out of all the animals that exist in the world, why that one?”

“They are pretty cool looking,” Cassidy said, sounding defensive. When all of us turned and looked at her like she was insane, she suddenly took on a look of innocence. “What?”

“I agree, if by cool looking, you mean ugliest animal ever,” Evie laughed.

“I don’t know. I think elephant seals might be uglier,” Ally disagreed.

“A few walruses have shown up in Finland lately. In the Baltic Sea,” Cassidy spoke up solemnly. “It’s been in the news a lot.”

“I thought walrus lived further north than that?” Ally asked. She had an eidetic memory, one benefit of which was remembering a lot of random facts.

“Typically, they do,” Cassidy agreed. “They’re common in the Arctic Ocean, north of Finland and Russia. Their habitats have been melting and disappearing, though, and a few have somehow made their way south.”

“What happened to them once they showed up in Finland?” Harper asked. “Did someone help them?”

Kassidy shook her head. “My government tried to help the ones that came to shore, but most of them ended up getting sick and dying, maybe because it was too warm for them. And then there was Freya, the walrus who showed up in Norway. The Norwegian government euthanized her because she was a danger to the public. She was capsizing boats to sunbathe on them, and tourists were taking selfies with her. So they decided she was a threat.”

“They euthanized her?” Harper repeated sadly.

Kassidy nodded.

“That’s awful,” I said.

We all sat quietly for a few moments, lost in our own thoughts. Eventually, Evie hit the button to resume the movie, and we were able to finish it without any more interruptions. Our thoughts had darkened by then, though, and the end of the movie had been depressing, so we were all in a somewhat reserved mood as the credits started.

As Harper turned the lights on, I checked my phone.

“I got a text from Knox. They’re done with the investigation for the night,” I told everyone, then turned to Harper. “And he has a message for you, from Nolan. His phone battery died so he can’t text you, but he should be home soon.”

“Oh, good,” Harper smiled, and I could easily see how much she loved her fiancé.

“I’ve been wondering something,” Evie suddenly spoke up, looking over at me. “What’s going on with you and Knox?”

I felt myself blush, uncomfortable being the center of attention. “What do you mean? We’re friends. We’ve known each other since we were little.”

“Hmm,” Evie answered thoughtfully, then shrugged. “It just seems like there’s more to it than friends, you know?”

I looked down at my lap, unsure what exactly Evie had observed, but too mortified to ask her. As far as I knew, Knox didn’t think of me as anything more than a friend—or even worse, a sister. And if Evie had noticed any outward signs of my feelings for Knox, I hoped he hadn’t also picked up on it. I would be mortified if he realized I had feelings for him and he didn’t return them.

I resolved to pay better attention to my interactions with Knox, and make sure I wasn’t being overly friendly. Just in case.

Harper interrupted my thoughts. “I have a better question, Evie,” she said “What’s going on with you and Gabe? That definitely doesn’t seem like a ‘just friends’ relationship.”

The others began to laugh and talk about Evie and Gabe, who seemed to have somewhat of a love-hate relationship, and I was eternally grateful to Harper for taking the attention off of me. I caught her eye and mouthed “thank you” to her, and she nodded her head, a small, knowing smile on her lips.

“I can attest that Gabe has been a real asshole at work lately. And I think it’s because you friend-zoned him. I wish you’d put him out of his misery,” Kate said, a knowing smile on her face.

“There’s no misery. And I didn’t friend-zone him!” Evie protested. “He friend-zoned himself!”

“Or maybe *he* friend-zoned *you*?” Ally asked. “Are you secretly pining for him?”

“Neither of us are pining,” Evie responded firmly.

“But how could you know that unless you talked to him about it?” Cassidy asked, pointing her finger at Evie in mock accusation.

Evie shook her head, her expression a mixture of guilt and amusement. “No comment,” she said, her smile resembling the Cheshire Cat. “Now, who wants some more snacks?”

The rest of us playfully groaned in disappointment as Evie got up and made her way towards the kitchen, definitively ending the conversation. A few moments later, she brought back a bag of cheese puffs and a package of Pull ‘n Peel Twizzlers, offering them to us. As I pulled a Twizzler out of the package, I heard a door open and shut, and then Nolan walked in.

“Having a good girls’ night?” he asked everyone, then leaned down and gave Harper a kiss on the temple. She smiled at him affectionately, and he gazed back at her like she was the best thing since sliced bread.

Someday, I want someone to look at me like that, I thought to myself, glancing away from the couple with a small pang of jealousy, knowing deep down inside that by someone, I actually meant Knox. He was the only one I wanted, and the one I doubted I’d ever have.

KNOX

The day after Liam and I visited Brittney's foster home, Kate and I took a trip to her school. We pulled out our badges as we walked into the office, showing them to the secretary, whose badge read Ms. Joy, and who appeared to be in her 60s or 70s.

"Hello, we're with the FBI," I told her. "We're here to speak to some staff members about Brittney Powers."

"Are they expecting you?" she asked, her expression uncertain.

"They are," I answered as I returned my badge to my pocket. "I spoke with Principal Sherman on the phone this morning, and she promised the school's full cooperation during our investigation."

"Principal Sherman?" Ms. Joy repeated, a deep frown line appearing between her eyebrows. "I don't think she's here right now. Let me check." She picked up her phone and began dialing a number. As she waited for the phone to connect, I noticed a man walking towards us.

"Assistant Principal Mike Turner," he introduced himself, shaking first Kate's hand, then mine, his grip firm. "I apologize for the confusion, but Principal Sherman had a last-minute appointment come up and asked me to assist you. Please, follow me."

Kate glanced at me, and I gestured for her to go first. We followed the man into a conference room, and he motioned for us both to sit.

“I understand you’d like to speak with Brittney’s teachers, and anyone else who may have information about her,” he said, sitting down as well.

“That’s correct,” Kate answered.

Since Brittney was the most recent girl to go missing—the others had disappeared at least a couple of months ago—we were focusing on her first. Someone on my team would return within the next few days to talk to the teachers of the other three students.

“And, of course, you’ll need permission from parents to speak with any students under the age of 18,” he said.

“That’s correct,” Kate agreed.

“Okay. Well, to start with, we’ve notified both of Brittney’s summer school teachers and her reading specialist, and they’ve made themselves available to talk with you today. You can let me know if there’s any other adults you need to speak with.”

“Thank you. That’s very helpful,” I said.

The assistant principal excused himself to call the first teacher down to speak with us, and as we waited, Kate turned to me.

“That was awfully efficient,” she said with a grin.

The first teacher arrived quickly, and we interviewed her, and then the reading specialist. Neither had much information for us, other than Brittney recently becoming friends with a cheerleader, which seemed to be an open secret at that point. Just like everyone else, though, neither of them knew the cheerleader’s name. It was very strange that *no one* knew who the girl was, and if it wasn’t for the fact that everyone else was saying the same things Penny was—and I would trust Penny with anything, up to and including my life—I would think there was some sort of cover-up going on.

Needless to say, we were done with the first two interviews quickly, and then Brittney’s other teacher, Penny herself, walked in, like the sun after a heavy rain.

Her presence always had that sort of effect on me—just being near her could make my day better, no matter what was going on, and that feeling had only grown stronger over the years. At that moment, though, I'd never felt such a strong pull in her direction. Her bright smile seemed to light up everything around her, stretching to each corner of the room like a brilliant star meant only for me, and I needed to touch her, to make sure she was real.

Suddenly unable to stop myself, I stood up, walking towards Penny and wrapping my arms around her in a hug. I heard her sigh contentedly, then felt her head resting against my chest. I wasn't sure how long we stood there, just holding each other—it could've been a few seconds or a few minutes—but Kate cleared her throat, bringing us back to reality. I felt Penny start to wiggle, and I stepped back, releasing her and dropping my arms to my sides.

“What was that for?” Penny asked, smiling up at me.

I shrugged, pretty sure that I should be embarrassed about basically lunging at her when she walked in, but I was too happy to care. “I guess I've missed you.”

“Are you okay?” Penny asked, studying me. “We just saw each other yesterday.”

I heard Kate make a noise, something that started as a laugh that she choked back into a cough. Penny blushed, then glared at Kate. Kate just raised her eyebrows in response, and Penny shook her head.

Unsure what their unspoken conversation was about, I pulled out a chair for Penny, then returned to my seat.

“Anyways,” Penny said, seemingly to herself.

I just stared at her, and Kate had to come to my rescue and re-start the conversation. “Thanks for coming to talk to us,” she said, suddenly back in professional mode. “I know you already told us a lot, but we have one question you might be able to help us with.”

“I'll do my best,” Penny responded optimistically, though I saw a hint of worry in her eyes, as if afraid to let us down.

“Everyone we’ve talked to—you, the foster care worker, the teacher and the reading specialist today—have mentioned Brittney recently making friends with a cheerleader. But no one knows her name. You haven’t figured it out since yesterday, have you?” Kate asked.

“I haven’t,” she replied, shaking her head. “I can try to ask around and find out, though.”

“You don’t think that would be dangerous?” I asked, running my fingers through my hair anxiously, then realizing I’d done it and smoothing it back down.

One glance at Penny told me that she’d noticed my nervous tick, and knew exactly what it meant, but she didn’t mention it, instead answering my question. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she said, then seemed to seriously consider whether or not asking around would be unsafe for her. “I mean, possibly?”

“Then no, thank you, but we *do not* need you to ask around,” I responded decisively.

Penny scowled at my answer, and Kate smothered a laugh, both of them clearly believing I was being dramatic. I ignored their reactions, though, knowing just how far I was willing to go to keep Penny safe.

When I didn’t say anything else, Kate released a sigh. “What about the cheerleading coach?” she asked Penny. “Do you know her name, or have her contact info?”

“I can ask around,” Penny said pointedly, glancing at me knowingly before returning her gaze to Kate. I frowned, not finding her funny.

Kate started to say something else, but before she could, both of our phones beeped. I pulled mine out, then saw the group text Nolan had sent to the entire team, asking us to return to the office for a meeting.

“Sorry. Got a text from Nolan. We have to go,” I said, and Kate nodded, looking at her phone as well.

“Oh, okay,” Penny replied. “Well, be safe.”

I nodded, then paused for a moment, making eye contact with her so she knew how serious I was. “And don’t go ‘asking around’ about anything,” I told her.

PENNY

The following day at school, I did indeed ask around to find out the name of the mysterious cheerleader, and the coach. Finding out the coach's name was easy, but getting the cheerleader's was much harder. It took most of the day, because everyone I asked gave me another name that they promised would know, and then that person would say the same thing.

Between each period, I was calling other teachers' classroom phones to talk to them, or hurrying through the halls, looking for certain students who I'd been told *definitely* knew the name. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any actual cheerleaders who were taking summer school classes, making my task even harder. I finally succeeded in discovering the cheerleader's identity, though, and I also learned that cheerleading camp would start the following Monday, in preparation for the upcoming football season. I was assured that both the cheerleader in question, Lana Bannister, and the coach, Christina Parks, would be there.

Once I had the information, I only texted it to Kate, along with a couple of pictures I'd found of Lana on social media. She must've told Knox, though, because few minutes later, he called to lecture me about 'asking around' when I was told not to, and making myself a target for the traffickers.

Once he had that out of his system, and had made me promise to never do something like that again, he also said he'd called because he had to work late. Like on his other late days, he asked if I could stop at his house to feed and walk

Neo. And then I always asked if I could just take Neo home with me instead, so he didn't get lonely. Like usual, Knox had agreed.

At Knox's townhouse, I let Neo out of his crate, which he stayed in during the day—I had one at my house as well, for the times he stayed with me. As a former military dog, Neo had spent much of his life in kennels and crates. I'd expected him to want as much freedom as possible now, and resist any type of cage, but he actually loved his crate and felt safe in it. Knox had explained that Neo thought of it as his den, the only space that was just his, and that he could easily protect. I loaded him into my car and took him back to my place, where I fed him, then

took him for a long, humid walk in my neighborhood.

By the time we got home and I ate dinner as well, I was ready to change into pajamas, curl up on the couch, and read for the rest of the night. Just as I headed back to my bedroom to change, though, my doorbell rang.

Unsure who my visitor was, I checked my phone for any calls or texts I'd missed, but didn't have any. I didn't think it was Knox at the door, since he usually let me know when he was on his way. Plus, when I'd talked to him 30 minutes ago, he said he'd probably still be at work for a few hours.

I made my way to the door and heard someone knocking on it impatiently, then the doorbell rang again. To my surprise, Neo was standing at the entryway, growling threateningly, as if an enemy was about to burst in. I'd only heard Neo growl once or twice, so I immediately tensed up with apprehension. The knocking started again, though, so I made my way closer and looked out the peephole cautiously, gesturing for Neo to move back some.

Seeing who it was, I relaxed just a little bit, exhaling the tension I'd allowed to creep into my body. The person who was there wouldn't hurt me—at least not physically.

"*Af*," I said to Neo. The Dutch command, meaning 'down,' was one that Knox had taught me, and luckily, Neo always obeyed me. That time was no different, but the dog clearly

disagreed with my order, slowly lowering himself to the floor while still glaring at the door, his posture stiff as if he was ready to pounce. “*Blijf*,” I added firmly, telling Neo to stay. Then, I opened the door wide enough to allow my twin sister inside.

“Hey, Sis,” Annabelle said as she strutted inside, bags underneath each arm. Her hair was so blond it was almost white, and everything about her was flawless, as usual. “What took you so—,” she started, then stopped and stared at Neo, whose lips were curled back as he returned her gaze menacingly. Still holding the commands I’d given him, he released another small growl, and my sister screeched, backing away from him towards the kitchen. “What is that?” she asked, her voice several pitches higher than normal.

I let out a small chuckle at her ridiculous question, since obviously, it was a dog. I’d forgotten she and Neo had never met.

“This is Knox’s military dog, Neo. They retired together. He’s a Belgian Malinois, which is similar to a German Shepherd,” I explained.

“Huh,” Annabelle said, as if dogs were a foreign concept to her. Keeping her eyes on Neo, she made a wide circle around him as she walked over to the larger couch, then sat down, placing the bags on the cushion next to her. “Is he dangerous?”

“To terrorists and bad guys, very much so,” I answered proudly, and Neo let out another growl, as if in agreement. “Although, right now, he seems to think you fit into one of those categories. I’ll grab a treat you can give him, which might help him warm up to you.”

“Okay. I’ll be right here,” Annabelle said, not moving from her spot on the couch.

I went to the kitchen where I kept the dog treats, and returned a moment later, handing her one. When she held it out, I gave Neo the command to release him from his stay. He walked towards her warily, as if she was a bomb that was about to go off, sniffed her for several seconds, then gently

took the treat. As his tongue slid against her finger, she squealed and pulled her hand back. “Eww! He licked me!” she said.

Neo ignored her, turning his back and carrying his treat over to his dog bed, where he curled up to eat it.

I laughed. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d never seen a dog before. I’m pretty sure that’s impossible, though, even though our parents are allergic.”

“You know how I feel about animals,” she reminded me snidely.

“Yeah, I know. You think they’re only good for eating and wearing.” I said, rolling my eyes as I quoted something she’d told me more than once. “Anyways. What are you doing here? I can’t even remember the last time you just stopped by.”

Now that the stand-off between her and Neo was over, and I no longer had that to focus on, I was starting to feel uncomfortable in her presence.

“Well, I was out shopping, and I saw a couple things that would be perfect for you. So, I brought them by as a peace offering. I know I’ve been a little hard on you lately, and I want to apologize.”

“Really?” I asked, feeling unsure.

She never did anything nice for me, and I struggled to believe she was there just out of the goodness of her heart.

“Yes, really,” she said, then pulled a tan-colored Coach handbag from one of the shopping bags and handed it to me.

“Oh, this is really pretty,” I said, running my hand over the soft leather and then handing it back to her, but she wouldn’t take it.

“No, that’s for you,” she said derisively, as if I’d just done something stupid.

“For me?” I asked with a frown, looking at it more closely. “It must’ve cost a fortune.”

“Not really. I got a great deal on it because of my industry relationships,” she replied smugly.

“I still don’t feel right accepting such a nice gift, though. I think you should keep it.” I tried to hand it back to her again, but she ignored me, rifling through her shopping bags again. She found what she was looking for and sat up.

“I also got you this dress,” she said, practically thrusting a handful of fabric at me.

I set the purse down and unfolded the material, realizing it was a floor-length dress, the pattern covered in blue and pink flowers. “This is really pretty,” I admitted, almost grudgingly. It was exactly what I would’ve picked out for myself—I loved loose, flowing fabrics and floral prints.

“I think you should wear this on the first day of school, with the purse, and those brown wedges you have,” she said, styling me as if I was one of her clients, and I had to admit I loved the whole idea.

I was still suspicious, but I gave in, knowing she wouldn’t let me say no to the gifts. She never accepted no from anyone—even if you tried, she’d eventually wear you down until she got her way. I’d seen it many times before, with material things she liked, opportunities she wanted, and boys she desired, and I couldn’t remember ever seeing her fail. With a shrug, I thanked her, then stood up, holding the dress against me and twirling around.

“You should let me come over and do your hair and makeup that morning, too,” Annabelle said, leaning over and brushing some hair out of my eyes, “help you catch the eye of some handsome teacher.”

I doubted she actually cared about my love life. She was always offering to give me a makeover, to change me into someone I wasn’t, someone more like her. Once again, it felt like she was ashamed of me—not just my looks, but my entire essence. Everything about me was wrong to her. I took a deep breath, ready to defend myself, only for Annabelle to change the subject.

“What classes are you teaching this year?” She asked me.

For a moment, her question threw me off. She never asked me about my job. But as she asked follow-up questions and seemed really interested in what I was saying, I let it go, for once enjoying a conversation with my sister. I couldn't remember the last time that had happened. We were getting along so well that I even confided in her about the four missing girls at my school, and she seemed to care about them as well.

An hour or two later, Annabelle said she needed to go, and for once, I was actually sad she was leaving. I wondered if she'd thought about her past actions, or her life in general, and decided she wanted to be a good sister. Or maybe she was turning over a new leaf. For a moment, I imagined my parents, Annabelle, and me being a real, happy family.

She didn't even make it to the door before crushing those dreams under her high heels, though.

“Hey. I meant to ask you,” Annabelle said, turning back to me casually, as if an unimportant thought had just crossed her mind. “Is Knox single? He's gotten really hot, and I'm thinking about asking him out. Plus, he was in the military, which is, like, lifetime bragging rights. And I think he and I would make a gorgeous couple, don't you?”

I felt my entire body go still, suddenly realizing Annabelle's motivation for her visit—her entire charade. She hadn't come over to make amends, or to spend time with me, or to give me presents just because they made her think of me. She was there to suck up to me, in an attempt to get information on my best friend so that she could seduce him. She was just using and manipulating me, like she'd done so many times before, and I'd fallen for it like an idiot.

Why had I given Annabelle the benefit of the doubt? Why did I think she cared about me at all? I had 28 years of proof that she only cared about herself, and I really believed she'd changed? After a couple hours of her being nice to me? I had to be the most gullible person in the world.

“Penny?” my sister said my name, yanking me out of my thoughts and back into reality. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

Oh, I definitely had. And I wanted to scream, to scratch her eyes out, to tell her what a horrible person I thought she was. It would all be a waste of energy, though. Annabelle *always* got her way, no matter what. She would get her claws into Knox soon, and it wouldn’t be the first, second, or even third time she dated a guy I had feelings for.

And now that she’d set her sights on Knox—who I was completely, hopelessly, and irrevocably in love with—she’d probably be married to him within a year. Eventually, I’d be the aunt of Knox’s kids, instead of their mother, like I’d sometimes daydreamed about.

I considered pointing out that she’d have to see Neo a lot more if she and Knox were together, but decided there was no point. At any rate, she’d probably somehow manipulate him into getting rid of Neo. That’s how much power she wielded, as if she was some sort of evil queen. But if Knox got rid of Neo, I’d volunteer to keep him. The dog spent half his time with me anyway.

I finally noticed Annabelle frowning at me, and I shook my head, trying to re-focus on the conversation. *She asked if he’s dating anyone*, I reminded myself.

“He’s single,” I finally told her, my voice flat.

Annabelle didn’t seem to notice the change in my mood, though. She just smiled at me, looking incredibly smug. “Oh, good. I won’t have to steal him away from anyone, then. That can be such a chore sometimes.” With a laugh that could objectively be described as evil, she shut the door behind her.

As I turned the deadbolt, locking out the world, I promised myself I wouldn’t cry. Instead, like I’d planned to do earlier, I got changed, then crawled into bed with the book I’d been reading, hoping to distract myself from all anger, grief, and hopelessness I was feeling. It was only a few seconds later when Neo, who would probably soon take over the title of my

best friend, joined me on the bed, curving his body to fit behind my bent legs and quickly falling asleep.

KNOX

The following Monday, Kate and I arrived back at Green Valley High School right as the buses were leaving. We waited for the congestion to die down, then parked and walked into the building. I kept an eye out for Penny as we walked towards the office. For some reason, I'd barely heard from her over the weekend, even though I'd reached out multiple times, and I was hoping to catch her before she left for the day. She was nowhere in sight, though.

As we entered the office, the secretary, Ms. Joy, was putting her purse strap over her shoulder. She looked up, tensing as she noticed us.

"I'm sorry, but I'm leaving for the day," she said, firm but apologetic.

"Oh, that's okay. We don't want to hold you up at all, we just have one person we need to talk to. Could you possibly do us a huge favor and page someone to the office before you go?" Kate asked sweetly.

The secretary's posture seemed to relax a bit. "Sure, honey. Who is it?"

"Thank you so much," Kate replied. "Her name is Lana Bannister. She should be at cheerleading practice right now."

"A student?" Ms. Joy asked skeptically.

"Yes, but she's over 18 years old. We just need to ask her a few quick questions," Kate smiled charmingly.

Ms. Joy conceded, picking up the phone and calling the gym, then asking for Lana to come to the office.

“On that note, I need to get home and make dinner. There’s still a few staff members around, if you need something,” Ms. Joy said, and Kate and I both wished her a good evening.

We waited for almost 15 minutes before deciding to go look for Lana ourselves. The hallways were mostly empty as we tried to find the gym, until one girl in a t-shirt that read “Green Valley High Cheerleading Squad” hurried past us.

“Excuse me,” I said, stopping her. “Do you know where Lana Bannister is?”

She looked around, as if worried she’d be caught talking to us. “I saw her go into the locker room a few minutes ago,” she finally said.

“That’s helpful. Thanks,” Kate said. “And where’s the locker room?”

The girl pointed down the hall the way she’d come. “It’s down there on the left,” she replied.

We thanked her again, then made our way towards the locker room, stopping in front of the door.

“Think I should go in first and look for her?” Kate asked.

“Yeah, that would probably be best. But maybe first make sure there aren’t any other exits, in case she tries to run,” I suggested.

“Consider it done,” Kate said cheerily, opening the door and disappearing into the locker room.

I leaned back against the wall opposite the door, unsure how long it would be before Kate returned, and if Lana was even in there. I was surprised when, no more than 30 seconds later, a few girls rushed out of the bathroom, their expressions tense.

“The lady said for you to come in,” one of them said without stopping.

Unsure why the girls had been in such a hurry, I unsnapped the holster of my gun and rested my hand on it, in case Kate was in danger. When I got inside the quiet locker room, though, Kate immediately called for me, her voice calm.

“Over here, Knox,” she said. “A girl locked herself in a bathroom stall when I announced myself, and I’m guessing it’s Lana. She won’t come out.”

I spotted my teammate quickly, one hand leaning against the wall, looking exasperated.

“Lana?” I asked once I joined Kate. “We’re with the FBI. We just want to talk to you. It would make things a lot easier if you’d come out willingly.”

The voice that answered me was surprisingly haughty for someone trapped in a bathroom stall. “You can’t be in here. This is a girl’s locker room.”

“These are special circumstances,” I replied. “And it’s just the three of us in here now.”

She was quiet for a few moments. “I want my attorney,” she finally said.

“Your attorney isn’t going to come to a girl’s locker room,” Kate said. “You’ll have to come down to the station if that’s what you want.”

“My parents pay him a lot of money. He’ll come where I tell him to,” the girl replied.

I glanced at Kate, who rolled her eyes with disdain.

“Tell you what,” Kate said. “You can either come out willingly and walk with us to our car, and we’ll call your attorney to meet us at the station. Or, we’ll break this door down and handcuff you, and we’ll take a detour past cheerleading practice so everyone can see you before we put you in our car and take you to our office anyway.”

When Lana still didn’t speak or move to open the door, Kate looked at me expectantly, eyebrows raised, as she motioned towards the door. I let out a quiet, frustrated breath,

resigned to breaking down the door of a bathroom stall in a girls' high school locker room. It would be a first for me.

“Knox is going to break the door down. He’s huge, so it’ll probably only take one try,” Kate said, but she was met with silence.

I sighed again. “Alright. I’m going to kick the door in. You’ll probably want to stand back as far as you can,” I warned, and I watched as Kate pulled out a pair of handcuffs, looking almost gleeful. Then I began to count down. “Three... Two...,” I started. Then, almost to one, I began to lift my leg for the kick when the door flew open.

The girl who’d been in the stall perfectly matched the picture Penny had sent, but she was even tinier than I’d imagined, very thin and over a foot shorter than me. She wore short-shorts, sneakers, and another cheerleading t-shirt with the school’s name on it. The only giveaway to her emotions was the makeup smeared below her eyes.

“Fine. I’ll go with you,” she said defiantly, glaring at us. “I need to grab my purse out of my locker, though.”

“I’ll get it,” Kate corrected. “Which locker is it?”

Lana rolled her eyes, but gave Kate directions and told her the combination. A moment later, my coworker let out a low whistle.

“A Louis Vuitton purse? This is pretty fancy for a high school student,” Kate said. She sounded like she was impressed, but I picked up on the sarcasm underneath.

“Exactly. You have no idea who you’re dealing with,” Lana said, trying to sound threatening.

For all her bravado, though, she walked with us without a fight, her head down as if hoping no one would notice or identify her. Luckily for Lana, we didn’t pass anyone as we exited the school and got to our car. After situating her inside, I got into the driver’s side and started the car as Kate looked up the phone number for Lana’s attorney and called him. The girl, who looked more afraid every time I checked on her

through the rear-view mirror, also asked Kate to call her parents, and have them come to our office as well.

KNOX

As soon as Lana's parents arrived, it was clear where her entitled attitude came from. Both of them threatened to call everyone from the FBI director to the President to file complaints against Kate and me, along with the rest of our team. Their lawyer's attitude was only slightly better, letting us know that he was the best in the area and would have Lana released in minutes, before he joined his youngest client in the interrogation room. We had her parents wait in the lobby.

Kate and I asked Ryder to run the interrogation while we watched from behind the interview room's two-way mirror. A former Delta operator, Ryder was by far the best at interrogations, partly due to how scary he could be. He'd stepped away from a lot of the direct work with trafficking survivors after accidentally terrifying one too many of them, but his size and his intensity were an asset in the interrogation room.

"Lana Bannister?" Ryder asked as he entered the room, a stack of files in his hands.

I watched Lana's reaction to Ryder. Like a lot of people, she seemed to shrink away from my coworker as he came closer to her in the small space. I'd often heard Ryder described as a larger, scarier version of the actor Taylor Kitsch, and the comparisons had only increased after the actor's role in the show, *The Terminal List*. Well over six feet tall and muscular, with shoulder-length hair, a beard, and tattoos visible on both arms, he was intimidating enough without the deep scowl and the waves of intensity that were currently

pulsing off of him. For most of the human traffickers he interviewed, he was a nightmare come to life.

Ryder had many more layers than he let on to most people, though. He had become a close friend to everyone on my team over the past couple of years, and I knew that underneath the muscles and the tattoos beat a heart of gold. He was intense, yes, but only because of how protective he was. He cared deeply about the innocent, and people who had been wronged. He would do anything, face any bad guy, for the people he cared about, as well as for strangers who needed help. And he did smile fairly often, even though at that moment it was hard to believe he even knew how.

“Are you Lana Bannister?” Ryder asked again, his voice almost a growl and one of his eyebrows raised in a question as he tossed the files down on the table.

Lana still didn't answer, her eyes wide in fear. Her attorney cleared his throat, speaking up in her place. “Yes, this is my client, Lana Bannister. And I'm her attorney, Robert Clineman.”

Ryder nodded, but didn't speak for a moment, instead pulling out the chair on his side of the table and sitting down. Taking his time, he flipped through the files he'd brought with him, the only sound in the room that of pages being turned.

“If you could just tell us why Lana is here, I'm sure we can clear this up quickly,” the attorney said, but Ryder didn't react at all. After a moment, Mr. Clineman adjusted his tie nervously, then tried again. “Lana and her family are well-respected in this community, and unless she's under arrest, you can't hold her here.”

Ryder finally looked up at them. “She's not under arrest yet, but I expect she will be by the end of this conversation,” he said simply.

Mr. Clineman sneered. “I appreciate your confidence, but I can assure you, I have the highest dismissal rate in Northern Virginia. Most law enforcement officials give up as soon as I'm retained on their cases.”

“That’s funny. I’ve never heard of you,” Ryder said flatly. I watched the attorney straighten, as if he’d been grievously insulted. Before he could say anything else, though, Ryder pulled a few photos from the file and slid them onto the table, facing Lana. “Do you know who these girls are?” he asked, gesturing towards the photos.

The teenager’s eyes widened for a moment, before her face went blank. She shook her head, pulling her knees up to her chin and wrapping her arms around herself, as if protecting herself.

“Are you sure?” Ryder asked, his voice skeptical.

When Lana didn’t answer, her eyes downcast, he moved those four photos away, then pulled out two more different ones, setting them in front of her. One was a group photo of several cheerleaders, and the other was a photo of Lana and Brittney—their arms around each other as they smiled for the camera—that we’d found on social media.

When Lana didn’t immediately look at the photos, Ryder rapped his knuckles on the table, causing her to glance up in surprise. As soon as she caught sight of the photos, she clearly knew she was caught, and she immediately burst into tears. Her attorney quickly glanced over at Lana, his expression bewildered for a moment before he could mask it.

“I need a few moments alone with my client,” he suddenly insisted.

Lana shook her head, sobbing even harder than before.

“No. I just want to tell him,” Lana cried.

“Really, I have to insist,” Mr. Clineman said, straightening his tie as he glanced at Ryder, then back at Lana.

“If she wants to talk, that’s her call,” Ryder said with a small, one-shouldered shrug. Then, he seemed to show a softer, more understanding side as he grabbed a box of tissues and handed them to the teenager. “I want to help you, Lana,” he said kindly. “But to do that, I need to know what you know.”

Lana blew her nose with a tissue, then wiped her eyes with another one, gradually calming down.

“You really want to help me?” She asked hopefully.

“Lana, I really think we should talk first,” her attorney interrupted, his tone verging on belligerent. “You could end up with jail time, depending on what’s going on here. We really need to discuss this first, see if you can make a deal.”

“We can’t offer any deals until I know what the information is,” Ryder said. “But if you work with me right now and tell me what you know, I’ll see what I can do.”

Lana looked at her attorney, eyes wide, but when he shook his head, she glanced away again. “I want to work with you,” she told Ryder.

“That was easy,” Kate whispered to me.

“I really appreciate that, Lana,” Ryder said, as if he was confiding in her. “You could be saving lives by talking to me right now.”

She nodded her head, a small blush staining her cheeks. She took a deep breath, clearly steadying herself before she spoke.

“Honestly, though, I’m not really worried about a deal to keep me out of jail,” Lana confided. “I’m worried about my safety, and my sister’s and parents’. If anything, we need to go into witness protection or something.”

Ryder frowned, creases appearing on his forehead. “Okay. Tell me what you know, and I’ll help make sure you’re safe. You and your family.”

Lana nodded. “So, a couple of years ago, I broke my leg while doing a lift at cheerleading practice. Someone dropped me, and I fell off the top of our pyramid,” she began. “I needed surgery, and afterwards, the doctor prescribed me pain meds. My leg was hurting really, really bad, and I had to take more and more just to be able to function. I was in so much pain, and I was barely getting through the day at school. I was starting to get bad grades, which would mean getting kicked off the cheerleading team,” Lana said. “Plus, my parents were

putting a lot of pressure on me. They expect me to go to Harvard like my dad, you know, so I need perfect grades and a lot of extracurricular activities to do that.”

“That sounds very stressful,” Ryder said compassionately.

“You have no idea,” Lana agreed, glancing up at him, then away. “But when I asked the doctor for more of the medicine, he said no. He said he didn’t want me to get addicted.” Lana paused, releasing a derisive laugh. “He was a little late, obviously. But I didn’t know what to do, so I asked around. I was introduced to a couple of guys, and they sold me some pills for a month or two. But then they started refusing my money, saying they wanted something else instead.”

Lana went silent for a few moments. “What did they want?” Ryder asked.

When she looked up again, regret was written plainly on her face. “They wanted help meeting girls,” she said, suddenly rushing as if she was desperate to get everything out. “They wanted me to find girls who didn’t have many friends, and invite them over to my house. They promised it was innocent, that they’d just come over to hang out with us. But then they started getting the girls really drunk and taking them with them when they left, and I’d never see them again.”

Tears were streaming down Lana’s cheeks as she continued. “I told them I was going to tell someone—call the police—but they threatened me. They said if I didn’t keep doing it, they’d stop giving me pills. And when I said I was going to tell someone anyways, they told me they were trafficking the girls I’d brought over, and they’d be happy to kidnap me and turn me into a sex slave, too, if I told anyone. And they said they’d turn my little sister into one, too—she’s only twelve! And they threatened to kill my parents.” She stopped and took a deep, unsteady breath. “I’ve been *so scared*.”

Ryder’s scowl had returned, deepening the longer Lana talked. And after hearing what she’d been through, I was definitely unhappy myself, even though she wasn’t the most pleasant person.

“Thank you for telling me about this,” Ryder said sincerely. “Was Brittney Powers one of the girls you invited over? That the men took?”

Lana nodded, and relief washed over me. We finally had a lead on Penny’s missing student.

“Okay. That’s really helpful,” Ryder said. “What about the other girls whose photos I showed you? Did the men take any of them after you invited them over?”

“Just one of them,” she said. “Stephanie Vargas.”

“Thank you for telling me that,” Ryder said. “And what about the men? Do you know their names?”

Lana nodded. “Andy and Darrell. I don’t know their last names.”

“Even their first names are helpful,” Ryder reassured her. “I’m assuming you have a way to get in touch with them. Do you have phone numbers for them? Do you know where they live?”

“I do have their phone numbers,” she said. “They’re on my phone. They always text me when they want something, or when they have pills for me.”

“Do you know of anyone else who’s working with them?” Ryder asked.

Lana didn’t answer at first, instead, nervously staring at her fingernails.

“I take it that’s a yes?” Ryder asked.

“There’s another cheerleader,” Lana responded, her voice barely a whisper. “Kelly Holt. I’m pretty sure she had something to do with those other two girls who went missing, the ones whose pictures you showed me.”

“Ok, that’s really helpful,” Ryder said. “What about your parents? Do they know about this? Does your sister?”

Lana shook her head emphatically. “No. Andy and Darrell always come over when they’re out of town. My dad travels a

lot for work, and my sister is in a bunch of different traveling sports, so she and my mom are gone a lot for that.”

“And just to be clear, how do you pick out the girls you target? Do you choose them, or does someone else?” Ryder asked.

Lana swallowed nervously. “I choose them,” she admitted quietly. “They said to choose girls who didn’t have many people in their lives. People that no one would miss.”

“Who said this? Andy and Darrell?”

Lana nodded contritely. The factors she looked for were the same as virtually every other sex trafficking situation—targeting girls without a strong support system—but it still turned my stomach.

“Okay. That’s helpful. Is there anything else you can think of to tell me?” Ryder asked. Lana seemed to think about it, then shook her head. “That’s okay. We’re going to figure out something to keep you safe. We’re going to have to tell your parents what’s going on, though, so we can keep them safe, too.”

When Lana simply nodded in defeat, Ryder excused himself from the room, promising to be back momentarily.

“What do you think?” he asked, joining us behind the glass a few seconds later, his hands on his hips.

“I think that was awesome,” Kate replied. “You basically just solved the case.”

Ryder nodded, brushing off the compliment. “Can one of you go grab her parents and bring them in here?” he asked. “And can someone grab her phone? I want to get Andy and Darrell’s numbers.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “What’s the plan after that?” Ryder had more seniority than Kate or me, and I could tell that he was already brainstorming the next steps.

“We set up a sting and take these fuckers down,” Ryder said, an excited gleam in his eyes.

“What about protection for the family?” Kate asked.

“We’ll need to check with Nolan and get his approval. But my thought is to get a couple of officers assigned as security for the family, at least for now. We’ll tell Lana and her parents to stay quiet about all of this, and just go about their lives as normal. Otherwise, it’ll tip Andy and Darrell off, and they’ll disappear before we can arrest them. Once we’ve got them in custody, we can reassess, and see if witness protection is the right choice.”

“Okay. Thanks, Ryder,” I said.

“No problem. Good work today,” he replied, and we all went our separate ways.

PENNY

Without any plans that weekend, and in an attempt to keep myself busy and keep my mind off of Knox, I sent a text to the group to see if anyone wanted to get together. Other than updating him about Neo, I was trying to avoid Knox, even asking Ally and Kate for updates on Brittney instead of him.

“You’ll probably think I’m morbid, but I love the Holocaust Museum. I go at least once a year, and I’d like to go this weekend. Do any of you want to join me?”

Ally and Kate planned to work most of the weekend, Evie was doing something with her family, and Harper and Nolan were going out of town, but Kassidy agreed to join me, saying Evan was working most of the weekend as well, and she didn’t have any plans. As Nolan’s second-in-command, Evan would be covering for Nolan while he was gone.

On Saturday afternoon, Kassidy and I met up outside of the building.

“I’m so glad you invited me,” Kassidy said as we moved through the museum’s security and went inside. “I’ve always wanted to come here.”

“In that case, I’m surprised you haven’t already been,” I said.

Kassidy hesitated before she responded. “Well, I asked Evan to come with me once, and he said it was too depressing for him,” she replied sheepishly.

I could tell she was worried about offending me, but I laughed. “Yeah, a lot of people have refused to come with me

over the years for that exact reason.”

Kassidy smiled, but I felt a twinge of sadness, remembering that Knox had always been the one to join me on my visits. He'd been the only person who didn't mind how intense and disheartening the museum was, and was happy to keep me company as I slowly studied the exhibits.

“So why do you like this museum so much?” Kassidy asked curiously. “I read that most people only visit once, and have no desire to come back.”

I considered the question for a moment. “Well, I've always loved history and found it fascinating, which is why I teach it. But so much of what I teach is about wars, and kings, and governments—basically, it's about power, and who had it. That's what society thinks is important.

“What I love about World War Two, and the Holocaust specifically, is that, yes, it was absolutely about power. But it's also about humanity. So many people in the world were affected by the war, not just soldiers, but everyone. And this museum gives the Holocaust victims—some of the people who were most affected—a chance to have their story told. A chance to be remembered. Every time I come here, I learn something new, I hear someone else's story, and they're remembered a little while longer.”

“That's a really good way of looking at it,” Kassidy said solemnly.

I led her over to a display being manned by a museum volunteer. The stand had a few recessed shelves, separated by gender, with stacks of small booklets inside. A sign on the table read “Identification cards, please take one,” and I randomly chose one from the “female” side, indicating that Kassidy should take a card as well.

“Speaking of stories, this is one of my favorite parts when I visit. Every card has a different person on it, who was a real Holocaust victim. You keep it with you throughout the museum, and then at the end, you find out their fate.”

Somberly, she looked at the one she'd taken. It was a small booklet, reminding me of a passport, and had a photo, date and place of birth, and a biography inside, including information about their families, their interests, and their experiences during the Holocaust.

“Okay, this is already really sad,” Cassidy said. “Now I see why Evan never wanted to come.”

“Has he ever been?” I asked curiously.

“He said he did once, when he first moved to DC, and that it took him days to stop feeling so gloomy afterwards.”

“Poor guy,” I said, imagining the usually upbeat, outgoing Evan struggling to shake off his sadness after the visit. It must've had a strong effect on him.

We began moving through the permanent exhibit, which was chronological. The first section was from the pre-war years, including Nazi propaganda such as posters about second-tier races, pictures of the Hitler Youth, and authentic Nazi uniforms. We saw videos of thousands of German soldiers marching in sync, and damaged artifacts from *Kristallnacht*—or Night of the Broken Glass in English—a night of rampage perpetrated by Nazi soldiers which destroyed over 7,000 Jewish businesses and 900 synagogues.

In the next section, a tall room displayed thousands and thousands of family photos of Jewish residents from a small town in Lithuania, nearly all of them killed by the Nazis. The next area was about the Final Solution and held items from the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw, and a train car that was used to transport people to one of the death camps. We entered a restored barracks structure from Auschwitz, and I noticed Cassidy wiping her eyes in the room filled with hundreds of shoes collected from people killed in the gas chambers.

Then there were photos and displays of individuals who helped save Jewish people during the Holocaust: those who hid them in their homes, and those who had enough information or influence to save hundreds or thousands.

A small Danish boat was on display next to a sign explaining that Denmark was the only country who protected its Jews from the Nazis. It talked about how, when a German diplomat, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, learned that the Danish Jews were about to be arrested and deported, he told his contacts in Denmark, and also traveled to Sweden, a neutral country, to ask for their Prime Minister's help. Because of his actions, Denmark's government had enough warning, and were able to hide Danish Jews in homes and hospitals in coastal towns, then smuggle them into Sweden using boats.

The final section of the museum focused on the liberation of the concentration camps, and the end of the war. There were photos of US Army tanks arriving at camps, swarmed by crowds of people in striped clothing who were holding out their hands for help. And after the Hall of Remembrance, which displayed the names of major death camps and featured an eternal flame, were some military flags of different Allied military units who liberated the camps.

"Knox's grandfather was in the US Army. He was at one of the concentration camps as part of the liberation force, and then stayed to help, while they sorted everything out." I told Cassidy. "I never met him, but Knox's parents said he refused to talk about the concentration camp, even once, because he'd been so disturbed by what he saw there. Every time they'd ask, he just got a haunted look in his eye and changed the subject."

"I can't even imagine," Cassidy said gravely.

Once we'd seen everything, we entered the museum's store, looking around at the books and other items for sale.

"Do you know about Finland's part in World War Two?" she asked as we browsed.

I glanced over at her. "I don't, actually. I've never even considered that they had a part in it, although now that you mention it, they obviously must have, considering its location."

"Most people haven't considered it," she conceded. "My country doesn't have a lot of power, as you said before, so the

world doesn't pay us much attention. But our role in World War Two is interesting, I think, if nothing else."

"I'd love to hear about it," I told her, knowing that, as a former Finnish diplomat, Cassidy was also knowledgeable about history—at least when it pertained to her country.

A woman was there, signing copies of the book she'd written about her mother's experiences during the Holocaust. Unable to resist, I purchased a copy and had her sign it, then Cassidy and I spoke to her about the book for a few minutes. Excitedly clutching my new book to my chest and planning to start it as soon as I got home, we both went to the café, buying drinks and a couple of snacks and then sitting down so I could hear Cassidy's story.

"So, in 1939, after Germany defeated Poland, the Soviet Union was worried about protecting Leningrad, which is now St. Petersburg," she began. "The city is very close to Finland's borders, and the Soviet Union demanded that we surrender some of our nearby land, including a naval base and some islands, to use as a defensive position. We said no, not trusting the Soviet Union and assuming that they'd continue to make more demands, and then they attacked. We fought back, but weren't really a match for the Soviet Union, and eventually we gave in. Finland and the Soviet Union came to a peace agreement, and the Soviet Union got the land they wanted.

"After that, we were, as you say, stuck between a rock and a hard place. Tensions were growing between the Soviet Union and Germany, and, having just lost a war against the Soviet Union, we approached Germany about making a deal with them. Nothing was formally agreed upon, but we did allow German troops to travel through our country, and we also fought against the Soviet Union. When Germany was defeated, Finnish people wanted peace, and our President began negotiating with the Soviet Union. We agreed to evacuate all German forces from our borders, give the Soviet Union *more* land, and pay them war reparations.

"But the Germans refused to leave, so then we were fighting them instead. A lot of northern Finland was destroyed as we tried to get them out, but we eventually succeeded. And

after that, we did our best to stay on good terms with the Soviet Union, wanting to avoid more wars, and more land being seized.”

“What happened to the Jews in Finland? Were they deported as well?” I asked.

“Good question,” Cassidy smiled. “So, Finland finally gained independence in 1917, after always being part of either Sweden or Russia. Once they had independence, Finnish people were concerned with fighting Communism, and didn’t pay much attention to anti-Jewish propaganda, so it never became a political issue. And during the Holocaust, Finnish politicians actually defended the rights of our Jewish citizens. They protected them against being deported or having their assets taken, going against Germany’s policies, even though we were somewhat in alliance with them. Regretfully, we didn’t provide the same protection for Jewish people in Finland who weren’t citizens, and eight non-Finnish Jews ended up being deported to Eastern Europe.

“Other than that, the Nazis felt that putting the Final Solution into place in Finland would be “difficult” and decided to prioritize defeating the Soviet Union first. So, out of the approximately 2,300 Jewish people in Finland during World War Two, only eight were harmed.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. “I had no idea.”

“Like I said, most people don’t.”

We talked for a few more minutes, then said our goodbyes. With Knox working, Neo was at my house in his crate, and I knew he’d be ready to get out and stretch his legs. Plus, I was eager to get home and start reading my new book. And with Evan working as well, Cassidy planned to go home and get some things done around the house while he was gone.

KNOX

Just a few days after our interrogation of Lana, on a Saturday night, my team and I were hidden around the teenager's house and neighborhood, while she and her family were being heavily guarded at a nearby hotel. Nolan was the only one who wasn't with us—he'd made plans months earlier to go out of town with Harper this weekend, and while he'd considered cancelling the trip, we'd told him not to, promising we could handle things on our own. He'd given in pretty easily, not wanting to disappoint his fiancé.

Evan was running the operation in Nolan's place, and stood near the house's back door. Ally and Kate waited inside, Liam and Gabe were positioned on different sides of the street as lookouts, and the rest of us were positioned around the house, waiting for the traffickers to show up. For hours, we stayed as still as statues, but finally, it was time.

"We've got company coming from the south and headed your way," Liam said over the radio. "I've got three tangoes, all appearing to be in their late 20s. One is African American, two are Caucasian, and they're all dressed in jeans and dark hoodies."

"Copy that," Evan replied. "Stay on them."

Seconds later, Liam spoke again. "They're currently having a chat in the driveway. Lots of pointing and hand motions," he paused for a moment before speaking again. "Okay, they appear to be heading around the house to the back."

“Alright, everyone stay out of sight, but get in position behind the house,” Evan said. “Wait for the signal.”

Following directions, I made my way towards the back door as discreetly as I could. I glimpsed the shadows of a couple of my teammates as they moved nearby, but unsurprisingly, the three men were too busy to notice us. One of them knocked on the door, and a few seconds later, Kate answered, a red Solo cup in her hand.

“You aren’t Lana,” one of the men said accusingly.

“She’s in the bathroom,” Kate responded, sounding convincingly like an air-headed teenage girl. She opened the door wider for them. “Come on in.”

The men grumbled their complaints about Lana not opening the door, since she always did, but they made their way inside anyways. As the last one began to cross the threshold, I saw Evan’s shadow dart towards the man at the same time he gave the signal over the radio. “Now!”

Evan grabbed the door, preventing it from shutting behind the men, and Mason shoved the last tango from behind, then yelled for everyone in the house to get down. The rest of the team followed them in, rifles at the ready. I didn’t even get all the way inside, though, before Evan, Mason, Kate, and Ally had the three men on their stomachs on the floor, their hands zip tied behind their backs. It was one of the smoothest operations I’d been involved with.

Barely any time passed before the men were read their Miranda rights, then placed in three different FBI vehicles, and transported to headquarters, where they were each escorted to a separate interrogation room. They didn’t speak once the entire time, not even to ask for their lawyers. When they refused to even give their names, Kate and Wes took their fingerprints and ran them through the system, quickly getting results. The men’s names were Andy Stewart, Darrell Jefferson, and Stanley Wright. We left them waiting as we pulled their criminal histories and searched social media for any information we could find on them.

After letting them sit for a couple of hours, Ryder started the first interrogation with Andy as we all watched.

“You’ve got quite a list of priors here, Mr. Stewart,” Ryder said gruffly as he started the questioning. “Drug dealing, soliciting a prostitute, assault, driving without a license, DUI. Another DUI,” he paused. “Now, this is one I don’t see every day: Dogfighting. Tell me about that one.”

The man stayed silent, staring at the table in front of him as if it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. Ryder sat in silence as well, trying to draw him out, but eventually, it was clear that quiet wasn’t an effective weapon against the man. Without warning, Ryder stood up, slamming his fist down on the table. The man flinched at the loud noise, but quickly got control of himself again.

“There’s two things that really piss me off,” Ryder said, anger flowing off of him as he leaned towards the man. “Abusing women and children, and abusing animals, and you’re involved in both. You have to be a special type of scum to pick on those who are physically weaker than you.”

Ryder waited, but still, the man across from him stayed silent. Eventually, he sighed, then tried a different line of questioning. “Tell me what you were doing at the Bannister house tonight.” Still, Mr. Stewart didn’t answer.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” Ryder asked. “You’re finally in front of someone your own size, and you’re scared?”

Ryder must’ve hit a nerve, because Mr. Stewart finally looked up, a sneer on his face. “You have no idea what fear is,” the man said, and I easily identified a Russian or Eastern European accent.

“And you do?” Ryder responded sarcastically. “Then, please. Enlighten me.”

“You think your little ‘tough guy’ act has any effect on me?” The man scoffed. “You still answer to the law. The worst you can do to me is lock me up. That’s *nothing*,” Mr. Stewart paused. “The man I work for? He’s true fear. You have no idea

what he's capable of, what I've seen him do. He would murder your entire family without batting an eye, just for the thrill of it. If you cross him, he will hunt you down anywhere, anytime. You think to hide in the desert? In Antarctica? The top of Mount Everest? He will find you, and he will make your death that much more painful because of the effort he expended on your behalf.

"You accuse *me* of targeting those who are weaker? You should see how he treats the very weakest of society, Mr. FBI."

Ryder blinked slowly, seeming to process Mr. Stewart's monologue before changing tactics. "That was very dramatic. I'm impressed," Ryder quipped. "But I don't scare easily. I've hunted down a lot of bad guys, and I can take yours down, too. Just give me a name."

"You don't *listen*," Mr. Stewart said with frustration. He shook his head as if disappointed, then once again dipped his chin to stare at the table in front of him.

Ryder tried for another hour to get the man to talk, without getting a single word out of him. Eventually, he gave up, joining us behind the mirror. So that there was no chance of Mr. Stewart overhearing our conversation, we moved to a conference room to discuss the interview.

"He's not going to break," Ryder said once we were settled.

"I wouldn't either, if his boss is as bad as he says," Wes responded.

"Well, that's *my* question," Kate added. "Are we believing him? The man acts like he works for the Boogeyman."

A few of us started talking at once, and soon, the room was just an echo chamber, no one really communicating, just hearing themselves talk. Then, Ally whistled loudly, and everyone went silent.

"This is my concern, if he's telling the truth," Ally began. "He has an Eastern European accent, but his name is Andy Stewart. That doesn't add up. But he's had the identity for a

while, and it's held up under scrutiny over the years, since he has so many charges under that name.

“Between that and the resources he claims his boss has, I have a theory. This is no ordinary criminal we're dealing with. Even organized crime, like the mafia, wouldn't have that much reach. This guy has eyes everywhere, can get to anyone, can create really believable identities. What if he's someone in the government? Maybe police, CIA, even a politician? I can't think of anyone else with these skills.”

“I'm so glad that you're our genius, and not an evil genius working for the bad guys,” Kate joked.

“So you think my theory might be plausible?” Ally asked.

“I think so,” Evan said, then looked around the room. “Alright, here's the plan. I apologize that it's the middle of the night, but that's the nature of the beast sometimes.

“Ryder and Gabe, split up and interview our other two subjects. See if they're more willing to talk than Mr. Stewart was. Liam and Mason, write up warrants for these guys—I want access to their phones, their homes and cars, their financials, everything. Knox, I want you looking into all three men's associates. See if they have any connections—criminal or otherwise—who might lead us in the right direction. Wes, contact Arlington PD and get the files for the other three missing girls to see what the detectives have already done, and start investigating from there. To start with, work on getting good pictures of all three and re-interview their parents.

“Kate and Ally, I want you going home to rest, and first thing in the morning, I want you tracking down and interviewing the other cheerleader, Kelly Holt, and the cheerleading coach—whatever her name is. I'm going to reach out to Tex and see if he has any thoughts about who this guy could be, and then start compiling a list of government officials who have enough power and authority to be our Boogeyman, and then start digging into each one of them. We need to find the skeletons in their closets, see whose skeletons match ours.”

KNOX

Except for Kate and Ally, my team and I stayed at the office until the sun came up, before Evan told us to go home and rest for a few hours. I did as he said, glad that Neo was with Penny so that I didn't have an overactive dog expecting breakfast and a walk when I was ready to collapse into bed. I slept well into the afternoon, and when I woke up, I had several phone notifications waiting for me.

I deleted the emails, most of which were from stores wanting me to buy something, then looked at my unread texts. My parents and Penny had checked on me while I'd been asleep, so I responded back to let them know that I was still alive. Then, I noticed a follow request and a new message on one of the social media apps I rarely looked at. I clicked on it, curious, and then Annabelle's overly made-up face greeted me on the screen, along with the message she'd sent.

"Hello!" the message began. "I really thought we were already friends on here, but apparently not. That's unacceptable, though, don't you think, since we've known each other most of our lives? I couldn't find you on any other social media, but let me know what your handles are, so we can be friends on those, too.

"Anyways...It was so nice seeing you over Face Time the other day! I'm glad you're back in town, and I hope to see more of you soon. I also have been dying to get into baseball, and I know you were really good at it as a kid. I'd love if we could go to a game together, so you can explain all the rules.

I'm including my phone number so we can talk about this more. See you soon!"

Perplexed, I re-read the message, hoping I'd misunderstood the entire thing, then set my phone down. I was pretty sure I hadn't misunderstood, but if Annabelle was asking me on a date—which was what it sounded like—then she was out of her mind. It would be a cold day in hell before I voluntarily spent time with her, in any capacity.

I decided to make some coffee and wake up while I tried to think of a diplomatic response to the message. Then again, I wasn't sure I cared about being diplomatic. Maybe just responding back with a "hell, no" would be good enough?

Shaking my head at myself, I decided to just say I wouldn't be able to make it to the baseball game, without giving a reason why. Once the message was sent, I got into the shower, trying to wake myself up the rest of the way.

* * *

I STOOD at Penny's locker holding a large stack of her books as she knelt on the ground, pulling papers out of her backpack and wadding them up. We were finally in seventh grade, which, according to the teachers, meant we were supposed to be more responsible. And I wasn't sure if part of being responsible was being faster than we were last year, but for some reason, our lockers were downstairs while our classes were upstairs. That meant that Penny was tempted to carry all her books in her backpack all the time so that she didn't have to return to her locker during the three minutes we were allotted between classes. She'd taken the responsibility lecture seriously, and was afraid of being late. Meanwhile, I was mostly afraid she'd hurt herself wearing a backpack that weighed more than her, and I'd offered to either carry the backpack for her, or to switch out her books and mine between classes since I was the faster. She'd refused, though, saying she was an independent young woman and she didn't need anyone to carry her books.

Her head was almost buried inside the backpack when I noticed Annabelle and her group of friends walking towards us, smirks on their faces, and I didn't have time to warn her. Annabelle's hair was long and blond, but I knew it was a wig, and that her hair was just starting to grow back underneath, now that she was in permanent remission. She strolled along as if she thought she was a princess, and the friends surrounding her were her servants, traveling the hallways together in an attempt to put people in their place. To me, they just looked like a bunch of idiots.

"Look who it is: String Bean and the Ugly Duckling," one of Annabelle's friends, Jason, mocked as they came closer.

I wasn't upset about being called String Bean—it was true, after all, since there was no denying how tall and skinny I was—but I didn't appreciate the dig towards my best friend. I stepped in front of her, trying to block her as much as possible from seeing or dealing with the group of degenerates.

"That's a stupid thing to say," I told Jason. "If Penny is ugly, so is Annabelle. They're twins."

"They're not identical twins, though, are they?" Another member of the friend group commented snidely. I was pretty sure her name was Jennifer.

"Close enough," I responded. "And don't you have anything better to do than harass us?"

With that, Annabelle finally spoke up, a smug look on her face. "She's my sister. I'll talk to her if I want to," she said.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "You're right, you can talk to her. But you won't be mean to her, not if I'm around to stop you."

"What are you going to do about it?" Jason asked.

Instead of answering, I turned to Penny, making sure she was ready to go to our next class. I put the textbooks I'd been holding into her locker, and grabbed her hand, ready to pull her away from them.

"You're just going to walk away like a chicken?" Jason asked.

I continued to ignore him, but a moment later, Penny cried out, her hand jerking out of mine. When I looked over, I noticed tears pooling in her eyes, and that Jason had grabbed her hair and yanked on it hard enough to rip out a chunk.

“Eww,” Jason said, staring at the clump of hair in his hand, then letting the strands fall to the floor.

Angry, I stepped towards Jason, shoving him hard enough that he fell back into Annabelle and the others, and they all collapsed to the ground on top of each other like bowling pins. Then, they all started shoving each other, trying to get off the floor. Jason was on his feet first, and time seemed to move in slow motion as he pulled his arm back to retaliate.

Then, finally, he swung his fist. He didn't put much power behind it, though, and I had plenty of time to step back, completely avoiding the punch. He snarled, then swung again, but I was much taller than him, and once again, ducked out of his reach easily. Unable to immediately stop his forward momentum, most of Jason's weight rested in his front leg, and I easily pushed him, causing his momentum to carry him straight into the wall of lockers. Grayson had used that move on me many, many times over the years, when we'd good-naturedly grappled with each other, but it was my first time being on the other end of it, and the first time it wasn't just messing around.

The metal lockers banged loudly as Jason rammed into them, and then I heard a teacher's voice. “What is going on here?” she yelled, rushing towards us, and then she was checking on Jason while another teacher restrained me.

“He's being mean!” Jason yelled childishly, pointing a finger at me.

“You called us names and yanked a clump of hair out of Penny's head. It was self-defense,” I replied with a shrug.

The teacher shook her head. “Both of you are going to the principal's office and having your parents called,” she said.

I wasn't going to be disrespectful to the teacher, but internally I shrugged, knowing my dad would completely

understand why I did what I did. Both of my parents would. So instead of worrying, I turned back to Penny and gave her a thumbs up, her mouth hanging open as I was led away.

* * *

I DRIED off from my shower, thinking about how Annabelle and her friends called me String Bean all the way through middle and high school. That was just one of a million reasons why her finding me “gorgeous” now didn’t matter to me, and why I wanted nothing to do with her.

After I was dressed, I grabbed my phone, meaning to text Evan and check in, and already had a response from Annabelle.

“Why not?” she asked, along with a sad face emoji.

I rolled my eyes, then closed the message thread without responding. It was only a couple of minutes later, though, when I received another message from her.

“I wanted it to be a surprise for both of you, but I guess I should tell you that Penny will be there, too,” it read.

I frowned at my phone. I didn’t believe her, but I would at least ask some follow-up questions to try and figure out what she was up to.

“Why is it a surprise?” I wrote back.

Within seconds, she answered. “I thought it would be fun for the three of us to hang out, just like we used to.”

That didn’t make any sense, for multiple reasons. “The three of us have never hung out together, unless you count the times you and your friends terrorized Penny and me,” I responded back.

I was beyond irritated and blocked her so she couldn’t message me again. As soon as that was done, my phone suddenly rang, Evan’s number popping up on the screen. I forgot all about Annabelle and her issues, and answered my co-worker’s call.

KNOX

I was so busy with the investigation—and running down all the new leads we had— that I barely had time to eat or sleep, let alone take care of Neo. Luckily, summer school was over, and Penny had a break before the regular school year started, so she was more than happy to keep Neo at her place and take care of him. I felt guilty about it, and missed them both, but I reminded myself that the sacrifice was worth it to find Brittney, hopefully safe and sound. Every time I saw Penny, I noticed the worry in her eyes and the heaviness in her shoulders, and could see how withdrawn she'd become due to her worry, and I was determined to make it better for her by finding her student as soon as possible.

Thankfully, I also didn't hear from Annabelle again after our "conversation," at least at first. A few days of blessed silence went by, but then, my luck ran out. It was near dark on a Friday evening, and I'd just gotten home from work and changed out of my suit when my doorbell rang. Not expecting anyone, I quietly checked the peephole, and, seeing Annabelle standing on my front porch, I leaned my back against the door, debating whether or not I could pretend that I wasn't home.

"I know you're in there! Your car is here!" She yelled. "I need to talk to you!"

I sighed with exasperation, but decided that she'd leave faster if I just opened the door and found out what she wanted. I did so, but when she tried to come in, I blocked her path, instead joining her outside and shutting the door behind me. She was illuminated by my porch lights, and I glanced at her

for a moment, noticing the gift bag in her hand, as well as her heavy makeup, her perfectly-curved hair, and her... whatever she was wearing. I assumed it was supposed to be a dress, but it showed so much skin that I wasn't sure it qualified. I quickly looked back at her face, both because I wasn't interested, and because I didn't want to give her the wrong idea.

“What do you need to talk about?” I asked, my tone all business as I crossed my arms across my chest impatiently.

She didn't speak, just smiling up at me and fluttering her eyelashes. I knew she was trying to flirt with me, but I couldn't resist making a comment about it.

“Is something wrong with your eyes? Did a bug fly into one? I've had that happen before,” I said, struggling to maintain my seriousness.

For a split second, rage flitted across her face before she expertly smoothed over her expression. Her eyelashes were no longer fluttering, though, so I considered it a win.

“My eyes are fine,” she finally said. When I didn't respond, she continued. “You always look so grumpy. I bet if you spent less time with my sister and more with me, you'd have plenty to smile about.” She rested a hand on my chest, and I immediately stepped away so that she had no choice but to let her arm fall back to her side.

“Don't,” I warned her, holding my hands out in front of me like a shield. “Either tell me why you're here, or I'm going inside. By myself.”

She huffed. “Fine. You blocked me online, and I don't like it. I want you to unblock me.”

“*That's* why you came here?” I asked incredulously, and she nodded, a pout on her face. “Then I'm sorry, but you wasted your time. I'm not going to unblock you, and I don't want to go on a date.” I turned around, ready to head back inside, but she grabbed my arm.

“Wait,” she said, her long, acrylic nails digging into my skin like a subtle warning. I paused for a moment—my parents had taught me better than to hurt women, including elbowing

them in the face, but I was trying to decide how they'd feel if the face belonged to Annabelle. Before I could decide, she spoke again. "I met your dog the other day."

"Neo?" I asked, without turning around.

"Yes!" That's her name!" she said. Clearly, she'd forgotten it. "She's so cute."

"Neo is a boy," I corrected, my voice flat. I closed my eyes, hoping for some kind of rescue if Annabelle didn't leave very soon.

"Oh, ok," she said cheerfully. "Well, *he* really liked me. More than he likes Penny, I can tell. So I brought him something."

She let go of my arm, and then I heard rustling behind me. Not trusting her, I turned around to make sure she hadn't just pulled out a knife or something to stab me with—I wasn't sure how far-fetched that idea was. Instead of a weapon, though, she held a clear container with what looked like different types of small treats inside. It really was a gift for Neo.

"There's a little pet store near my house, where they make really cute dog biscuits. They have a ton of different kinds but I really loved this 'barkcutterie' board. Like a charcuterie board, get it? Hopefully Neo will like it."

"Thanks," I said flatly, taking the treats from her. "I'm sure he'll love them."

I was the tiniest bit impressed—she was genuinely trying to get on my good side, and Neo's. Her scheming might've worked if I wasn't in love with her sister, and if I wasn't aware of just how horrible Annabelle was.

Plus, I still remembered how much she'd hated my family's dogs when we were kids, and the time in elementary school when Penny and I rescued a sick kitten we'd found. My parents had been proud of us for helping it, but when Annabelle saw the kitten, she'd called it gross and said we should've left it where we found it. With so much history, I knew that buying Neo a few treats was just an attempt at manipulation, not Annabelle actually changing her ways.

And, she still wasn't leaving.

"I need to go inside now. My boss asked me to call him," I said, giving her the first good excuse I could come up with so that she'd leave. I couldn't say I had to get dinner out of the oven before it burned, because then she'd just try to invite herself in to eat it with me.

"Okay," she said, clearly disappointed, but she finally stepped back.

"Bye," I said, then quickly went inside and shut the door, immediately feeling better once it was locked and dead bolted. Then, I walked straight to the kitchen and tossed the entire tray of dog treats into the trash can, just in case she'd somehow poisoned them. I certainly wouldn't put it past her.

* * *

Penny

"PLEASE TELL me it's going to start cooling off soon," I said to Neo as we walked through my townhouse's parking lot, nearing my front door.

The dog just glanced up at me happily, his tongue hanging out to help him regulate his temperature. Even missing one of his back legs, Neo kept up with me well, his gait only slightly different from four-legged dogs. Most people didn't even notice his missing limb at first.

We'd just gone on a walk, and even though it was early in the morning, DC's typical August humidity was overpowering. We'd gone a couple of slow miles, both of us taking frequent water breaks, but I was still incredibly sweaty and uncomfortable. I fed Neo and re-filled his water bowl, then took a shower, hating that sticky feeling all over my skin. Then, I made myself a bowl of cereal as I checked my phone.

The only notifications I had were texts from Annabelle, and when I reluctantly opened my phone to see what they said, my heart sank all the way to my knees.

“Knox and I had our first date last night! It was amazing! He’s so sweet, and I’m totally falling for him,” her texts read, along with a few different love-themed emoji’s.

I quickly deleted the messages, and then, to distract myself from Knox and Annabelle’s blooming relationship, I texted Kate and Ally to ask if they had any updates about Brittney.

Ally responded first. “We’re working on a few promising leads, but we don’t have any concrete ideas yet about where she is.”

“And traffickers typically move fast, so it usually takes a while to track someone down. Honestly, she could be anywhere in the world right now. But we’ll find her,” Kate added.

I imagined Brittney in some far-off place like South America or Asia, being abused and treated as nothing more than a plaything for men to enjoy. I wondered if she was being drugged into submission and barely knew what was happening to her, or if she was aware of every harrowing moment, and I wasn’t sure which would be worse. But I knew my imagination couldn’t truly do justice to the horrors that she was probably experiencing—I didn’t think I was that creative. Brittney had already experienced so many challenges in her young life, and it was just cruel that she was now going through something so terrible.

My appetite gone, I dumped out the rest of the cereal and went back to bed, intending to read more of the romance novel I was currently in the middle of. I barely made it through a paragraph, though, before giving up and setting the book aside. I needed to focus on a different book genre for now—I couldn’t stomach reading about fictional characters falling in love and having good things happen to them when Brittney was out there somewhere, being mistreated. And I was starting to lose my faith in true love and happily-ever-afters, anyways, now that Knox and Annabelle were together—that was a plot straight out of a Victor Hugo novel. Now I knew how Eponine felt in *Les Misérables*, when Marius fell in love with Cosette.

Or, better yet, I could be Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, watching Esmerelda and Phoebus get their happily-ever-after. The only difference was that he had a few gargoyle friends, and I had a dog.

Rolling my eyes at my own dramatic thoughts, I decided to take a nap instead. I pulled the covers over my head to block out the early morning sun, and a moment later, I felt Neo jump up next to me and lay down, his head resting on my feet.

At least dogs were as loyal and affectionate in real life as they were in fiction.

And it wasn't long before I heard his little doggy snores, and my heart lifted, just a little.

KNOX

Nolan had called a team meeting that was supposed to start ten minutes ago, and ironically, he and Evan were the only ones missing. I checked my watch again, feeling uncharacteristically antsy, although at least I knew the reason why.

For the past few days, Penny had barely spoken to me, other than to assure me that Neo was doing great, and sending me photos of him. She wouldn't answer my phone calls or respond to any topic I brought up other than Neo, and I'd been working so much, looking for Brittney, that I'd barely slept in the past few days, let alone had time to track Penny down and find out what was wrong.

My team and I were running on caffeine and fumes, everyone working ourselves to the bone because we knew how important Penny's student was to her. Our exhaustion was especially clear as we all sat silently in the conference room, even Kate and Ally quiet and resting their heads on the large table. I could also hear Mason snoring from the other side of the room, but the rest of us were too tired to wake him up.

Finally, Nolan and Evan walked in, grinning as if they were having the time of their lives. They seemed to quickly pick up on the mood in the room, though, their smiles disappearing. As the door shut behind them, Mason suddenly jerked awake, shaking his head to clear it and looking around as if he wasn't sure where he was.

"Everything okay?" Evan asked us, his voice worried.

Kate answered the question. “Aren’t you two tired?” she asked Evan and Nolan. She didn’t even lift her head all the way, just set her chin on her folded arms as she spoke.

“I’m not sure what the right answer is here. Do you want the truth, or would you feel better if I’m tuckered out, too?” Evan joked.

Kate released a groan.

“How do you have the energy to make jokes? You two have been here even more than us. How are you *not* exhausted?” Liam asked indignantly.

“It’s because I’m in love,” Evan responded happily, and I heard a few of my teammates groan.

Nolan shook his head at his friend, a small smile on his face. “Don’t listen to Evan. We’re tired, too,” he said. “We just don’t look like it at the moment because we got something in the mail that woke us up momentarily.”

“What is it?” Kate asked, suddenly sounding more awake herself.

Nolan and Evan sat down, the latter pulling a small jewelry box out of his pocket.

“You’re going to propose to Kassidy?” Wes guessed, sounding excited.

Evan coughed, his face turning red. “Umm... Well, yes. Eventually. But that’s not what this is,” he said, clearly embarrassed. He opened the box, showing off a pair of pearl earrings.

“So you got Kassidy a present? What’s that got to do with us?” Gabe asked sullenly.

“Nope,” Evan corrected. “These earrings have tiny tracking devices inside of them. My friend Tex sent a couple pairs for Harper and Kassidy after they were kidnapped and put on the cruise ship. We recently asked him for another pair for Penny, what with her student being kidnapped, and these just came for her. After all, there may be more people at the school who are involved, and there’s always a chance they

know Penny reported it and might be targeting her next. And sometimes bad things just happen randomly. You never know.”

“And they’re secure. Tex is the only one who can track them,” Nolan added.

Evan closed the lid, then handed the box to me. Pleased that Penny would have an extra level of safety, I thanked him, then pocketed it.

Gabe cleared his throat. “Could we get a pair for Evie?” He asked, sounding almost sheepish.

Nolan raised an eyebrow at him. “Is she in danger?” he asked apprehensively. His fiancé, Harper, was Evie’s best friend, so I didn’t blame him. After the shooting at Harper’s workplace, and then the kidnapping she’d been through with Cassidy, I knew Nolan wasn’t taking any chances with her safety. If Evie was in trouble, then Nolan would probably insist on keeping Harper in his sights at all times, just in case.

“Not that I know of,” Gabe admitted. “But like Evan said, you never know.”

“That’s true,” Nolan agreed, then looked over at Evan.

“I’ll ask Tex. I’m sure he’ll be happy to send a pair for her.”

“Thank you,” Gabe said simply, with a nod of his head.

“Great,” Nolan replied. “Now, moving on. I’d like to get updates from everyone, and then I’m ordering all of you to take the rest of the day off and sleep.”

“Thank God,” Mason said quietly, and everyone else seemed to be in agreement with him, including me.

Ally spoke up first. “We hit a dead end,” she said. “We spoke with the other cheerleader, Kelly Holt. She confirmed what Lana said, and pretty much had the same story, but she targeted the other two girls we have pictures of: Adriana Luna and Daniella Ortiz. The men took both of those girls from her house on different dates, which she was able to provide. Other than that, she didn’t have anything helpful to add. And the

cheerleading coach is either a great actress, or she had no idea about the trafficking.”

“I hit a dead end, too,” Gabe said. “Stanley Wright didn’t say a word.”

“Neither did Darrell Jefferson. Their boss, whoever he is, has certainly made an impression on them,” Ryder added.

“And I’m still looking into all three men’s associates. There’ve been a couple of red flags so far, but they turned out to be distractions more than anything. We still have a few more people to check out, though,” I added.

“I got the files for the other girls and have been working those cases, but there’s not much more information than we already got from the cheerleaders. Adriana and Stephanie were being raised by single parents who were working too much to really notice their existence, and Daniella was also in foster care.”

“Good work everyone,” Nolan said. “Evan and I are still compiling the list of government officials who are powerful enough to pull something like this off. It turns out there’s a lot of them, so it’s taking a while.”

“Not a surprise,” Gabe said, and a few others mumbled agreements.

“Tex is making a list on his end of things, too,” Evan added.

Nolan nodded, acknowledging the statement, then turned to Liam. “How are the warrants coming?”

“The judge signed off on all of them, and they’ve been served. The phones and financial records will take about 45 days, like usual. And we split up and searched their homes and cars over the past couple of days but didn’t find anything useful. We didn’t even find drugs, which is surprising, since they’re drug dealers, and we were thorough,” Liam said. “I’m worried that they’re either smarter than we’re giving them credit for, or that their boss keeps their leash that tight.”

“Neither one is good news,” Ryder replied.

We talked for a few minutes, making plans and brainstorming ideas, and then Nolan interjected.

“Alright, everyone. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we could talk about this case all day. It’s time to go home and get some rest. None of you are any good to the FBI if you’re too tired to function,” he said. “Be back here at 0900 tomorrow.”

Relieved, I followed the others out into the bright sunshine, listening to them talk about how tired they were. Even Ryder said he planned to take a nap when he got home.

I needed to make one stop before I collapsed into bed, though, especially since I now had the excuse of needing to give her something.

It took longer than I liked because of the traffic, but 30 minutes later, I made it to Penny’s house. I noticed right away that her car wasn’t there, and when I knocked and only heard silence, it was clear that neither Penny nor Neo were home. I tried to call her, but it rang a couple of times and then went to voicemail. I decided to leave her a message.

“Hey, Penny, it’s your best friend, Knox. Hopefully you remember me,” I said, trying to sound like I was joking, but I could tell that it came out as sad more than anything. “Listen, I’m starting to get worried. I don’t know what’s going on and why you seem to be avoiding me, but I really need to see you. It’s important. And I’d like to see Neo as well. He’s probably forgotten me, too, at this point. Just call me back, okay?”

With that, I turned around and got into my car, barely able to keep my eyes open.

PENNY

That Saturday, I woke up to a voicemail from my sister, along with a text. And instead of deleting all of it immediately, like I should have done, I immediately listened to the message. Apparently, I had a newly developed desire to torture myself.

“Hey, Sis!” it began. “I just wanted to thank you for setting Knox and me up. We slept together for the first time last night, and it was *life changing*. Seriously. And it turns out, he’s big *everywhere*, if you know what I mean. I think I’m already halfway in love with him. Anyways... oh, he’s making us breakfast. I’ve got to go. Bye, Penny!”

I checked the text from her next, and saw a grainy photo of a sleeping Knox, an arm slung over his head. Although the angle was strange, as if she’d taken it while standing above him on the bed, it was clear they were in his room together. I wasn’t sure which emotion was stronger: my confusion over her claiming I’d set them up, my heart breaking even more, or my urge to vomit at the thought of them together.

I’d already received a voicemail from Knox a couple of days ago, calling himself my best friend as if to remind me we couldn’t be more, and then saying it was important that he see me. I knew he was going to tell me about his new relationship with Annabelle, and I didn’t want to hear it, somehow thinking that if he never told me, I could pretend it wasn’t true for a little while longer. I never called him back, and now, I was especially glad that I hadn’t. I was also glad that I’d done my best to spend as little time at home as I could lately, instead

taking Neo on hikes and to the dog park during my free time, so that I could avoid Knox and Annabelle.

A few minutes later, I received a call from Knox's mom, and I ignored it as well. She left me a message, too, inviting me to a cookout at their house to celebrate Grayson leaving the military and moving back home. I waited a while, so it was less obvious that I purposely didn't answer her call, and then sent her a text message that I had a lot to do before the school year started, and wasn't sure I could make it.

I knew I was being petty and immature. Cowardly, even. But if Knox showed up to the cookout with Annabelle, I would probably die of a broken heart right on the spot. If I had to choose between seeing my worst nightmare—Knox and Annabelle as a couple—come to life right in front of me, or shoving my head under the sand like an ostrich and keeping it there as long as possible, I chose being an ostrich.

His mom sent me a message back, calling me sweetie, and saying she really hoped I could make it because I was part of the family. I felt a twinge of regret, but I knew that not going was the best option. Knox and Annabelle could go to the party and have their happily ever after without me getting in the way. And I'm sure Annabelle wouldn't want Neo there, anyways. I was just doing everyone a favor.

* * *

Knox

I LEANED against my parent's house, sipping my beer as Grayson and a few of his friends talked about their favorite football teams, and my dad grilled nearby. There had to be at least 100 people at Grayson's Homecoming party, and most of them were spread out in the backyard among the small spots of shade, since the temperature was high and the sun was scorching.

My mom started walking towards me. "You doing okay, sweetie?" my mom asked as she stopped next to me.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I lied. "Is Penny coming?"

“I don’t think so,” my mom said sadly. “She said she had a lot to do to get ready for the new school year.”

I shook my head. “She didn’t even answer when I texted and invited her,” I confided. “Something’s going on with her. She’s avoiding me like the plague, and I have no idea why.”

My mom frowned. “That is strange. Do you want me to try and talk to her?”

“I don’t know. Do you think it would help?”

“It might,” my mom said. “But are you sure you don’t know what’s wrong? You can’t think of anything that’s happened lately that could be upsetting her?”

I shook my head. “Not really. But she *never* ignores me like this, so it has to be something big.”

For a moment, I wondered if Penny was upset about Annabelle pursuing me, but surely she didn’t even know about that. And if she did, I hoped that she knew me well enough—and trusted me enough—to know that Annabelle wouldn’t get anywhere with me. Surely if that’s what Penny was upset about, she’d just talk to me. I also wondered if she was upset with me for not already finding Brittney and the other students, but I found that hard to believe. She had to know my team and I were doing the best we could.

I stayed at the party a while longer, mostly hanging out by myself as I watched Grayson make his rounds and spend time with everyone. And as soon as the first guest left, I congratulated my brother as well, promising to hang out with him soon, and rushed out of there as well.

I sped all the way to Penny’s house, slamming the car into park in my usual space. My heart sank as I noticed Penny’s car was gone again, but knocked on the door anyways, my fist banging loudly. No one answered, and again, I didn’t hear Neo behind the door, either.

“Does she even live here anymore?” I said angrily, running my fingers through my hair in frustration.

Where the hell was she? I grabbed my phone and called her, but again, it rang a couple of times and then directed me

to voicemail. Frustrated, I hung up without leaving a message, then sat down on her stoop, intending to wait as long as it took for her to show up. I refused to even use the key she'd given me to go inside and wait, worried she'd see my car and disappear again without me realizing she was there.

I waited so long that I drifted to sleep with my back against her door, and when I woke up, it was starting to thunder and starting to rain. I jogged over to my car and climbed in, then pulled out my phone.

“Can you at least let me know you're alive?” I texted her. “I'm really worried.”

It took over ten minutes, but finally, she responded. “I'm alive,” it said simply.

“How do I know you didn't kidnap or murder Penny and take her phone?” I replied.

“It's really me,” she responded. “Your best friend since we were six years old.”

“It feels like I'm losing my best friend,” I replied. “Why are you avoiding me? I miss you.”

I waited for a reply, the text bubbles telling me she was typing and then deleting over and over again. Then, the typing stopped, and didn't re-start. I waited a few more minutes, then took a deep breath and let it go slowly. I'd never felt so defeated, or so close to punching something in anger. I would never hurt Penny, or anyone else, but I was so wound up that walls and objects felt like fair game. Knowing I needed to calm down, and not wanting Penny to see me in that state in case she miraculously showed up, I decided to head home. If I needed to, I'd go for a run or lift some weights to help me relax.

Going home didn't help, though. When I arrived, there was a box on my doorstep. Nervous about the obviously hand-delivered package—there wasn't even a label on it—I contemplated calling the bomb squad. Neo would've been able to tell if it was an explosive, but that was obviously out of the question. Deciding I was probably over-reacting, I listened to

the box, making sure nothing was ticking, then opened it slowly. Inside, I found a few bags of coffee, a t-shirt, and a mug from Black Rifle Coffee Company, but nothing about who it came from or why. I'd seen too much in my life, though, and was too jaded about how evil the world could be to keep the items, even though I loved their coffee, and the shirt and mug were nice. Since I didn't know who'd left the box—even though I had a feeling it was from Annabelle—and I didn't want to risk being poisoned, I regretfully threw the entire package into the dumpster behind my townhouse.

Then, as I left work on Monday evening, I got to my car in my usual parking garage and found the poem "How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning on my car. Someone had printed it out, folded it up, and stuck it under my windshield wipers while I was at work. I was thoroughly creeped out, and once I was pretty sure that there was no one in the garage watching me, I crumpled it up and threw it in the closest trash can. While I'd never thought of Annabelle as insane, just an appalling person, I didn't know who else could possibly be leaving this stuff for me. I definitely wasn't going to just let it continue, though.

But Annabelle would have to wait. My first priority was Penny. I was done playing around, and she was going to talk to me, whether she liked it or not. It was time to show the woman of my dreams how hard I would fight for her. If she didn't want me after that, I'd leave her alone, but I'd at least tell her how I felt first.

PENNY

It was early on a Tuesday morning, a week before school was supposed to start, and I was there getting my classroom ready to go. It was mostly empty so early in the morning, but I expected more teachers to show up later in the day to work on their own classrooms.

As I walked through the quiet hallways towards my classroom, my purse on one shoulder, I spotted Knox leaving the front office. I picked up my pace, hoping to get around the next corner before he saw me and tried to talk to me.

My heart couldn't take that today. Not yet, not until I'd shored myself up more, not until I was prepared to have my broken heart ripped out of my chest and stomped on. Right now, I couldn't be near him, couldn't see that gorgeous smile directed at me when I knew he was with Annabelle and giving her so much more. I knew down to my soul that if I had to interact with him today, I'd have a complete breakdown.

"Penny!" I heard Knox shout from behind me.

I cursed under my breath, looking around for somewhere to hide. I knew I was being a coward, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances. Maybe someday soon I'd be able to face him. The thought of completely losing my best friend by pushing him away was almost as painful as imagining him with Annabelle, but it was all I could do right now. I had no hold over him, no claim to him, as much as I wished I did, and it hurt, but hopefully someday soon I could once again handle just being his friend.

I saw the girl's bathroom and sped up, needing to get inside before Knox caught up to me.

"Penny!" I heard him shout again, his voice closer that time.

I was so close to escape, had just started to reach for the door of the bathroom, when he gently grabbed the wrist of my other arm. I tried to pull free, but his grip was firm, unyielding. I finally gave up and turned around, looking up at him, my heart in my throat.

"Why do people keep trying to hide from me in girl's bathrooms?" He said, more to himself than to me.

"What?" I asked with confusion.

"Just talking to myself," he said, then seemed to refocus on me. "Why are you running away from me?"

"Running from you? What do you mean?" I asked, trying to sound innocent.

He shook his head. "Nice try, but I know you heard me calling your name. You sped up both times," he responded, then his voice gentled. "What's going on with you? You've never run from me, Penny."

"I've just been busy," I answered, pulling my wrist from him. He let go that time, but didn't move, crowding me against the wall. Luckily, the hallway was empty, the teachers apparently all inside their rooms.

"I'm not leaving here until we talk. If that means we stand in this hallway all day and night, then so be it."

"Knox! I need to get my classroom organized!" I protested.

"Then we better get this over with," he said, and I knew there would be no talking him out of it. Our confrontation had come at last.

I huffed out a breath, frustrated with the situation. "Fine. You can come back to my classroom, but you can't stay long."

He nodded, a hopeful glint in his eyes, and my stomach dropped. I couldn't believe he'd gone to so much trouble, had come all the way to my school just to tell me he was dating my sister.

"Well, come on," I said, leading the way.

When we got back to my classroom, he followed me in, and then the door shut behind us with a loud thunk, sealing my fate. When I didn't turn around right away, Knox circled me until we were face-to-face.

"Alright, we're here. Are you ready to talk?" he asked.

"I guess so," I said, waiting for his announcement, but he didn't say anything.

"Well?" Knox finally asked. "Aren't you going to tell me why you've been avoiding me?"

"You can go first," I said, but he just shook his head.

I did my best to think of an excuse for my behavior that Knox would accept. I didn't really want to tell him how jealous and heartbroken I was, when I knew he didn't feel anything for me but friendship. He'd just pity me, which was the last thing I wanted. It was too hard to think with my heart pounding in my ears, though, and I came up empty.

"I can see your brain working on coming up with a lie, Penny. Just tell me the truth. Please," he said, almost sounding desperate, which I didn't understand.

"I really have just been busy. I'm in a different classroom this year, and I had to move all my stuff, and I wanted to replace some of my decorations, and —."

Knox cut me off before I could finish, with just a frown and a simple shake of his head.

"They gave me a new subject to teach, and I've had to brush up on that time period," I started, but he cut me off again.

"I know how smart and well-organized you are, and there's no way high school students are learning any history that you

don't already have committed to memory. None of your excuses are the real reason why you're avoiding me," he said.

"Well, if you'd stop cutting me off, I could explain better!" I said, stomping my foot like a child. At that moment, I hated how easily he could affect me, hated how much power he had over me, even though he'd broken my heart. "It's not like you've always been around, anyways. Maybe this is how I normally act right before school starts."

"I know you inside and out, Penny," Knox said, his voice low, almost seductive. "And I know this isn't just you being busy. You're avoiding me, and I need to know why. Did I do something to upset you?"

"Actually, yes, you did," I said, grabbing onto the small thread that he'd unknowingly offered me, and thinking fast. "You forgot about the anniversary of the day we met."

He studied me even more closely before speaking, and then he blew my mind. "We've never even acknowledged that day before. But in case you're being serious, I've never forgotten about the day we met, but I know for a fact that I didn't recently miss the anniversary of it. This isn't even the right season!" He shook his head. "We met in the winter. I remember everything about that day, including how cold it was, and that you were wearing all purple. Your coat, your scarf, your mittens, your pants. I'd never seen anything like it before. You were like a puffy purple cloud walking towards me."

He took my breath away. How could he be dating my sister when he and I had such a connection? When he knew everything about me? It wasn't right. Didn't he know how much I was hurting? How had he not guessed, when we'd always been an open book to each other?

It felt like my heart was being ripped in two, the pain almost physical in its intensity.

"You must've missed a different anniversary, then," I mumbled.

"I don't think so. Try again."

“I’m on my period, and my cramps are really bad,” I tried.

“Nope,” Knox said simply. “Not unless your periods suddenly last an entire month.”

“Fine. I give up,” I said.

He knew me too well, and I clearly wasn’t going to be able to lie myself out of the situation. I looked down at my feet, embarrassed. “I’m upset that you’re dating Annabelle.” I was careful with my phrasing, trying to downplay how heartbroken I was. Maybe he’d just think that I was afraid he’d neglect our friendship.

“Dating Annabelle?” he repeated slowly, as if it was a question. As if he found it bizarre that I was upset about him dating my sister.

“Why do you sound confused?” I asked defensively, hurt that he was so easily dismissing me and my feelings. “You wanted the truth. I gave it to you. Now you can go.”

“I’m *confused* because this is the first I’ve heard that I’m dating her. It’s news to me.”

“Don’t joke about it,” I said, almost in tears. “It’s not funny!”

“Oh, it’s definitely not funny, you’re right about that,” he said, then stepped closer, placing his hands on my shoulders and staring down at me with a serious expression. “Listen to me. I *am not* dating Annabelle. She’s tried, more than once in the past week or two, but I’ve turned her down every single time. You’d know that if you hadn’t been avoiding me.”

“What?” I asked, struggling to process what he was telling me, but he kept talking.

“I thought you knew me well enough—trusted me enough—to know that I’d *never* do that. Not even if she and I were the last two people on Earth, and it was up to us to re-populate. If that was the case, humans would just have to go extinct. That’s how much I despise your sister.”

I started to doubt myself for the first time. “But she told me you were dating!” I said.

“And you believed her? Just like that?” he asked incredulously.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. “She even has a picture!” I said. “And she left me a message, and sent me all these texts about your relationship.

I found the voicemail—I had to un-delete it first— and played it for him, watching his eyebrows furrow more and more as he listened. Then I pulled up the text chain between Annabelle and myself and handed my phone to him. I bit my lip nervously as he saw the photo Annabelle had sent and scrolled through the conversations, the fury on his face growing the more he read.

When he looked up again, his gaze penetrated, like he was trying to read my mind. Then, he turned and set the phone down on my desk before cupping my face between his large hands.

“First of all, I don’t know how she got that picture of me sleeping, but you can bet I’m going to be taking out a restraining order against her. So help me, if she put cameras in my house...” he began, then stopped himself before saying more. “I’ll deal with that later. But I need you to believe that I’m not dating her. I would *never* date her. She invited me out once, and I turned her down and blocked her. I’ll show you the messages if you want. Then she showed up at my house, and I turned her down again. I’ve also had a couple of creepy gifts left at my house and on my car, which I was already pretty sure were from her, but now I’m positive she left them. All of that is also going to be mentioned when I file the restraining order.

“And I’m still mad that you’d believe your sister about something like this, instead of just coming to me. We’re going to have a talk about that later.”

“But why wouldn’t I believe her? She’d have to be a complete psychopath to make all of that up,” I argued.

Knox raised his eyebrows at me. “And you’re telling me she isn’t? Did you hear the thing about her putting cameras in my house?”

I groaned with embarrassment, closing my eyes. Why had I believed Annabelle, after everything she'd done over the years. Hadn't she and my parents ruined my life enough? I was the most gullible human alive.

"Hey," Knox said softly, prompting me to open my eyes, and tilting my chin up so that we could see each other better.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've been avoiding you and ignoring you for no reason."

He hesitated for a moment before replying. "That's the thing, though. You were obviously *really* upset, since you pretty much cut contact with me. Were you just upset because it was Annabelle, or was it something more?"

My stomach sank as I realized I'd have to lie to him again. The only alternative was telling him how I felt—how jealous I'd been, how utterly distraught. It would ruin our friendship for good. But before I could say the words, he spoke up first, changing everything.

"I was going to tell you this two years ago, as soon as I got out of the military, but I got hurt, and didn't want to tie you down to someone with a brain injury. My symptoms could have gotten worse instead of better, and I didn't want to put you through that. And then time started to pass, and I kept stalling, making up one excuse after another. So this whole misunderstanding is partly my fault. But Penny, I am completely, hopelessly, head over heels in love with you. I have been for most of our lives. So no, I'm not dating your sister. I'm not interested in her, or anyone else. Because no one compares to you. No one even comes close."

"What?" I asked in disbelief, but he kept going.

"I'm hoping, based on your reaction to thinking I was dating your sister, that you have feelings for me, too. But if you don't feel the same, please don't let this ruin our friendship. I need you in my life, even if it's just as my best friend. I promise I won't make it weird."

I was astonished, my world suddenly turned upside down. It felt like I'd lost the power of speech, but I forced it to return,

unwilling to leave Knox hanging. “I love you, too So much,” I told him.

“Really?” he asked, his eyes full of warmth as he studied me.

“Yes, really,” I smiled.

He leaned down, and I lifted up onto my toes as he covered my lips with his. At first, he was gentle, the kiss more of a question, a caress. It didn't take long for it to grow heated, though, especially as he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me impossibly closer. I melted into him, wrapping my arms around his neck and running my fingers through his hair, and the kiss deepened, becoming urgent, as if we needed each other to breathe. I'd dreamt of kissing him, had imagined what his lips would feel like against mine, but the reality beat every fantasy that had come before. It left no doubt that Knox loved me, and I hoped he could feel my love for him in return.

KNOX

Penny telling me she loved me was the best moment of my life, our first kiss a close second. When our lips touched, it felt like everything was suddenly right in the world, like the missing puzzle pieces had fallen into place. It was magic, and I lost myself in it for a while.

Eventually, though, I had to end the kiss, remembering we were at Penny's place of work—which was also a school. Breathing heavily, I rested my forehead against hers, a smile on my lips.

Penny was the first to take a step back, releasing my neck but intertwining our fingers together as she did. "I can't believe you've been in love with me for years and never told me," Penny said with a mixture of pleasure and accusation.

"At first, I didn't want to ruin our friendship, and then it felt selfish to tell you when I knew we wouldn't be living right next door to each other after we finished high school. I know we both made a pact to live as close to each other as possible, and to both move back to DC when we could, but it didn't seem fair to tell you, when I was going to join the military. And then, you finished college and moved home, but I was still a SEAL and being deployed all the time. I wanted to wait until I could give you everything, to settle down with you."

"What if I'd started dating someone else before you said something?" Penny asked curiously.

"Then I would've moved up my timeline," I said, certainly sounding more confident than I'd felt at the time. "I mean, you

went on a few dates in high school, and you told me about other guys you went out with, but I could tell it was never serious. If things had started heading that way, I would've spoken up."

"I mean, I guess that plan worked," she admitted reluctantly, but she was smiling. "Especially since I doubt I ever would've gotten serious with someone else, unless you did first. No one could compare to you, and how I felt—feel—about you."

"We were always meant to be," I said, unable to resist kissing her again.

* * *

ON A WARM SPRING DAY, Penny and I laid side-by-side in my backyard, the family dog Luna curled up to next to me, as we listened to music and watched the clouds go by. Each of us had one earbud in our ears, my iPod between us, and as the song "Somebody that I used to Know" by Gotye ended, my mom came outside.

"Can you two come in for a few minutes? We need to have a family meeting," she said.

Pulling the earbud out of my ear, I stood and helped Penny up, and we went inside, Luna trailing behind us. We joined my parents and Grayson, who'd recently returned from an overseas deployment and was visiting for the weekend, in the living room.

"Should I just go home?" Penny asked, but my mom shook her head.

"No, honey, you should stay. You're part of the family, after all," my mom answered warmly, and we both sat down.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well, we know you've been struggling to make a decision about your future, but it's getting to the point where you need to choose," my mom said. "If you wait much longer, you won't have as many options."

“I’ve been putting it off because it’s so hard to decide,” I admitted.

“I had a feeling that was the case,” my dad said. “That’s why we waited until Grayson was home for a visit, so we could all talk to you together and help you. Including Penny.”

“Okay,” I said, relieved.

“I’m just going to summarize the issue, so everyone is up to date,” my mom said, glancing at Grayson.

“Go for it,” my brother responded, an amused grin on his face.

“So, as you know, Knox has always wanted to be a SEAL, and follow in you and your dad’s footsteps. That’s what he’s always worked towards, and planned things around. Also, SEALs are typically only stationed in Virginia Beach or California. Based on that, Penny applied to several colleges with education programs, and has already committed to going to William and Mary. And of course, William and Mary is an amazing school, but part of that decision—and let me know if I’m wrong here, Penny—was because she would only be about an hour from Virginia Beach, and she and Knox would hopefully live close enough to see each other more than if she went somewhere else.”

I glanced over at Penny, who just nodded, a blush staining her cheeks.

“Penny and I came up with that idea together,” I said, trying to draw everyone’s attention back to me instead of focusing on her, since I could tell she was uncomfortable.

“I assume something’s changed lately?” Grayson asked.

“Well, you know your brother’s always been good at baseball,” my mom replied. “And unexpectedly, a few Division One teams have tried to recruit him, including a couple who have offered him full scholarships to be on their baseball teams.”

Grayson’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s awesome. When did that happen?” he asked.

“Over the last month or so,” my mom said. “Their offers have a deadline, though, which is only about a week away.”

“Which schools are they?” Grayson asked.

“Duke and UVA offered full rides,” I said. “Clemson, UNC, Florida State, and a couple of others have offered smaller scholarships.”

My brother whistled. “Those are pretty good schools,” he said.

“Yeah, but they’re all at least three hours from William and Mary,” I replied.

Penny spoke up. “You shouldn’t make a decision based on me,” she protested.

“Why not? You chose to go to William and Mary because it was near the naval base in Virginia Beach,” I replied.

“I probably would’ve gone there anyways, though,” she replied. “You know I’ve always loved Colonial Williamsburg.”

“You always said you wanted to go to a big college so you could blend in. William and Mary isn’t big,” I responded.

“I said that a long time ago,” Penny answered, sounding defensive.

I started to reply, but Grayson interjected. “Whoa, hold up,” he said, holding his hands out, and Penny and I both got quiet. “College is, what, four years?”

Penny answered him. “Five, since I plan to get my master’s degree while I’m there.”

“Okay, so we’re talking about the next five years, compared to the rest of your lives,” Grayson said.

“Technically, but—,” I started, but my brother interrupted.

“Five years isn’t that long, in the grand scheme of things. Especially when you consider that you could get stationed in Coronado, or even if you do end up in Virginia Beach, you’ll be training and deployed so much you won’t have much free time anyways. I don’t think you should make a decision based on where Penny will be for the next few years.”

Annoyed, and wanting to defend Penny, I began to protest again, but my dad spoke up.

“Just hear him out, Knox,” he said gently, and with a huff, I sat back against the couch and listened, Penny quiet beside me.

“I’m not saying to do what you want and forget about Penny,” Grayson said. “What I am saying is that this isn’t the 1800s. There’s more forms of communication out there than writing letters and sending them on the Pony Express. You do have cell phones, after all, and you can even video call people now.”

“Don’t be sarcastic,” I warned. “Just get to the point.”

Grayson’s grin widened. “I’m almost done, just hold on,” he said. “I think you need to consider what you want to be doing in ten or twenty years. You can either go the baseball route—knowing it’s unlikely you’re going to end up in the major leagues making millions of dollars—and get a degree in accounting or something, then spend the rest of your life doing people’s taxes. If that’s what you want, great. Or, you can join the military, and spend the next however many years doing something important. And you’ll still have options afterwards—you could go into law enforcement, or work in intelligence or something. Hell, you could work at the Pentagon like dad. Plus, the military gives you free college anyways, and if you want to have some adventures, and then get a degree and do people’s taxes, you could still do that.

“You just have to decide which of those options sounds most appealing.”

“That’s great advice, son,” my dad said proudly. “When did you get so wise?”

“I’ve always been like this. Haven’t you noticed?” my brother quipped.

I hated to admit it, but Grayson’s words did make sense. I paused for a moment, considering what he’d said, then glanced over at Penny, noticing how uncomfortable she seemed. She was staring at her shoes, as if her greatest wish at

that moment was to sink into the floor and disappear. If I hadn't realized long ago how much I loved her, I would've at that moment, feeling her emotions as if they were my own, and wanting to make it better for her.

"I've made a decision," I announced, and everyone looked at me expectantly, including Penny.

"I'm going to join the Navy, and hopefully become a SEAL, like I've always planned," I said. "You're right that I'm never going to play baseball professionally, and being on a college team will just be a waste of time, even if I do get a degree out of it. I don't want some random desk job. Going the military route will get me everything I want out of life."

"Are you sure?" my mom asked.

"Yeah, I'm positive."

"And you aren't making the decision because of me?" Penny asked quietly.

I met her eyes. "I'm not," I assured her. "Although I can't say I'm not taking you into consideration. I'll always want you to be part of my life, Pen. That's not negotiable for me."

I heard my parents talking quietly, sounding approving, but my brother made a sound as if he was choking, then abruptly stood up.

"Alright, now that I've solved your problem, I'm going for a run," he said. "You and Penny are so sweet, I can literally feel myself getting a cavity."

I glared at him, but he just punched me on the shoulder as he headed for the front door.

** * **

EVEN AS A TEENAGER, Penny was the center of my world. Once I got to boot camp and then BUD/S, I realized how unique I was, as other guys teased me for pining over my best friend and wanting to call and talk to her for hours instead of joining them at bars. Their opinions didn't even faze me,

though—I'd always been sure that Penny was the one for me, and I knew that if the other guys had their own Penny, if they really understood how lucky I was to have her, and how she made me feel, they'd stay home just for the chance to talk to her, too.

I was thrilled that Penny and I had finally admitted our feelings for each other, but eventually, I had to force myself to leave her classroom so that she could get some work done. Before I left, though, I made her promise that she, Neo, and I would spend time together after work, and that she'd never avoid me like that again.

I'd already taken the day off, determined to sort things out with Penny, so I had some free time to kill once I left her school. My priority was looking for cameras at my townhouse, and when I got home, I checked the mail, then threw the stack of bills and letters onto my kitchen table and began searching. Sure enough, I found several cameras spread throughout the house, including the ceiling in my bedroom. I'd never been so infuriated, and wanted to immediately rip them all down, but knew I needed to think it through before doing anything.

And while I needed someone to come over ASAP to deal with the cameras, I also wanted to plan a nice evening with Penny. Thinking about her helped me calm down, and after a phone call with Nolan asking for his advice, I straightened up the house, then started on dinner for us.

As I went to set the table, though, I finally remembered the mail, and started sorting through it. Most of it could be thrown away, but near the bottom of the pile, I found a sealed manila envelope without a name, a return address, or a stamp on it. My stomach sank as I realized someone—probably Annabelle—had put the envelope in my mailbox instead of mailing it. I donned latex gloves in case we could get fingerprints or other evidence from the envelope or its contents, and then carefully opened it.

The first thing I pulled out of the envelope was a lock of platinum blond hair, which I found so disturbing that goose bumps immediately popped up onto my skin. I quickly grabbed a paper towel to set the hair down on, then stuck my

hand into the envelope again, pulling out a picture of Annabelle, completely naked from the waist up, and gazing into the camera seductively. The photo, even more than the hair, made me feel sick, the goose bumps on my skin being joined by nausea.

I quickly flipped the photo over and set it next to the hair, then checked the envelope again, finding nothing else inside. I set it with the contents, and then, with my stomach in spasms, I turned off the stove and stepped outside, headed to my parent's house, which was the safest place I could think of to go while I waited for Penny to get off work. When I got there, as soon as I greeted my mom, I went straight to the bathroom and washed my hands until they were raw. I wished I could scrub my eyes clean as well, and somehow erase the memory of that photo.

Instead, I called Nolan again, updating him on the envelope, and he promised to come over later that afternoon. Then, with nothing else to do, I spent time with my mom until it was time to return home and see Penny and Neo. I didn't think I'd completely feel better until I saw them, and I also wanted Penny's input before I took action against her sister.

* * *

Penny

FOR THE REST of the day, I felt like I was in a daze, struggling to believe that my life was completely different than it had been when I woke up this morning. In the span of a few minutes, I'd gone from heartbroken, to being in a relationship with the man I considered the love of my life.

Organizing and decorating my classroom didn't feel important anymore, but I slogged through it anyways, counting down the minutes until I could leave. And I considered texting Harper, Cassidy, and the others to tell them what had happened, but it still didn't feel real, as if I'd get to Knox's house later and realize it had all been a dream.

It felt like months had passed by the time I was done with work for the day, and I hurried out of the school, rushed home to pick up Neo, and then drove to Knox's house. I was nervous as I knocked on his door, worried that things would be different and awkward between us. As soon as he opened the door and smiled at me, though, I knew my fears had been unfounded.

Knox stopped me from going inside, though, instead leading Neo and me around the building to the fenced-in backyard. Once the gate was shut and Neo was off his leash and sniffing the ground, Knox stepped towards me, crowding me against the fence, and kissed me. His lips met mine with a frenzy, as if he needed reassurance as much as me. His touch felt like magic, making me feel as if I was under his spell. I never wanted to be set free.

He broke away more quickly than I liked, then led me to the chairs on the patio. Luckily, they were underneath a shaded area, since it was a hot afternoon.

"I hate to ruin our day, but I need to talk to you about something important," he said seriously, and I was suddenly nervous. I wondered if he'd changed his mind about us already, but he leaned over and tenderly kissed my forehead, disabusing me of that idea. "Stay here. I need to go in the house for a minute," he said, then went inside through his back door.

I was willing to do anything he asked in that moment, and while I waited, I moved my chair a little further into the shade, Neo stretching out underneath me, panting lightly. Even in the shade, it was really hot, but I knew Knox had a reason for bringing us outside, and that it was a good one. A few moments later, he was back, latex gloves on his hands and holding an envelope. As he sat down, he handed another pair of gloves to me, encouraging me to put them on. I did, my anxiety quickly growing.

"So, I mentioned getting a couple of gifts," Knox said once my gloves were on.

“Oh, yeah. I meant to ask about that, but I got distracted,” I said, embarrassed that I’d forgotten something so important.

Knox’s grin was almost wolfish, clearly knowing just how well he’d distracted me. He re-focused quickly, though, and continued talking.

“Someone left a box in front of my door the other day, no address or postage or anything. It was filled with coffee, a t-shirt, and a mug from Black Rifle Coffee Company. I threw it all away, since I didn’t know where it came from.”

“That’s really weird,” I said, suddenly feeling cold even in the hot sun.

Knox nodded. “And then a day or two after that, someone stuck an old love poem under my windshield wiper while I was at work. And today, I got this,” he said, holding up the envelope. I reached for it, but he stopped me. “I’m not going to keep you from looking at what’s in here, but I strongly recommend that you don’t. I definitely wish I hadn’t seen it. I could just tell you what’s in there instead.”

“That just makes me more curious,” I said, reaching out to take the envelope. That time, he let me.

“I know. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. It’s pretty disturbing,” Knox replied with a grimace.

I opened the envelope and looked into it, not understanding what I was seeing at first—my eyes and my brain couldn’t make sense of it. Instead, I set the envelope down on the fire pit in front of me, then put the objects down on top of it.

First, I noticed a lock of blond hair tied with a ribbon. A photo sat next to it, face down, and I flipped it over, coming face-to-face with a picture of my sister from the waist up, completely naked. I gasped, quickly flipping it over again, then shoving it back into the envelope. Then, I put the hair inside as well, tucking the envelope’s flap back inside of it and pulling off my gloves.

“I should’ve listened to you and not opened it,” I said, my voice flat. I was disgusted and horrified, as well as indignant

on behalf of Knox for being the target of Annabelle's harassment. "I assume that's her hair, too?"

"Most likely," he replied gravely. "But there's more I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Like I said earlier today when you showed me that photo of me sleeping, I was worried Annabelle put cameras in the house to spy on me. I looked around when I got home, and I found a few, including one in my bedroom."

I wanted to vomit. "I don't even know what to say. This is crazy," I told him.

"I know," Knox agreed. "But that's why we're sitting out here, instead of inside. I don't want you on Annabelle's radar any more than you already are, and I can barely stomach going in there."

"Also, I talked to Nolan earlier, and he's on his way over, along with an Arlington PD detective friend of his, so that they can help us with all of this. Right now, her actions fall under the jurisdiction of local police, not the FBI, which is why a detective is coming as well. But if you're okay with it, I'd like to press charges against Annabelle."

"Of course you should press charges against her! I'm completely okay with that," I assured him. "I'd be more upset if you didn't, honestly."

"Okay. I just wanted to make sure," Knox said. He looked over at me. "How are you handling all of this?"

"I should be asking *you* that. I'm not the one being stalked," I said.

"I'm fine," Knox responded. "As soon as you and Neo got here, I was perfect."

"You're so sweet," I said, then sighed. "I'm okay, too. I'm just wondering if I'm in some kind of alternate reality, or a dream."

"What do you mean?" Knox asked cautiously.

“I’m just saying, when I woke up this morning, I thought you and Annabelle were together. Now, you and I have confessed our feelings for each other, and it turns out that Annabelle is more diabolical than ever I thought possible. Or she’s having some kind of mental break. Maybe both.”

“*Probably* both,” Knox corrected.

“Probably,” I conceded. “But do you see what I mean? It’s a lot to take in.”

“I do. But I promise you aren’t dreaming or in an alternate reality, unless I’m there with you,” Knox said. “It’s way too hot right now to be anything other than real life, though.”

“That’s true,” I laughed, wiping sweat from my brow.

Before I could say anything else, a familiar voice called out to us. Neo got up, ready to fulfill his self-appointed guard dog duties, but Knox stopped him with a simple command. Then, Nolan entered the gate, followed by a man in a suit. Knox stood up to greet them, and I followed.

A few minutes later, Knox had explained the situation he’d just told me about, and Nolan’s detective friend, Jonathan Bailey, had donned latex gloves.

“I’m going to take this back to the precinct and test for fingerprints,” Jonathan said, carefully placing the envelope and its contents into an evidence bag. Once he was done, he glanced at Knox. “You want to show me around inside, point out the cameras you spotted?”

“Sure thing,” he replied, then glanced at me. “Nolan, will you stay with Penny?”

Nolan nodded. “I’ll keep her safe,” he promised.

Knox had always been protective, but now, knowing that he cared about my safety because he was in love with me, it felt more meaningful. I offered Nolan the chair Knox had been in, and we both sat down.

“So, what happens now?” I asked him.

“Well, first Jonathan will want to find all the cameras. He has a radio frequency detector with him to make that an easier

task. He'll bag all of those to take back to the police department so they can be dusted for prints. He'll also try to track down who the cameras belong to, in case he doesn't get any usable prints or doesn't get a match."

"How can he track down who the cameras belong to?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm assuming they're connected to the internet. Otherwise, the cameras would need some type of storage card, meaning your sister would have to keep breaking in here and switching them out. That seems pretty unlikely to me. Unless your sister is some kind of genius, and a mastermind criminal, I'm going to assume the cameras are connected to Wi-Fi, and that they aren't very high tech. If that's the case, then Jonathan can use the Wi-Fi info stored in the cameras, and her internet provider can easily match that data to her account. Or, if that doesn't work, he can try tracking the serial numbers back to find the store they were purchased from, and then possibly the person who bought them. He'd have to subpoena receipts from the store, though, and security camera footage if they have it."

"That sounds complicated," I said.

"It can be, but a lot of times, people don't cover their tracks very well," Nolan answered. "Do you know if your sister has ever been fingerprinted? That's the fastest way to solve this."

"She was arrested for shoplifting a couple of times, maybe when she was 18 or 19, but they dropped the charges. Would they still have fingerprinted her?"

"If they followed procedures, then yes, they would've done that when they arrested her."

"Her fingerprints are probably in the system, then," I said. "So, if they can prove that she put the cameras in his house, will that be enough for Knox to get a restraining order against her?"

"Oh, that's enough for more than a restraining order. Your sister is looking at a few misdemeanor charges, at a minimum.

Possibly a federal charge of wiretapping, which is a felony. She could be facing prison time.”

“Prison?” I repeated. I knew she more than deserved it, but for some reason, my feelings were mixed.

Nolan nodded. “Even if she does end up with prison time, though, it won’t happen overnight. Knox needs to up his security in the meantime, so that this can’t happen again. A friend of mine owns a security company and could turn this place into a fortress, but I’m wondering if maybe Knox should stay somewhere else for a while, in case Annabelle goes off the rails once the cameras are taken down.” He paused for a moment, deep in thought. “Most of the team lives in apartments. I’m going to call Harper and see if she’s okay with Knox and Neo staying with us for a while. We have a nice, big yard.” He unlocked his phone, getting ready to call her, but I put my hand on his arm, stopping him. He glanced over at me.

“It’s not as big as yours, but I have a yard. They can stay with me,” I said.

“Are you sure? Harper won’t mind.”

“Very sure,” I replied awkwardly, unsure if Knox was comfortable with announcing our relationship to his team, or if he wanted to wait.

At that moment, though, Knox came out the back door and joined us, Jonathan behind him. He walked up to me, wrapping me in his arms and placing a short, sweet kiss against my lips. That answered my question—obviously, he was more than okay with announcing the change in our relationship.

“Finally,” I heard Nolan say, and when I glanced over at him, he was grinning. “We’ve been making bets at the office about how long it would take you two to get together.”

Knox laughed, seeming to be pleased, but I was more surprised than anything.

“You all knew how he felt about me?” I asked as Knox wrapped his arms around me, ignoring how sweaty I was.

“Penny, everyone could tell he’s in love with you. Strangers on the street probably noticed,” Nolan said.

“I didn’t,” I replied.

“I think you saw it, you just didn’t let yourself believe it,” Nolan disagreed.

I was about to say something else when I heard the detective clear his throat. I’d forgotten he was even there.

“I hate to interrupt, but I just have one last thing, and then I’ll get out of your hair,” Jonathan said as we all turned to look at him. “Knox’s fingerprints will be in the system already since he’s an FBI agent, but have you ever been fingerprinted?” he asked me. “If not, I need to get that done so we can differentiate between you and the suspect.”

I thought for a moment. “My fingerprints should be in the system. I’m a teacher, and that was part of my background check,” I replied.

“Ah, that makes sense,” Jonathan said with a nod. “Well, I took all the cameras down and have bagged them for evidence. I think I’ve got everything I need, so I’ll head out. I’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you so much,” Knox said, and he and Nolan shook the detective’s hand before he left.

“I’m going to head out, too,” Nolan said once it was just the three of us—and Neo. “But like I told Penny, I’d feel better if you stayed somewhere else for now, in case Annabelle escalates things. Penny said you can stay with her, but Annabelle can find you there just as easily. You’re welcome to stay with Harper and me if you want. Or I can get Seth out here ASAP to set you up with some security.”

“Thanks, Boss. But if she’s still offering, I’m going to stay with Penny. Do you think Seth could set up the security at her place instead?”

I interjected before Nolan could reply. “You don’t want security here?” I asked.

Knox shook his head. “Only if you want to wait a while before we move in together. My lease is up in a couple of months anyways, and your place is nicer. But if it’s too soon, I’ll get security set up at both of our places. I’m not risking Annabelle targeting you while I’m not there.”

It was another huge life change, but one that I was more than ready for. I turned to Nolan. “We’ll just get it set up at my place,” I told him.

Nolan smiled. “I’m happy for you two,” he said. His phone beeped, and he checked it, his grin growing even wider. “Harper is asking me what’s for dinner, which means she wants me to pick something up on my way home. I better go before she gets hangry.”

“Thanks for coming, Boss,” Knox said, shaking his hand.

“No need to thank me. We look out for each other,” Nolan replied, then glanced at me. “Harper’s going to lose it when I get home and tell her you two are finally together.”

I blushed, and then Nolan left, and it was just the two of us and Neo again.

“You really want to move in together? It’s not too soon?” Knox asked, his voice uncertain, but I could see the hope in his eyes.

As the evening had progressed, and especially after how loving he was towards me, even in front of his team leader, I was feeling more and more confident in his love, and I was sure of my answer. “If anything, we should have moved in together a long time ago,” I said.

Knox laughed. “That’s true,” he agreed.

He leaned in, pressing another kiss to my lips, and it quickly grew more heated. After a few moments, though, I stepped back. “It’s way too hot outside to be doing this,” I said. “Can we go in now?”

With another laugh, he agreed, leading the way as he promised that Jonathan had found all the cameras—there had been five total in the townhouse. Another surge of anger towards Annabelle crept in, but Knox distracted me with

more kisses, interspersed with packing some of his and Neo's things.

"I forgot to give you these earlier," he said at one point, walking up behind me as I shoved some dog toys into a bag. As I stood, he wrapped his arms around me, one hand holding out an open box with pearl earrings inside.

"What's this?" I asked, taking the box from him, then turned to look at him. "You got me a gift?"

"Well, not really," he said, running his hand through his hair, and when I looked at him quizzically, he explained. "Evan's friend, Tex, was in the military, and now he's more of a behind-the-scenes guy—like if Batman was mostly a computer hacker. Apparently he's made earrings like these for a lot of his friends' wives—and his, I assume. He sent earrings for Harper and Cassidy, and when Brittney disappeared, Evan reached out to Tex and got a pair for you, too, just in case."

"Well that's really sweet of Evan," I teased, then took out the earrings I'd been wearing and replaced them with the new ones. "How do they look?"

"Beautiful, but mostly because of who's wearing them," he said, then leaned down and placed another gentle kiss against my lips.

We finished packing up the essentials, also putting the dinner he'd made into Tupperware containers to take with us, since we were eager to leave. When we got back to my house, it didn't take long to get Neo settled, since he already had a crate, bowls, and some toys there. When we went upstairs, though, things became awkward. I only had two bedrooms, and since I virtually never had overnight guests, the second room operated as a home office. It held a large desk, a couple of carts filled with craft supplies, and a futon that had been shoved into one corner. It was unmade, and covered with yards of fabric from a quilt-making phase I'd gone through a couple of years before.

I turned back to Knox, suddenly filled with nerves.

“Umm... what were your thoughts about sleeping arrangements? I can move that fabric... somewhere, and make the futon into a bed. Or one of us could sleep on the couch downstairs,” I said, then added shyly, “or, we could sleep in my bed together.”

Knox studied me closely, and I felt myself blush under his gaze. “What would you be more comfortable with?” he finally asked. “You know I can sleep pretty much anywhere, including the ground.”

I hesitated before answering him. “I’m not sure if this is moving too fast or too slow, but I think I want you to share the bed with me,” I finally said, my voice timid.

“You think, or you know?” Knox asked seriously. “If you aren’t sure, I’ll sleep on the couch.” He stepped backwards, as if he was about to head downstairs, but I reflexively grabbed his arm. He paused, watching me patiently.

“Don’t,” I said, suddenly sure of exactly what I wanted. “After all this time, the thought of you being anywhere other than right next to me just feels wrong.”

Knox took a step towards me, then another, and cupped my cheek in his large hand. “Do you know how much I love you?” he asked, placing gentle kisses along my jaw.

“Yes, because I love you just as much,” I responded.

The sensation of his lips against my skin sparked a fire in me, but it quickly grew out of control, my skin feeling heated, and unable to catch my breath. Then, I felt Neo’s nose nudge against my leg, and heard him release a small whine. I stepped back from Knox and glanced down.

“I think someone is jealous and wants attention,” I said.

Smiling, Knox crouched down in front of Neo, talking to him in a deep, soothing tone as he scratched under his chin and along his chest. Then, he looked up and met my gaze, studying me intensely.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I realized that Knox had picked up on my emotions even before I had, and that petting Neo had mostly been to my benefit, allowing me to gather my thoughts. He'd always been attentive and thoughtful that way.

I took a deep, steadying breath. "Yeah. I think I'm just hungry, and a little overwhelmed by how intense this entire day has been."

Knox stood up and took my hand. "Let's go downstairs, and I'll heat dinner up for us, and then we'll hang out on the couch and watch TV. Does that sound good?"

I smiled at him, feeling grateful. "That sounds perfect."

PENNY

That weekend, Knox announced that he was taking me on a surprise date, and stubbornly refrained from giving me even a hint about what we'd be doing. First, he took me out for a delicious breakfast, which I pleasantly thought was the entire date, until a little while later, when we were standing in front of my favorite bookstore in DC—probably the entire world. As Knox held the door open and gestured for me to go inside, I gave him a quizzical look.

“I know this is your favorite store, and you could spend an entire day looking around and still not be satisfied. I also know that they have your favorite coffee here. So, I'm going to buy you a cup of that coffee, and keep you company while you look around to your heart's content.”

“Really?” I asked, looking around like a kid in a candy shop.

The bookstore was huge, with three floors, and it housed all kinds of books. They had some of every genre, from the most tedious classical books, to romantic comedies that everyone was raving about on social media, to fantasy and science fiction, and books about topics I'd never even heard of. They also had board games, stationery, notebooks, pens, and all kinds of other odds-and-ends that I loved to browse.

Knox insisted that I start looking around while he got my coffee, and I started in the fantasy section, which was closest to the café.

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor, books all around me while I flipped through another one, when he returned with my drink.

“Was there an explosion?” Knox asked with a grin, glancing around as he handed the coffee to me.

“Only in my brain,” I responded, taking a sip, then picking up one of the books I’d placed on the floor and showing it to him. “I read this book years ago, and I loved it. I had no idea it was going to be a series. So now I have five books to catch up on!”

“Is that good or bad?” Knox asked.

“Well, it’s good because I’m really excited to read these, but bad because the series still isn’t finished, and these books are expensive. I might just get the second book in the series for now, and the rest as I move through the series. I could also try the library, although the waitlist for this series is probably really long.”

“I guess I forgot to mention that part of this date is that I’m buying all the books you pick out,” he responded, crouching down next to me and picking all the books up off the floor.

“You can’t do that!” I argued. “That could be hundreds of dollars!”

Knox just smiled. “I know. But you deserve to be spoiled. And I have plenty of savings after all my years in the military. I spent a lot of time in war zones, with nothing to buy.

I just shook my head. “It’s too much,” I said, standing up.

Knox studied me for a moment. “This date is going to be a lot less fun if you’re just pining over all the books you want and can’t get.”

“Then we should just leave now,” I said. “Maybe we can move this date to a library?”

He shook his head. “What if we set a budget?” he asked. “This can be your birthday present, since it’s coming up.”

I thought about that for a moment. “I guess that’s okay, as long as it isn’t too big of a budget.”

“Of course,” he said, the seriousness in his voice at odds with the mischievous glint in his eyes.

I glared at him in mock-warning, then glanced at the stack of books already in his hand.

“I already own the first book,” I said, realizing that he was holding all six books from the series. “You can at least put the first one back.”

“You don’t want an extra copy, just in case?” he teased before returning it to the shelf.

Then, he followed along as I made my way through other sections. I reluctantly picked out a couple more books, then saw a display featuring a boxed set of all the books from the *Anne of Green Gables* series.

“Ooh, they’re so pretty,” I said, running my hand along the books’ colorful spines. I turned to Knox. “I want to get these for Brittney. When you find her and bring her home, I want her to have something nice, that’s just hers, and not a hand-me-down.”

“That’s a really good idea,” Knox agreed, then nodded at the books he was already carrying. “Add them to the stack.”

“No, I’m going to pay for these,” I said. “They’re a gift from me to Brittney, and it’s important to me that I buy them myself.”

“Okay,” he said, knowing not to argue with me about that. “I can still carry them for you, though.”

I studied the stack already in his arms, debating whether he could really carry so many more. Then, he adjusted the books I’d already picked, holding them in one hand, and with the other, he reached out and took the boxed set from me.

“You just have to be a hero,” I teased him, rising on my tiptoes and kissing him on the cheek.

“Only for you,” he replied.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING few days were perfect, with Knox and me easily falling into a routine, but the sense of peacefulness I had didn't last long. The day before school started, I had meeting after meeting, and also decided to make some last-minute changes to my classroom. When I got home that day, completely exhausted, I went straight to the fridge to get a snack. I'd just shoved a huge spoonful of ice cream into my mouth when there was a knock on my door. I went to open it, Neo at my heels, and found my parents on the other side of the door.

They practically shoved me aside as they stormed into my townhouse, and I could sense emotions I couldn't quite identify pouring off of them. Neo seemed to pick up on the strange vibes as well, sticking close to me as my parents made themselves comfortable in my living room. I sat down in the chair closest to them, and Neo settled at my feet, waiting for an explanation.

"We need your help," my mother spoke up.

"Okay. I'll do my best," I said, confusion and apprehension settling over me.

"Your sister was arrested this morning. They handcuffed her and everything, as if she was some type of criminal," my mom said, not recognizing the irony in her statement. "They won't even release her on bail or anything."

"I'm not sure I can help with that," I responded.

"That's where you're wrong," my father said. "They let us talk to Annabelle for just a few minutes, and she said that Knox can get all of this dismissed. We just need to talk to him, and get this misunderstanding cleared up."

My mom started rifling through her huge purse, then pulled out a stack of papers and handed them to me.

"I convinced them to make a copy of everything for us. I just can't believe this."

I studied the forms, quickly realizing they were arrest warrants. The first few pages were from the Commonwealth of Virginia, charging Annabelle with trespassing and stalking.

When I got to the bottom of the stack, though, I was somewhat surprised. The federal government was also charging her with wiretapping. Because she always got her way, I hadn't really expected Annabelle to be charged with anything, let alone a federal crime punishable with years in prison. I was surprised she hadn't flirited her way out of the arrest, and the charges.

"This looks pretty serious. Where are they holding her?" I asked.

"She's at the City of Arlington jail right now, but they said after she's arraigned in the morning, they'll probably transfer her to a federal holding cell," my mom said, her voice shaking as if she was about to burst into tears. "How could they charge her with wiretapping? Who do they think she is, Richard Nixon? This is ridiculous!"

My dad nodded in agreement. "This is just a big mix-up," he said. "We need you to talk to Knox and let him know what's happened. We'd call him ourselves, but we don't have any way to contact him."

I thought for a moment. "I'm not sure what Knox can really do," I finally said. "He might not have any say over it," I finally said.

"Oh, of course he does," my dad replied, brushing me off.

"No, really. If a crime is serious enough, they'll prosecute it no matter what. And they might have enough evidence even without Knox's cooperation."

"But Knox is an FBI agent. Surely he has more say over these things than some Joe Schmo would," my mom said.

"Honestly, Annabelle should face the consequences of her actions just like everyone else. And Knox doesn't deserve to be stalked and harassed," I argued.

"But he's Annabelle's boyfriend. She isn't stalking or harassing him. He can just explain that, and they'll let her go."

My stomach twisted. "Annabelle's boyfriend," I repeated, a sense of déjà vu washing over me.

“He’s probably already worried about her, since he wouldn’t have heard from her at all today. We need to tell him where she is,” my mom said.

“If you just give us his phone number, we can talk to him ourselves, and leave you alone,” my dad added. “Annabelle has been through so much already, you know.”

I sighed, frustrated at the position I was suddenly in because of my sister. I was also unsure if my parents understood what was going on. They seemed to believe that Annabelle had asked for Knox’s help because they’re dating, and because Knox has a government job and might know what to do. In reality, Annabelle probably said Knox could help because he was the victim, and could possibly get the charges dismissed. My sister certainly knew how to make a mess of things. I decided to try and explain everything first.

“She and Knox aren’t dating. They never were,” I told them.

“Well, that can’t be true. That’s not what Annabelle said,” my dad replied. “She told us about it just last week.”

“So it’s impossible that Annabelle lied about something?” I asked sarcastically, my temper was starting to rise. They’d *always* believe Annabelle over me.

“Why would she need to lie? Your sister could date any boy she wanted to,” my mom said in Annabelle’s defense. “I’m sure Knox feels very lucky that she chose him.”

“You remember that she and I are twins, right?”

“I know, sweetie. But you just aren’t... charming like Annabelle is,” my mom replied. “It’s not a bad thing. You’re just more reserved, and good at different things.”

Exasperated, I gave up on trying to be reasonable. “Well, in this case, I know that Annabelle is lying, because Knox is dating *me*.”

My dad made a choking sound, then glanced over at my mom in shock.

“Penny, I know you’ve always been jealous of your sister, but you’re taking it too far this time,” she said.

“Do you think she’s doing this to be spiteful, or is she having some kind of delusions?” my dad asked. “Maybe she needs to be checked out by a doctor.”

“I’m right here, you know. And no, I’m not delusional,” I said, infuriated.

“Then you’re just trying to be difficult,” my mom said.

“I’ve had enough of this. Give us Knox’s phone number. Do you need your phone, or do you have it memorized?” my dad asked.

“I’m not giving you his number,” I replied firmly.

“You will,” my dad bit out. “We’re not leaving until you do.”

“If Annabelle and Knox were dating, shouldn’t *she* know his number?” I asked, trying again to make them see sense.

“They haven’t been together long enough for her to memorize it,” my mom said dismissively.

I shook my head, a watery laugh escaping my lips. “You two are horrible parents. You need to leave right now, and never come back.”

I walked towards the door, pulling it open, glaring at them as I waited for them to leave. My dad got up first, followed by my mom, and for a moment I was relieved that they were actually listening to me. That misguided belief didn’t last long, though. Instead of leaving, my dad grabbed my wrist, then pushed the door closed, only tightening his grip when I tried to pull away.

“You’re hurting me,” I told him, my anger fading, replaced with fear.

“Well, your sister is hurting a lot more right now because of you.” He turned to my mom. “Find her phone,” he ordered.

“No! Get out!” I yelled, trying to twist away from him.

Neo, standing nearby, started to growl menacingly, causing my dad's grip to loosen momentarily.

"Why is he making that noise?" my dad asked, watching him closely.

I rolled my eyes. He was even more clueless about dogs than I thought. "He's warning you that he's going to attack if you keep it up," I answered. "Just get out now, before he hurts you."

"We will, as soon as we have Knox's phone number," my mom answered, joining us in front of the door, my phone in hand. "Get both her hands," she told my dad, and once he had both of my arms restrained behind me, she walked closer. "Will this unlock if it recognizes your face?" she asked.

Before I could answer, a voice I wasn't expecting came from behind my mom.

"What the *hell* is going on here?" Knox asked, his gun out but pointed at the floor, his finger off the trigger. He must have heard the commotion and come in from the back door, unsure what he would find.

My mom whirled around with shock, but my dad simply tightened his grip on my arms, causing me to wince. Knox noticed, and began to advance towards us.

"Let go of her. *Now!*" he demanded, and when he finally did, Knox shoved his gun back into his holster and grabbed my dad by the throat, backing him up against the nearest wall and pressing him against it. Several inches taller, Knox hovered over him, resting his arm heavily on the front of his throat.

I shook my arms, trying to get the blood flowing again.

"Who wants to start explaining?" Knox asked, his voice a growl, his arm still pressing against my dad's windpipe.

"It's good you're here, because we've been trying to get in touch with you!" my mom spoke first, her voice suddenly innocent.

"Well, I'm here. Start talking," he said.

“Could you... let go of my husband first?”

Knox paused for a moment, then stepped back, releasing my dad from the wall. “I’d feel better if you both sat down on the couch for this conversation,” he said, standing between my parents and me.

Once they were sitting, Knox angled his body so he could see all three of us. Neo, seeming to follow Knox’s lead, sat down in front of me, another layer of protection between me and my parents.

“Are you okay, Pen?” Knox asked quietly, not taking his eyes off my parents, and I rubbed my wrist, which was already starting to bruise.

“I’m fine. Mostly,” I replied.

He nodded, his eyes darting to my wrist, then he addressed my parents again. “Alright, Mr. and Mrs. Russell. What can I help you with?” he asked, his words polite, but his tone giving away his emotions. I could tell that he was just barely holding himself together, his fury anxious to be unleashed.

“Well, we wanted to tell you Annabelle is in jail,” my mom said.

“I’m aware,” Knox replied, his tone matter-of-fact.

“Annabelle said to ask you for help. We know the two of you are dating.”

“Jail just isn’t a good place for her,” my dad added, his voice hoarse. “We were just trying to get your phone number from Penny, but she was refusing to give it to us. We need you to get her out.”

Knox released a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry, but you two have no idea what’s going on here,” he said. “First of all, you should know that I’m the one who pressed charges against Annabelle, and filed a restraining order against her. She’s been leaving creepy presents for me and put cameras up in my house so she could spy on me. She’s completely unhinged, and she *needs* to be locked up. I certainly won’t be helping you get her out.”

My dad tried to speak, but Knox continued to talk.

“Second of all, I’m not dating Annabelle, I’m dating Penny, and I’m head-over-heels in love with her,” he said, and my heart skipped a beat.

“And third, after the way you two just assaulted Penny, I’m very tempted to call the police right now, so that you can join Annabelle in the cell next to her. You two are about as insane as she is.” He glanced over at me. “Do you want me to call the police?”

I stepped towards Knox and took his hand as I studied my parents. “Not today,” I finally answered, after thinking about it. I was already tired, and just wanted them to leave so I could have some peace. “But if it happens again—if you even show your faces here again, or come anywhere near me—I *will* press charges.”

Knox smiled at me proudly before returning his attention to my parents.

“Just a heads up, I’m living here now,” he said. “And if you do show up uninvited again, I’ll know about it, and it won’t go well for either of you. Do you understand?”

My dad just scowled, but my mom answered, her “yes” almost too quiet to hear.

“Alright, well I think it’s time for you both to leave,” Knox said, squeezing my hand and then letting go so he could escort them out.

My mom rushed towards the door, my dad right behind her.

“You two deserve each other,” my mom spat as she passed us. My dad was silent, staring straight ahead.

Then, finally, the door shut behind them, and Knox locked it, turning the deadbolt and then double checking it. Once he was sure it was secure, he turned to me, grasping my shoulders as he checked me over. His eyes snagged on my wrist, and returned there once he was sure the rest of me was unharmed.

“Let me see,” he said, sliding his hands down my arms and then taking my wrist gently. He lightly brushed his thumb over the bruising, then looked up, making eye contact with me. “Let’s get you some ice,” he said. I followed him to the kitchen, and watched as he wrapped an ice pack in a towel, then settled it over the bruise. “So, if I understand correctly, your parents came here to get my phone number thinking that I was dating Annabelle and could somehow magically get her out of jail, you refused to give them my number, and they got physical with you?”

“Pretty much,” I answered, somewhere between embarrassment and shock.

He rested his hand on my cheek, tilting my head up so he could look at me.

“I love that you were trying to protect me, but you should’ve just given them my phone number,” he gently chided.

I sighed. “I know. But I didn’t realize they’d go so far. And it’s the principle of the thing. I’m tired of them thinking they can walk all over me. I’m not putting up with it anymore.”

Knox grinned at me. “That’s my girl,” he said before leaning down, brushing his lips against mine.

“I think I’m just going to cut off contact completely, with all three of them,” I said.

He studied me closely. “That’s a big step.”

“You don’t think I should?” I replied, suddenly feeling insecure.

“Oh, no, I absolutely think you should. I wish you’d cut them out of your life years ago,” he said. “But they’re your family. I want to make sure you think it through first.”

“They haven’t been my family for a long time,” I said. “You’ve pretty much always been my family, Knox. You, and your brother, and your parents.”

“And we always will be,” he replied.

KNOX

As I worked at my desk a few days later, Nolan called my phone and asked me to come to his office.

“What’s going on?” I asked, worried, as I entered his office and shut the door behind me. Nolan’s face was grim as he gestured for me to sit down.

“Jonathan called me a few minutes ago. Annabelle was arraigned today, and her bail was set at \$5,000. Her parents have already paid it and she’s been released.”

“Well, that’s not great news,” I said, rubbing a hand over my face. “Does that include the bail for the federal charges?”

Nolan nodded his head, a frustrated expression on his face.

It had been a few days since their parents had shown up at our townhouse and hurt Penny, and I didn’t think I’d ever be able to erase the image of her frightened expression as her dad held her arms behind her back. I regretted not seriously roughing the man up before letting them leave, although I doubted Penny would’ve appreciated it.

That afternoon, a team from Phoenix Security came and installed cameras around the house and yard, along with alarms on the windows and keypad locks on both doors. By the time Penny got home, they were ready to show us everything, including having us install the security company’s app on our phones. The app could turn the system on or off, and we could also use it to check the cameras and to disable the alarms on certain windows if we needed to open them. It also had a last-resort button we could push if everything else

went wrong. As soon as we pushed it, police would be dispatched to our house.

“What do you think?” I asked Penny once the team had left.

“It seems pretty easy to use. And I think it’ll make me feel a lot safer,” Penny said. “I’m just sorry my family caused so much trouble that we had to resort to this.”

“It’s not your fault, Penny. Honestly, I should have gotten this kind of system installed at both our places a long time ago. There’s all kinds of dangerous people in the world, who are way worse than your parents and sister. I’ve dealt with a lot of them.”

“That’s true,” Penny said, hugging me around the waist. I leaned down, brushing my lips against her temple.

* * *

IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG for the alarm system to come in handy. In the middle of the night, the alert activated, indicating that someone was near the house, waking us all up. I checked my phone, seeing someone in a dark hoodie near our cars, and immediately jumped up, pulled on some shorts, and grabbed my gun, handing another to Penny.

“Take Neo and hide in the basement until I tell you it’s clear,” I told her. “Lock the door and don’t open it for anyone but me. If someone other than me tries to get you to come out, push the last-resort button and get everybody here.”

“What’s going on?” she responded, rubbing her eyes, her brain clearly still trying to wake up.

“Someone’s outside,” I said.

With that, her eyes widened, and, calling Neo, she rushed down the stairs, the dog right behind her.

Once I heard the basement door shut and lock, I went out the back door, planning to circle around and catch the person. When I got there, though, everything was still, the hooded

trespasser gone. I listened for a few minutes to be absolutely sure, and then, with the phone on my flashlight, I looked around the cars to see what they were doing.

“Shit,” I said to myself, then, with one more glance around the area, I went back inside and told Penny it was safe to come out.

“What happened?” she asked once she and Neo were both upstairs.

“The person is gone, but they slashed our tires—all four on each vehicle—and it’s bad enough that a patch won’t work, and they’ll have to be replaced. Someone took a lot of anger out on those things.” I said, trying to hide my anger and worry by keeping my tone light.

“What?” Penny responded. “Do you think it was Annabelle, since she got out of jail today?”

“Oh, most definitely,” I answered.

Penny released a groan. “It’s going to be so expensive to replace eight tires at once,” she said.

“Insurance should take care of it. And I’d pay to replace a million tires, as long as you were safe,” I told her, then pulled out my phone. “I’m going to call the non-emergency dispatch number for Arlington PD and get someone out here to take a police report on this.”

“That sounds good,” Penny said.

“Why don’t you go on back to bed? I can handle this,” I told her, the exhaustion clear on her face.

“Are you sure?” she asked, but I could tell that she was barely keeping herself upright.

“Yeah, I’m wide awake now, and there’s no use in both of us losing sleep,” I told her.

With a nod, she kissed me, then headed back upstairs, Neo on her heels. “Goodnight!” she called.

“Goodnight, Pen,” I replied, then settled in to wait for the police to arrive.

A couple of uniformed officers finally pulled up in front of the house just as my eyelids were starting to droop. Alert once again, I stepped outside to explain the situation and show them the video, hoping not to disturb Penny.

“Do you think this is enough to get her bail revoked?” I asked the officers, one of whom was old and overweight, and the other young and probably still being trained. They weren’t exactly a capable, crime-fighting duo like I’d been hoping for, but in the middle of the night, I’d take what I could get.

“I don’t know,” the older man said skeptically, studying the video again. “You can’t even see the person’s face, and if the weapon isn’t around here somewhere, then we have no way to prove who did it.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh, frustrated with the situation, but sympathetic to the position they were in. The older man was right that I didn’t have any proof—and I’d already looked around for the knife that had been used and couldn’t find it—and they couldn’t arrest someone on my gut feeling. “Could you just write up a report for me, then, and I’ll call Detective Bailey in the morning to update him?”

They agreed, and a few minutes later, I had the report number saved in my phone. With a final check of the security system, I headed back to bed as well.

In the morning, though, Jonathan said pretty much the same thing the uniformed officers did: There was no way to prove Annabelle was the one who slashed our tires, so there wasn’t much we could do about it.

PENNY

The first week of school went surprisingly smoothly, and that Friday, I rewarded my students by playing part of the recording of the musical *Hamilton*, about the founding of America. Towards the end of the class, I paused it between the end of one song and the start of the next one, and the students who'd been most absorbed in the movie groaned and complained, since they weren't expecting it.

“Sorry, everyone. I know you want to keep watching, but we'll have to pick it up again another day. We only have a few more minutes until the bell, and I wanted to discuss something before it rings.” They eventually quieted down, and I continued. “Does anyone have a guess why I played this today?”

Most of the students stayed quiet, but a couple raised their hands.

“It looks like most of you didn't read the syllabus,” I said with a smile. “Marie, what do you think?”

“Is it because we're going on a field trip to the US Capitol in a few weeks?” she asked.

“Yes, that's part of the reason. Great job,” I told her, then addressed the classroom. “This is the other reason—I could stand up here all day and lecture you about the Revolutionary War, the US Constitution, and the founding of America, but I've found that most people learn and absorb things much better when the material is presented in a different way.

“Can anyone tell me what the Compromise of 1790 was? I went over it yesterday,” I asked. A few students raised their hands, but most of them looked confused or bored. “Okay, a few of you, that’s more than I expected. Now, can anyone tell me about the song ‘The Room Where It Happens?’ What happened in that song?”

That time, more of the students appeared interested, and about half of them raised their hands. I called on one of the quieter students, since she looked eager to answer.

“Go ahead, Violet,” I said.

“It’s about Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton meeting in secret to make a deal that would make all three of them happy. Hamilton agreed to go along with the American capital moving to DC, closer to where Jefferson and Madison lived, as long as he could keep the financial stuff in New York. And Burr was mad that he wasn’t part of the conversation.”

“Very good,” I replied. “So, it seems that significantly more of you can explain the meaning of a song, than can explain a concept that I only talked about, right? And just in case you haven’t put it together yet, the Compromise of 1790 and the song ‘The Room Where It Happened’ are about the same thing. But you see my point, right? Learning is easier when it’s presented in a way that’s fun or interesting.

“So, with that in mind, I have an assignment for everyone. You can do this individually, or team up—keep groups no more than four people, though—but each person or team will be assigned an important part of history from the Colonial period, the Revolutionary War, or the forming of the American government. Your task is to come up with a song, a rap, a scene you act out, or something else that will help you, and your classmates, learn and remember the information. You have two weeks to get this done, and two weeks from today, you’ll all present what you came up with, and a few of you will be chosen to perform in front of the congressmen and their staff during our field trip. Some of the students from the other history classes will be chosen as well.

“So, everyone divide up, and then I’ll come up around with assignments for each of you. You can spend the rest of the period getting started on this.”

A few students seemed apprehensive, but many of them appeared to be excited, quickly forming groups and voicing their opinions on what they wanted to do. With a smile, I passed out the assignments, then sat down at my desk and watched them plan.

By the end of the day, I was exhausted. The first week of school was always extra tiring as everyone got back into the swing of things, and this year was no different. I made my way to my car after all the students were gone, and as soon as I’d buckled up, my phone began to ring. I checked it, not recognizing the number, and then hit ignore, but immediately, the same number called again, and when I hit ignore again, the number called a third time.

“Hello?” I finally answered, annoyed, but no one spoke, the only sound heavy breathing on the other end of the line. “If this is a prank, it isn’t funny,” I said and hung up. Then the number called back again, right away, and after hitting ignore another time, I blocked the number. By then, goose bumps had popped up all over my skin, and I made sure my car doors were locked, suddenly feeling as if someone was watching me.

That weekend, as Knox and I moved more of his things in and continued adapting to living together, the strange calls continued. I’d block one number, and then another would call, each of them silent except for the heavy breathing. Knox began answering the calls in my place, and he was as disturbed as I was.

“It’s got to be Annabelle,” he said irately. “She’s pretty much acting out Stalker 101 here, and she’s just going to continue to escalate.”

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Well, first, we need to change your number so that these ridiculous phone calls stop,” I said, “and we should try to get a restraining order preventing her from contacting or coming near you as well. Of course, that doesn’t do much more than

leave a paper trail, so we have more proof when something worse happens.” He ran his fingers through his hair, then met my gaze. “I assume you’d be opposed to having your own bodyguard?”

“A bodyguard?” I repeated, alarmed. “Are you serious?”

He sighed. “I mean, let’s just be honest here. Annabelle isn’t exactly an original thinker, and she certainly isn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, so this is going to play out just like every other stalking case. First, she’ll harass us a little more, maybe vandalize something else, until she gets bored of that or realizes it isn’t getting her what she wants. Then she’ll threaten to kill herself unless I agree to be in a relationship with her. And when that doesn’t work, she’ll start making threats—it’s a toss-up whether she’ll target you or Neo first. And then for her final act, she’ll either lose interest, do something bad enough to get thrown back in jail—of course in that case, she’d also have to leave evidence to prove it was her—or actually try to kill one of us. My money is on her trying to kill someone, and it’ll probably be you. So, I’m just skipping to the end, and I’m thinking you need a bodyguard.”

“This is insane,” I said, my mind reeling. In less than five minutes, we’d gone from receiving annoying phone calls to my life being in grave danger.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I wish I could tell you that everything will be fine, but that would be a lie, and more importantly, it wouldn’t keep you safe. So, what are your thoughts on a bodyguard?”

“I don’t think the school would go for that,” I said, only somewhat seriously.

“Maybe,” Knox said, then seemed to be deep in thought. “How many exits does your school have?”

I considered that for a moment. “I have no idea. At least a few.”

“Are any of them in secluded areas, where someone could sneak you out with no one noticing?”

“One of them goes to the back of the school where the overflow trailers are. But it would be really hard to sneak anyone out of there. They’d have to either take me over that huge hill towards the front of the school, or drag me past the trailers—which are in use all day— and through the athletic fields, all the way to the woods. But the woods would be even riskier than the front of the school, because of the really well-used walking path and the neighborhood back there.”

“So, if you had a bodyguard just to drive you to and from school that might be enough?” Knox asked. “The house is well secured, and if you need to go anywhere else like the grocery store, you can wait for me, right?”

“Yeah, I think that would work,” I said.

“Okay, good,” Knox said. “I’m going to go call Phoenix Security and see if they have someone who can do that.”

“Okay,” I said.

It felt ridiculous that I, of all people, would need a bodyguard, and I was also worried about the cost. But I trusted Knox, and if he thought I needed protection, I wasn’t going to argue with him.

KNOX

We got Penny's phone number changed, and Phoenix Security was able to provide a bodyguard for her beginning that Monday morning. Both of those things took a huge weight off of my shoulders and, feeling more productive than I had in a while, work passed quickly. Before I knew it, I was headed to the parking garage so I could get home.

As I neared my car, though, I saw Penny leaning against the driver's side door, and I almost had a heart attack, wondering why she wasn't at home and safe where the bodyguard should have left her. When I was right in front of her, though, I realized it wasn't Penny at all.

"Well, *this* is unexpected," I said under my breath.

It was Annabelle. She was either wearing a wig, or she'd dyed her hair back to its original auburn color. It didn't look like she had on any makeup, and she was wearing a dress that went all the way below her knees, with a sweater covering her torso. I was pretty sure I'd never seen Annabelle with her natural hair color—other than the occasional wisps as a child when her hair started growing back after chemo—and with the clothing and makeup changes, her similarity to Penny was disconcerting.

Annabelle trying to transform herself into Penny hadn't been on my list of stalker behaviors I was expecting, although clearly it should have been.

"What are you doing here, Annabelle?" I asked, running my hand through my hair. "I have to say, I really don't have

the energy for this.”

She looked slightly offended as she replied. “I thought, since you seem to like Penny’s appearance so much, that if I looked like her, too, you might realize that I’m actually a better fit for you.”

“A better fit? In what way?” I asked, genuinely curious what her response would be.

“You and I have ambitions. We want more for our lives. We want to be the best. Do you know how powerful we could be together? How rich and successful? We could go into entertainment, or politics, and have people eating out of our hands. If it was us against the world, no one could stop us.”

I frowned at her. “That was a nice speech, but I’m just a normal guy. You’re seeing what you want to see about me, and making up the rest.”

“I know that isn’t true. You were a SEAL. You *were* the best. Don’t you want that again?” she asked.

“I was a SEAL because my dad and brother were, and I wanted to follow in their footsteps, and help people. No power or riches involved.”

“So you’ll really be content to work at the FBI forever? You really want Penny, who will probably teach at the same school for the rest of her life? Is that truly what you want?”

“That sounds like *exactly* what I want,” I replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get home.”

I gestured, trying to encourage Annabelle to move away from my car so I could get in, but she ignored me. Instead, I walked around to the passenger side, deciding I’d just climb through to the driver’s seat.

“If you leave, I’ll kill myself,” Annabelle suddenly said as I opened the car door. “I’ll jump off this parking garage right now.”

“And, here we go,” I said to myself, relieved that we were finally back in territory I was familiar with. I met her eyes. “We’re only on the second floor right now, and I’m not sure

that would kill you, just be really painful and break some bones, probably,” I said. I was trying to distract her as I pulled out my phone and discreetly texted Nolan to call 911 and send police to the second floor of my regular parking garage.

“Then I’ll throw myself in front of your car when you leave!” she said, moving to stand in front of the hood.

“That definitely won’t kill you. The speed limit in here is ten miles an hour,” I replied. “Why don’t we just talk for a few minutes? I want to hear more about these plans you made for us to become rich and powerful.”

“You do?” she asked warily.

“Yeah. Government work doesn’t pay that much, you know. What’s the first step you’ve come up with?”

She vacillated for a moment, but I gave her my best, most charming smile, which seemed to make her more comfortable. “Well, I was thinking that first, you could run for a seat in the Virginia Senate or the House of Delegates, and then eventually, you could run for Governor. I think I’d be an amazing First Lady of Virginia, and I made an entire vision board of Melania Trump’s best looks when her husband was President, so I’m already prepared to step into a similar role. Plus I have so many ideas for decreasing obesity in children. I’d really love to get my message out there to more people.”

As she spoke, I kept an eye on her, but only partly listened, more focused on the texts I was exchanging with Nolan about how much longer it would take an officer to get to us. Finally, as she was mentioning something about my second term as President, I saw police lights flashing on the level below us, then the vehicle made the turn and headed in our direction. She didn’t even notice the car until it was stopped behind her, and the policeman had gotten out and shut his door.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, glancing between us.

I introduced myself and showed him my FBI badge before I explained the situation. “This woman has been stalking my girlfriend and me—she’s also, coincidentally, my girlfriend’s twin sister—and she was just threatening to kill herself by

jumping off the parking garage if I refused to be in a relationship with her,” I told him. “I think she needs to be transported to a hospital and assessed.”

When the officer had first arrived, Annabelle had seemed surprised, but her expression quickly turned into one of rage. She lunged for me, a scream of frustration on her lips, and I put my arms out to stop her, but the police officer was fast, and caught her before she reached me.

“You tricked me!” Annabelle screamed as the police officer practically lifted her into the air, just trying to hold onto her. “I’ll kill you!”

She was strong, and determined to get to me, and I debated whether I should help the officer. As the “victim,” and an FBI agent, I didn’t want to overstep and cause any issues, especially if Annabelle ended up getting hurt or if the officer didn’t want my help. But at the same time, I wasn’t sure the man could get her restrained on his own. Fortunately, I didn’t have to make a decision, as another police car suddenly pulled up behind the first one, and a female officer jumped out. She helped wrestle Annabelle to the ground, yanking her arms behind her back and snapping handcuffs onto her wrists.

A few minutes later, with Annabelle still screaming obscenities at me from the back of a police car, they drove her away.

* * *

Penny

I HEARD the front door shut, and then Knox’s voice calling out to me, sounding almost panicked. “Penny? Where are you?”

I’d been curled up in bed reading, but when I heard him, I set down my book and left the bedroom, greeting Knox from the top of the stairs.

“I’m right here,” I replied.

He was always happy to see me, but it seemed like more than that as he rushed up the stairs towards me, taking them

two at a time. I noticed a worried look in his eye as he cupped my face between his huge hands.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, gently gripping his forearms as he held onto me.

He rested his forehead against mine as he answered. “Annabelle was waiting at my car when I left work, but she’d changed her hair and clothes and everything so that she looked pretty much exactly like you. I thought it *was* you at first. Then she threatened to kill herself, and me, and the police had to come and take her to the hospital.”

“What?” I asked, struggling to comprehend everything he’d just told me. But Knox seemed to inherently understand that I was taking a moment to process, not asking him to repeat himself, and he just held onto me, waiting patiently as I caught up.

“That’s completely insane,” I finally said once I was ready to talk. “Every time I think she can’t do anything crazier, she does it.”

“Honestly, seeing her like that really freaked me out for some reason, and I needed to get home and see you. The *real* you, not the *Twilight Zone* you.”

“I’m right here,” I assured him, wrapping my arms around his waist and hugging him tightly.

He took a deep breath, then another, eventually lifting his head and meeting my gaze.

“You’re my entire world. You know that, right? You, and—to a lesser degree, of course—Neo,” he said, then glanced around. “Where is he, by the way?”

I smiled. “He’s in the yard,” I told him. “He was bored waiting for you to get home, so I gave him a Kong with peanut butter inside to keep him busy for a while.”

Knox nodded. “I’ll take him for a run when it cools off later,” he said, almost absentmindedly.

“Are you sure everything is alright?”

“Yeah. I just need to hold you for a while. Is that okay?” he asked earnestly.

“I guess so, if you insist,” I said, trying to sound reluctant, but failing miserably. “Of course it’s okay, Knox. Why are you even asking that? You know I love cuddling with you.” I moved my hand to his forehead, checking for a fever. “Are you sure you aren’t sick?” I asked.

He didn’t feel feverish, but I didn’t get much of a chance to check. Instead, he snatched my hand away from his brow, pulling me the few steps towards our bedroom, and kicking the door closed behind us.

“I love you so fucking much,” he said, and then his lips were on mine as he gently guided me backwards towards the bed.

“I love you, too,” I said between kisses. “I love you so much, it takes my breath away sometimes.”

He paused, leaning back just enough to meet my eyes. “I don’t want to take your breath away,” he said solemnly. “I want to give you life, not take it from you.”

I snorted. “You’re so dramatic sometimes, I swear. You’ve got everyone else fooled, thinking you’re the quiet, laid-back one, when you actually have thoughts like that swirling around in your head.”

He kissed me again. “Don’t tell anyone. That’s our secret,” he whispered, a smile on his lips.

“I would never,” I promised.

He continued to kiss me, and, unsatisfied with the slow pace he was setting, I reached down, my fingers brushing against the button of his pants,

He grabbed my hand, stopping me. “Are you sure?” he asked, watching me closely.

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Seriously?” I questioned. “Are we moving too fast? After all, we’ve only known each other for 22 years. What’s a few more,” I quipped, bringing out that gorgeous smile I loved.

He didn't answer with words, but his eyes softened, and he released my hand, both of which I took as a green light. I quickly commenced unbuttoning and unzipping his pants, then shoved them and his boxers down at once, sucking in air as I saw that part of him for the first time.

"Jesus," I said under my breath, impressed, before raising my eyes back to his. "I need you. *Please*. Don't make me wait any longer." I was essentially begging, but I was too far gone to care.

He didn't waste any more time, gently undressing me as I pulled his shirt over his head. Once there was nothing between us, he pressed me onto to the bed, then crawled over me. Holding himself up on one elbow and intertwining his fingers with mine, he pressed our joined hands into the bed, above my head.

"Once we do this, you're mine. I'm never letting you go," he said, as if warning me, but it was unnecessary.

"I've *always* been yours," I answered.

KNOX

The following two weeks were blissful, with Annabelle locked away in a psychiatric hospital, hopefully getting help. It felt like Penny and I were in our own little bubble, finally able to enjoy each other without any dangerous distractions. It was everything I'd dreamed life could be, if we were together.

And then, Annabelle must've been released from the hospital, because the harassment started up again. Letters left in the mailbox made veiled threats against Penny and Neo, Penny started receiving cruel messages on social media from random, newly created profiles, and one day after work, I found my car in the parking garage with huge gouges down both sides. I talked to Jonathan about having Annabelle's bail revoked since she'd threatened me in front of a police officer, and because of the other behaviors, and he said he'd work on it, but that it would most likely take a few days.

Another positive development was making progress towards finding Brittney and the other students. First, we found photos of all four girls being advertised on the dark web. In the pictures, each of them were branded with a tattoo of a bishop chess piece, and we were able to confirm with the foster care worker and the families that the markings hadn't been there before. Many traffickers tattooed their victims with their own unique symbol, as a sign of "ownership."

Then, we received the financial and phone records for the three low-level traffickers, Andy, Darrell, and Stanley. Using the list of possible suspects which Evan and Nolan had put

together with Tex, we started sorting through everything, trying to figure out the trafficker's name.

Kate, Liam, and I checked the phone records for the three men, identifying the numbers they contacted, and the ones who contacted them over the past year. We then looked into each of the people connected with those phone numbers, and flagged the ones who had a criminal record or otherwise seemed suspicious, so that we could do a deeper investigation on them. At the same time, we checked the names against Evan, Nolan, and Tex's list of likely suspects. While we did that, Ally went through their financial records looking for suspicious transfers in and out of their accounts.

Kate, Liam, and I had been working through the records for a couple of days—there were a frustrating number of burner phone numbers in the call histories—when Ally approached us, an excited look on her face.

“I found something I think you'll want to see,” she told us.

We pulled up chairs at Ally's desk, eager to learn what she'd discovered. She had three sets of bank statements displayed on her monitors, and I noticed highlighted areas on each document.

“We already suspected that Darrell, Stanley, and Andy aren't exactly geniuses,” Ally said, “but these financial records prove it. They didn't hide their questionable activity at all—although whoever they're scared of is *much* smarter than them.”

I nodded my head, encouraging Ally to continue, which she did.

“I'll summarize what I've found over the past couple of days. First of all, Stanley is the only one of the three with a real job. He works at a fast food restaurant, and gets paid about \$300 per week through direct deposit. That's been consistent for a few months.” She pointed at her screen. “I highlighted legitimate work in light blue.”

“What's the blue over here?” Kate asked, pointing at a bank statement I assumed belonged to Andy or Darrell.

“That’s legitimate work, too. Once in a while, Andy takes a job through a temp agency, and he gets paid by the day. Darrell has also done that a couple of times, through the same temp agency.

“Then, there’s the deposits of cash in their bank accounts,” Ally continued. “There’s usually one or two cash deposits per week in each account, on random days, and always less than \$500. I’m thinking that might be from selling drugs, or something similar.”

“Probably,” Liam agreed.

“And then there’s the big deposits.”

“What are those?” I asked.

“Every Friday, each of them gets \$1,000 deposited into their accounts. Each deposit has the same description: ‘Puerto Rico Avenue Porta Vitalia.’ I looked that up, and it’s actually a wine distributor here in DC.”

“Do the three of them work there?” Kate asked.

“That was my first guess, too, but I’m pretty sure they don’t,” Ally said. “I called over there, pretending to be a customer, and named them, saying I needed to talk to one of them to follow up on some business we discussed. The person who answered the phone said no one with those names worked there, and they sounded like they were telling the truth. Just to be sure, I looked up the business online and on social media and I couldn’t find anything about any of them—no pictures, no mentions, nothing. The company posts really often, and has featured a lot of their employees, so if they worked there, I think I would’ve seen them. I also checked the company’s liquor license, and none of them are listed on there as employees. Between all of those things, the only logical conclusion is that they don’t work there.

“So at that point, I looked up the business records, which is when things got really interesting,” Ally said, as she minimized the bank statements and pulled up different documents. “Porta Vitalia is owned by what appears to be a shell company called Wine Sellers of the Caymans, Inc. Its

location is listed as the Cayman Islands, which is automatically a red flag, because it's such a popular tax haven for sketchy businesses. Plus, Wine Sellers of the Caymans, Inc. doesn't have a physical location, just a PO Box here in DC. And there's no evidence of them actually doing any business, other than owning Porta Vitalia.

“And then, Wine Sellers of the Caymans, Inc. is owned by another mysterious company, Cayman Wines, LLC, which is *also* located in the Cayman Islands, and *also* has a PO Box in DC. They don't have any business records other than owning Wine Sellers of the Caymans. And then, finally, Cayman Wines, LLC, is owned by yet *another* likely shell company, Cayman Alcohol Distributors, LLC.”

“Whoever owns these companies is super creative,” Kate commented drily.

“Right?” Ally replied. “And there's one more thing, which is pretty much the nail in the coffin for whoever this guy is. Wine Sellers of the Caymans, Cayman Wines, and Cayman Alcohol Distributors all have PO Boxes that were set up on the same day six years ago, and they're all at the same post office. It's the one near Union Square, which is also the closest post office to the Capitol and a lot of other important buildings.”

“Do you think the location could be a clue?” Liam asked.

“Oh, definitely, but it's too big of a clue to really be useful. It would be almost impossible to narrow it down from the thousands of people who live or work in that area,” Ally said. “Luckily, I have a friend at the United States Postal Service Office of Investigations, and she was able to get me a copy of the applications for the post office boxes.”

“So we know who the trafficker is?” Kate asked with excitement.

“Not exactly,” Ally replied, sounding regretful. “The person who filled it out is named Albert Flanagan. I couldn't find much about him online, except that he was murdered a week after the post office boxes were set up, and the case hasn't been solved. I called the Metropolitan Police Department, but they weren't much help. As far as I can tell,

they barely even investigated the murder before saying they couldn't find any evidence and washed their hands of it."

"So if we find the killer, we find the trafficker," Kate said.

"Those are my thoughts," Ally responded.

"Is it possible someone pressured Metro to sweep it under the rug?" I asked.

"I'm almost positive that's the case," Ally said. "Especially since I asked for the records, and they said I'd have to subpoena them. They definitely have something to hide."

"And forcing us to get a subpoena gives them time to get rid of anything in the file that incriminates them. They could even say they can't find it," Liam pointed out.

"That's why I think we should subpoena the records, but also investigate the murder ourselves," Ally said. "And if we find a connection between Albert and anyone powerful enough to put pressure on the Metro Police Department, they're the most likely suspect."

"This is awesome work, Ally," Kate said. "We could be really close to solving this thing and finding Brittney and the others."

"Let's touch base with Nolan first, but I think he'll tell us to prioritize this over the phone records," I said, agreeing that this was a promising lead.

We continued working, and a few hours later, Ryder approached us with even better news.

"We've made contact with the traffickers who put the ad up for Brittney and the other girls," he said, "and we're working on setting up some 'appointments' with them. It sounds like they're in Baltimore, and right now it looks like we're aiming for the day after tomorrow."

We often went undercover online, pretending to be Johns looking for a sex worker, and scheduling 'appointments' with them. It was a ploy, so that we had a confirmed time and place the girls would be in order to find and extricate them. When

we got to the location for the ‘appointment,’ we’d rescue the girls and arrest the men who had brought them. It sounded like we’d be doing that for Brittney and the other students as well.

“That’s amazing,” Kate said, and the rest of us agreed. It looked like Brittney was close to coming home.

ANNABELLE

I had to admit, I was angry for a while after Knox got me sent to the hospital, especially since my stay there didn't help at all. The place was eerie and institutional, the food was disgusting, the beds were lumpy, and the blankets weren't even soft. I was surprised they were even allowed to operate in those kinds of conditions.

And unlike me, the other people there were truly insane. I spent most of my time silently mocking them and their 'woe is me' attitude. The "therapeutic" art classes were fun, though, and the sedatives they gave out at night worked well. Of course, they also prescribed me medication that they claimed would "stabilize" me, but I stopped taking it as soon as I was released, with my parents' encouragement. I was perfect just the way I was, no medication needed.

So yes, at first I was upset with Knox, but now I understood why he'd had me sent there: He loved me, and he just wanted to make sure I didn't hurt myself. Of course, my sister had him under some kind of spell, and he didn't *realize* he loved me, but he would soon. Once I killed her, she wouldn't have any more power over him, and he'd realize he was always meant to be with me.

I still wasn't sure how I'd kill her, though. Some man was always picking her up and driving her around—she was probably having an affair with him, and I wondered if Knox knew. He deserved better than that. Plus, her townhouse now had cameras and alarms, so getting to her in there would be

hard. I'd just have to bide my time and wait for an opportunity to come up.

I'd just left her townhouse's parking lot after another trip to check out the security—from a distance, of course—and had only made it a mile or so before a car slammed into the back of mine. Livid that someone had ruined my day by rear-ending me, I pulled to the side of the road and got out, screaming at the car behind me. Instead of apologizing, though, the two large men who got out of the car grabbed me, and after a sharp prick in my neck, my arms and legs quickly went limp, and I couldn't fight them off.

I must have drifted to sleep, and I came to sometime later in what looked like a warehouse, my arms and legs tied. A different man was sitting nearby, and he quickly noticed that I was awake, coming towards me with a smirk on his face.

“Ah, Penelope Russell, we finally meet. I've been looking forward to this day,” the man said. “Your nosiness has caused a lot of problems for me, and I think it's time we had a talk about that.”

I laughed, amused that someone had gotten the two of us confused. “I'm not Penny,” I said. “I'm her twin sister, Annabelle.”

“Twin?” he repeated, clearly suspicious of me.

“Yes. Annabelle Russell,” I explained calmly. This was just a misunderstanding. “If you search for me on the internet, you'll find pictures from my salon. I usually have blond hair, but I dyed it back to the original color. I guess that's why you thought I was Penny.”

The man glanced at someone behind me, making a gesture with his hand, but I couldn't twist around enough to see who was there. The room was silent for a few minutes, except for the sound of someone typing on their phone.

“She's telling the truth,” the man behind me eventually said. I heard footsteps coming closer, and the speaker moved next to the first man, showing him something on his phone. “Or at least, there is an Annabelle Russell who owns a salon,

has blond hair, and looks like Penelope Russell.” The second man glanced at me. “It’s hard to tell the two apart, honestly.”

The first man studied me as well, as if trying to figure me out, then shrugged. “Well, it doesn’t really matter. Even if you are Annabelle, I can still use you to punish your sister. Like I said, she’s caused me a lot of problems, and lost me a lot of money.”

I shook my head. “Penny hates me. She’d probably be happy if you hurt me or something.” I thought for a minute, knowing I didn’t have much to lose. This man obviously didn’t have good intentions. “I’ve actually been making plans to kill her myself, because she’s caused me a lot of problems, too. Maybe we could work together?”

“Why should I believe you?” the man asked, his voice intimidating.

“How much time do you have? I can sit here all day and tell you how awful she is, and all the reasons why she needs to die,” I replied with a shrug of my own.

“Okay. Let’s talk,” the man said, pulling his chair closer.

And we did.

KNOX

Two days later, I spent extra time saying goodbye to Penny that morning, knowing that my team and I were about to head to Baltimore in an attempt to rescue the girls, and that I might not be home until well after she'd fallen asleep. I knew Penny would be ecstatic if we succeeded, but I wouldn't tell her anything until afterwards—other than that I might have to work late—to avoid getting her hopes up. A million different things could go wrong and prevent us from bringing Brittney and the others home today.

When I got into work, though, there was only good news.

“I know who it is,” Ally said when we'd all arrived. Practically vibrating with excitement, she led all of us to the conference room. The large table inside was covered in papers, and she began searching through them until she found what she was looking for and picked it up.

“So, I started thinking about what the tattoo meant. It's a bishop piece from chess, right? Does that mean it's someone who loves chess? Is it a name, or a reference to something? And then, I took another look at the list of possible suspects, and guess who's on that list? *Ryan Bishop*. He's former CIA, was a state senator for a while, and now he's a congressman, and the head of the Education Committee in the House of Representatives. Pretty powerful, right?” Ally was talking quickly, clearly on a roll.

“I started looking into him, and I didn't see anything suspicious during his time in the CIA, it looks like he got greedy once he left. First of all, Albert Flanagan was a

member of his staff years ago, when he was a state senator in Delaware. And then, I searched through all of Porta Vitalia's social media again, and guess what I found? A staff picture from a Christmas party years ago. Ryan Bishop is in the back and clearly trying to hide his face, but it's him." She held the photo up, a man's face circled.

Evan held his hand out, and Ally handed the photo to him. "Do you have a clearer picture of him?" he asked after studying it.

"Of course," Ally replied, as if the question was ludicrous. She grabbed another stack of papers and flipped through them before pulling one out.

"This is his official portrait from the Congressional Pictorial Directory," she said, handing it to Evan.

He looked at the photo for a moment before passing it to Mason, who stood next to him. Mason passed it to Wes, who passed it to Ryder, who stood next to me. I glanced at the man's face as Ryder held the photo, immediately recognizing him, although it took me a second to realize why.

"I know him," I stated once I'd figured it out, and nine sets of eyes were instantly focused on me, waiting for me to explain. "On my last mission, when I was injured. The one to take down Abas Sayyid. He was one of the CIA agents who briefed us beforehand."

Everyone was silent until Ryder spoke up, sounding serious. "Do you think that's related to our trafficking case? Does he know you?" he asked.

I briefly considered his question before I responded. "No, I don't see how that could be connected, and I doubt he has any idea who I am. I was just one of a roomful of SEALs that day. It's just a really weird coincidence."

"Didn't Sayyid dabble in human trafficking?" Ally asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, he did. And the irony isn't lost on me that one of the main guys involved in taking Sayyid down is now trafficking people, too."

We all fell silent again, each of us lost in thought.

“Men are pigs,” Kate unexpectedly mumbled under her breath. She was loud enough that we all heard her, though, and when she realized, she glanced around at us, her eyes comically wide, and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“Really?” Gabe replied drily. “You know there’s eight men in the room right now, correct?”

Kate’s blush darkened. “I didn’t mean you guys!” she squeaked. “Just *other* men.”

Ally snorted in amusement. “Quit now before you dig yourself a deeper hole,” she told Kate, who ignored her advice.

“You guys aren’t pigs. You’re the opposite of pigs,” Kate said awkwardly, then glanced at Ally for help. “What would that be?”

“Sausage?” Wes answered before anyone else could, his lips quirked, and we all burst out laughing.

Nolan joined in as well, but as everyone’s chuckles died down, he spoke up. “Well, as entertaining as this conversation is, we really need to get moving,” he said. “I’m just trying to figure out what to do with Ally’s info. This is great work, but now I’ve got a predicament. We need all ten of us for the sting in Baltimore, but we also need someone to keep pulling on this Ryan Bishop string and get enough for an arrest warrant for him.

“We could get some interns working on it,” Ally suggested, and a few of my teammates groaned.

“Interns?” Gabe repeated.

“Hey, sometimes interns are really helpful!” Kate protested, clearly over her embarrassment. “We have a few right now who would *love* to work on this, and they’d do a good job.”

Nolan made a decision, nodding at Kate. “Okay, get them in here and get them started on this. We shouldn’t be gone that long, anyways.”

She nodded, and quickly disappeared in search of the interns.

PENNY

The bodyguard, Dave, dropped me at home after a long day of work, and I waved goodbye to him, then set the alarm and made my way towards the kitchen, craving a snack. I was scrolling through my phone while I tried to remember what I had in my pantry, and almost collided with something—or someone—that shouldn't have been there. I glanced up, meeting my sister's gaze, and then noticing a man behind her who looked vaguely familiar. Before I could even process what was happening, though, my sister snatched my phone from my hand and set it down behind her.

“What are you doing?” I asked as it dawned on me that she could only be inside my home for nefarious purposes. “H-How did you get in here without setting the alarms off?”

The man spoke up for the first time, answering my question. “I hacked it and turned it off, just long enough for us to get inside,” he said smugly. “I'll give Phoenix Security their due—their system is very good, but I'm better.”

As he spoke, I suddenly recognized him. “You're Ryan Bishop,” I said. “You're going to be talking to my history class in a few days, when we come to the Capitol on a field trip.”

He nodded. “I do speak to field trip groups occasionally,” he said. “Unfortunately, you won't be there that day.”

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely confused as I backed away from them.

“Because you'll be dead,” Bishop said, very matter-of-factly. “I'll try to keep it as painless as possible, though.”

“Why do you want to kill me? Can we talk about this first?”

I continued to back up, hoping to reach the door and make a break for it, but before I could, Annabelle lunged forward and grabbed me, then dragged me towards the couch, her fingernails digging into my skin. I tried to fight her, but she was strong.

“Sit down,” she ordered, shoving me backwards, and I ended up on the couch as Bishop walked closer.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked both of them, and I could hear my voice shaking. I had to find a way out of this.

“Because you ruined the good thing I had going at your school. You just had to go poking around, and now I can’t get girls from Green Valley anymore,” Bishop said.

“I’m glad. What you’re doing is evil,” I said, trying to sound antagonistic, but not quite succeeding.

“Oh, but you haven’t stopped me, you’ve just delayed me while I find another school. There’s no shortage of sad, lonely teenage girls in the world.”

“You’re disgusting,” I told him, my voice stronger that time, then turned to Annabelle. “Surely you don’t want to help this guy, do you? He kidnaps girls and turns them into sex slaves!”

She shrugged. “Yeah, that does sound pretty bad, but I have my own reasons for getting rid of you. Once you’re out of the way, Knox will fall in love with me. I know he and I are meant to be together.”

“You’re completely delusional,” I told her, but she just smiled at me, her eyes void of any humanity.

It was only then that it sunk in just how much trouble I was in, and terror washed over me, goose bumps popping up on my skin. I tried harder to get away, and managed to stand up and push Annabelle away from me, but she quickly caught her balance, then struck me across the face. My ears ringing, I cried out.

“That was impressive,” Bishop told her, then moved closer, wrapping a tourniquet around my upper arm, and pulling a needle from one of his pockets and removing the cap.

“Hold onto her shoulders,” he instructed Annabelle, and once she followed his directions, he turned his attention back to me. “You’re lucky that I’m also involved in the drug trade, so that I can just kill you with an overdose of heroin, instead of using something painful like a gun or a knife,” he said. “You’ll barely feel anything other than the prick when I inject you, and hopefully you’ll be unconscious by the time the house really starts to burn. Everyone will just think it was an accident.”

All I could see was the needle as it came closer and closer to my skin, and I struggled some more, one last effort to get away, before Bishop stopped me with a few chilling words.

“Stay completely still, or I *will* make your death a lot more painful,” he threatened, and the look in his eyes said he was telling the truth.

With tears running down my cheeks, and Annabelle painfully gripping my shoulders, the needle pierced the skin of my arm with a painful sting. Then Bishop pressed the plunger with his thumb, and I watched as the clear liquid pumped into my veins.

“That should do it,” he said once the needle was empty, and he removed the tourniquet from my arm, tucking both items into another pocket.

As Annabelle released my shoulders, I heard a loud, clanging noise upstairs, and I quickly realized what it was. Until that moment, I’d been so scared that I’d forgotten Neo was in the house, upstairs in his crate. I closed my eyes, unable to stop imagining Knox’s reaction when he learned that Neo and I had both been killed.

“What is that?” Bishop asked, his calm demeanor falling away. He turned to my sister. “Go and look!” he ordered, his tone demeaning.

With a huff, Annabelle did, clearly annoyed that she wasn't in charge. I heard her loud footsteps on the stairs, and considered trying to make a run for it, but I was already starting to notice the effects of the heroin. My body felt very heavy, like I'd turned into a boulder, and I doubted I could even stand up, let alone get outside, before Bishop caught up with me.

"Now I just need to start a fire, and make it look like an accident," Bishop said, and I opened my eyes to see him picking up one of the candles I kept around the house. "Let's start with the curtains, and see if it spreads from there. I have a policy to never use gasoline, because it sticks out like a sore thumb to arson investigators. It takes longer this way, but it's best to make it look real.

"That's also why I didn't restrain you. If your body doesn't burn completely, they'll see ligature marks on your wrists—another clue that it wasn't an accident."

Smiling smugly, he picked up a lighter. He didn't even have a chance to flick it on, though, as Annabelle screamed from upstairs, sounding as if she was being murdered.

"What the hell?" Bishop said, suddenly sounding worried.

Then, Neo was headed down the stairs, teeth bared and a vicious growl in his throat. Halfway down the staircase, he leapt towards Bishop gracefully, especially for a three-legged dog, and easily took him to the ground. Neo was in full attack mode, savagely sinking his teeth into every body part he could find, then biting and shaking. Screaming in pain and fear, I could tell that Bishop was trying to push Neo off of him, but didn't quite have the strength. I tried to keep watching, to make some kind of plan so Neo and I could escape, but I was having trouble keeping my eyes open, and my brain was sluggish.

Then, what could've been seconds or hours later, Annabelle appeared at the bottom of the stairs, cursing loudly, and her clothes bloody. She shoved Neo off of Bishop, but the dog jumped up again quickly, his hackles raised and a growl in

his throat as he backed up and stood between me and my attackers. My eyes drifted closed again.

“What do we do?” I heard Annabelle ask Bishop, her voice quiet. Neo barked loudly at them a few times, as if in response, and my sister shrieked.

“Let’s just go,” Bishop replied, sounding frustrated. “We’re not getting past the mutt, and I gave her enough heroin to kill an elephant. She’ll be dead in minutes.”

After that, I had trouble understanding what they were saying, but I heard a door shut somewhere, and then the house was quiet. Neo started to whine, licking my hand over and over. I pried my eyelids open long enough to glance at him.

“I’m okay, buddy. You kept me safe,” I said.

Neo wasn’t satisfied, though, and began to nudge my arms, legs, and stomach with his wet nose. I wasn’t sure what he wanted, or what he was trying to tell me, and I tried to pet him and reassure him, but my arm felt so heavy that I could barely move it. I must’ve been really tired, but I couldn’t quite figure out why.

“Let me just take a little nap,” I told Neo.

I was so comfortable and warm, the couch providing exactly the right amount of cushion, and I just needed to rest my eyes a little bit. I heard the pad of Neo’s paws as he walked away, and I assumed he was giving up and letting me sleep.

Then it felt like something was being shoved into my hand. I was *so* tired, though—whatever it was could wait until later. But at that moment, Neo barked loudly, right in front of my face, and I jerked my eyes open again.

“What?” I asked anxiously, but he just barked again, then nudged my hand, which I suddenly noticed held my phone. “Did you bring this to me?”

He licked my hand again—the one holding my phone—and I tried to focus long enough to figure out what he wanted. It was incredibly hard, when all I wanted to do was sleep, but he continued nudging me persistently, and then I noticed a strange smell. With difficulty, I opened my eyes, noticing a

pool of blood on the floor behind Neo, and more on the stairs and in his fur.

“Something bad happened,” I said, unsure exactly what, and Neo nudged my hand again.

It was getting harder and harder to think, but I tried, sensing that there was a reason that I felt so tired, and knowing that Neo was telling me something important. After a moment, I remembered the emergency button from the security app. I just had to push it, and they’d come. They’d figure out what Neo was trying to tell me.

It seemed to take a million years, but I finally got my phone unlocked, opened the app, and pressed the emergency button.

“There, I did it. Are you happy?” I asked Neo, but he wasn’t, continuing to lick me and whine as I drifted into a deep sleep.

KNOX

The sting was successful, and we found all four girls and made numerous arrests. I got home well after dark, finally turning my phone back on as I parked and went inside. I was excited to see Penny after my long day, and give her the good news. I assumed she'd either be reading or asleep, and that Neo would be curled up with her whether she was in bed or on the couch, but everything was eerily dark and silent as I opened the door. With an uneasy feeling, I flipped the nearest light switch, and suddenly, the entryway was illuminated, and I noticed the blood all over the floor and the stairs.

With a curse, I started shouting for Penny and Neo, but no one made a sound. I tore through the house looking for them, just in case, but no one was there. What I did find was more blood on the upper half of the stairs and on the second floor, and Neo's crate, which was now empty, but the metal was bent enough to leave a good-sized gap.

It was my worst nightmare come to fruition: The love of my life was missing, along with the best, most loyal dog I'd ever known, and there was blood everywhere.

I unlocked my phone and noticed a few missed calls and text messages, but I ignored those and immediately called Evan.

"I need you to call Tex and have him track Penny's earrings. She and Neo are missing, and there's blood all over my house," I told him, then hung up without waiting for an answer.

Next, I tried to call Penny, and quickly discovered that her phone was still in the living room, on the floor in front of the larger couch, and was covered in what appeared to be dog slobber. I paced the room, trying to decide what to do next, when Evan called back.

“She’s at the hospital,” he said, telling me which one, and I immediately sprinted to my car so I could head there. “Tex is working on hacking into the hospital’s system and getting her records, to see what she’s being treated for and what her condition is.”

As I tore out of the parking lot, he promised to call me back if he learned anything, and to notify the rest of the team, so that I could focus on getting to Penny.

A few agonizing minutes later, I arrived at the hospital, parked in the first spot I saw, and rushed inside. It took more precious minutes as I tried to find out what room she was in, and then I was rushing in the direction a nurse pointed me.

When I finally found the room, I pushed inside, finding Penny in the bed with her eyes closed, her chest rising and falling naturally, and a nurse checking a machine. Her bodyguard, Dave, sat in a chair next to her bed and watched her closely. Irritation bubbled up at him sitting by her side, where I should be, but I shoved it away. It was my fault for not being there to protect her, and for not even having my phone turned on.

“What happened? Is she okay?” I asked, trying to keep my voice quiet.

Dave turned, noticing me for the first time.

As the nurse excused herself, Dave stood up and joined me closer to the door. The redness around his eyes, and the wetness in them, became obvious once he stood in front of me, and I swallowed down my anguish, realizing that if the bodyguard was crying, Penny must be in really bad shape.

But his words surprised me.

“She’ll be okay. She’s just resting,” he replied solemnly.

“Are you sure?” I asked skeptically, my frustration and fear mounting. “People don’t usually cry when someone is ‘okay.’”

“She’s going to be completely fine,” he said, meeting my gaze and holding it. “I promise.”

I released a breath and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to calm down. “Well, what happened? Why is she here?” I asked.

“I’m guessing you haven’t checked your voicemails?”

“I haven’t had time,” I answered, shaking my head.

“Well, we’re still trying to pin down all the details, but someone broke in and shot her up with a ton of heroin.” His voice cracked with emotion. “I guess your dog stopped them, and Penny somehow managed to push the emergency button on our app. But it was less than an hour after I dropped her off, and when I got back there, she was dead, and they had to resuscitate her.”

“She *died*?” I asked. I wasn’t even sure how to process that. “But she’s going to be okay?”

“That’s what they said. Apparently she woke up in the ambulance and was able to talk to them, and she knew her name and everything.”

“And what about my dog? Where is he?”

“I don’t think any of it was his, but he was covered in blood. One of my coworkers took him to the emergency vet just to get him checked out.”

“Okay,” I said, but even though I now knew Penny and Neo were safe, I was having trouble breathing, and barely holding back my own tears. “Do you know who broke in, or how?”

“It was two people, a man and a woman. We have pictures of the backs of their heads, and of course, the police probably took DNA from the blood all over the place. And my bosses said it had to have been a very talented hacker to get through our systems and turn it off long enough to get inside before

she got home. I know it wasn't part of my job, but I just wish I'd cleared the house before I left her there, so this never happened."

Witnessing Dave's guilt helped me begin reigning my own emotions in. This wasn't about him, or me—it was about Penny, and I needed to be strong for her. I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"I know," I reassured him. "And I wish I'd been home with her instead of out of town on a case. But sometimes things happen, no matter what we do, or how many precautions we put into place."

I'd seen similar things happen to Harper and Cassidy, after all, with Nolan and Evan just feet away, and they were two of the most competent, protective people I knew.

Dave nodded solemnly, and then I heard Penny's voice calling my name. It was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. Dave excused himself and I went to her, forgetting everything else.

"Hi, Angel," I greeted her, taking one of her hands and leaning down to place a kiss on her forehead. I couldn't believe how close I'd come to losing her. "How are you feeling?"

"Not terrible, all things considered," she said with a small smile, then glanced around the room. "This is kind of like your last mission, except you were the one in the hospital bed that time."

"Yep. We're just missing my parents. Want me to call them?" I quipped, relieved all over again now that I saw with my own eyes that she really was okay.

"Hmm... maybe later," Penny replied, still grinning.

I sat down, still holding her hand. "Do you remember what happened? And who did this to you?"

She nodded. "I was injected with a bunch of heroin," she said. "It was Annabelle, and a congressman named Ryan Bishop. I guess he's the person responsible for Brittney being kidnapped."

“Yeah, we just ran across his name in our investigations earlier today. He’s definitely the guy,” I said.

“And Annabelle said she was helping him, because if I was out of the way, you’d fall in love with her.”

I shuddered, my stomach once again threatening to revolt just thinking about Annabelle. “You know that’s not true, right?” I questioned.

“Of course I do!” Penny replied vehemently. “She’s completely insane, and I’ll never believe another word that comes out of her mouth.”

“Good,” I said, squeezing her hand. “Do you remember anything else?”

“Not all of it, but I remember Bishop saying he was planning to burn the house down. And I know that Neo saved me. He got out of his crate somehow, and attacked both of them. And then brought my phone to me and wouldn’t let me fall asleep until I called for help,” she said. “Is he okay? I don’t even know how he got out of his crate.”

“The metal was bent, like he’d busted his way out,” I told her. “And Dave said that he seemed fine, but someone from Phoenix Security took him to the vet just in case.”

“Will you check on him soon?” she asked, worry on her face. “He risked his life for me.”

I assured her I would, and a few minutes later, she was tired again and wanted to take a nap. I watched her sleep for a while, making sure her chest continued to move up and down at a steady pace. I was terrified that I’d still somehow lose her.

A while later, someone knocked lightly on the door. I didn’t want to leave Penny’s side, or even take my eyes off of her. But I also didn’t want anyone to wake her up unnecessarily. Convincing myself she’d be fine for a few moments, even without me keeping watch over her, I stood and opened the door. And in the hallway right outside of the room, I found my entire team standing, plus Harper, Cassidy, and Evie. Stunned, I stepped out, pulling the door closed

behind me, but leaving it cracked open enough that I could hear Penny if she called for me.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked. It was getting close to midnight, and the hallway was silent except for the group of us.

“We’re here to check on Penny. And you,” Nolan said.

“Is she doing okay?” Cassidy asked.

I struggled to swallow, affected by how caring my teammates were. I nodded.

“Her sister, Annabelle, and Ryan Bishop broke in and tried to kill her by injecting her with heroin. I was told that she died, and had to be resuscitated before they even transported her here.”

A few of my teammates cursed, looking angry on her behalf. I kept going.

“They were planning to burn the house down afterwards, I guess to cover it up. Luckily, Neo got out of his crate and attacked them, and then brought Penny her phone and made sure she got help before she passed out.”

“Neo got out of his crate?” Evan asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know how, but it’s all bent up, like maybe he pushed on it, or pulled with his teeth until he could get out.”

“That’s insane,” Evie said, sounding impressed, and I nodded in agreement.

I knew Neo was special, and he’d already saved countless lives during his time in the military, but protecting Penny went beyond even that. I’d forever be in his debt.

“Does Arlington PD have jurisdiction over the attack on Penny? Surely once she gives an official statement, Annabelle and Bishop can be charged with attempted murder, on top of everything else,” I said. “I need them locked up, or else I’ll be tempted to go after them myself.”

“I talked to Jonathan, and he’s on his way,” Nolan said, resting his hand on my shoulder. “But I have an idea I want to

run by you first.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m assuming Bishop and Annabelle believe Penny’s dead. I think we should act as if she really is until they’re arrested—and even have someone from Arlington PD do a death notification to her family. Otherwise, they might disappear before we can arrest them, or they might try to kill her a second time.”

I considered that for a moment. “I’ll do anything if it keeps her safe,” I finally said. “And I doubt Penny will have a problem with it.”

We discussed logistics a little while longer, and Mason and Ryder volunteered to stand watch at the door once everyone else left, just in case. If Penny needed to stay for a while, someone else on the team would relieve them in the morning.

“Do you need anything before we go?” Harper asked. “I’m sure you want to stay here with Penny, but you must need food, or clothes, or company. Just tell us and we’ll do it.”

I thought for a moment before I answered.

“Neo is at the emergency vet. Could someone check on him?” I asked. “Phoenix Security said he seemed fine, but that they took him in just to make sure.”

“I can do it,” Kate volunteered. “If he’s ready to go, do you want me to take him home with me?”

I nodded. “Just until Penny is discharged. Or you can drop him off at my parent’s house if it’s too much trouble.”

I pulled out my wallet and handed Kate a credit card to pay the vet bill with, and she pocketed it.

“If Kate doesn’t want to babysit him, I will,” Evie offered hopefully.

“Hey!” Kate replied, as if offended. “I spoke up first. And I’m definitely babysitting him.”

“But I want to keep him!” Evie pouted.

“I think I should keep him. Do you two even know anything about dogs?” Gabe asked.

“More than you, probably,” Evie replied. “I at least had one as a kid. Didn’t you once tell me you’ve *never* had a dog?”

“That’s true, but I’d still be the best choice,” Gabe said. “And just because I’ve never had a dog doesn’t mean I don’t want one. As a kid, I probably watched every movie and show there was with a dog in it: *Lassie*, *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin*, *All Dogs Go To Heaven*, *Homeward Bound*, *Air Bud*, *Beethoven*. I could go on.”

“Why don’t you have a dog, then, if you love them so much?” Evie asked.

“Working for the FBI isn’t exactly conducive to pet ownership, and I don’t have anyone to help me.”

“I’ll help you,” Evie said enthusiastically.

“You know, Nolan and I would be the best choice to keep Neo,” Harper spoke up, smiling at me mischievously. “We actually *have* a dog, so we know what we’re doing. He’d basically be a guinea pig at their houses.”

Gabe scoffed. “He’s a nine-year-old retired military dog. How much care could Neo possibly need, other than feeding and walking him? If he had thumbs and his own credit card, he’d probably already be back home by now.”

Everyone laughed, and I had a feeling that my friends were arguing over Neo as a way to improve my mood—at least partly. I had to admit Gabe and Evie could argue about anything, and they were probably at least partly serious.

“This is a pointless argument. I have the credit card to pay the vet bill, so I get to keep him,” Kate said matter-of-factly, a smirk on her face. “But if you want to come over and hang out with me and Neo, you’re welcome to.”

“I bet I could get there faster and pay the vet bill with my own card,” Gabe replied.

“Ya’ll have lost your minds,” Evan laughed, stepping in to mediate. “Kate’s picking Neo up, she invited everyone else over, and that’s the end of it. I’m sure Knox wants to get back to Penny, not listen to this nonsense.”

The others grumbled their agreement, but Gabe just crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m at least picking up dog treats on my way over to your house,” he told Kate firmly.

We all laughed again, and then most of my friends started preparing to leave. Nolan and Harper promised to bring changes of clothes in the morning, and Liam offered to bring breakfast.

“Thank you guys,” I said, feeling grateful for each one of them.

Evan paused, resting a hand on my shoulder and meeting my gaze. “You’re our brother. We’ve always got your back. And Penny’s.”

KNOX

In total, Penny spent a day and a half in the hospital before being discharged. I was with her almost every moment, afraid something would happen to her if I couldn't see her and touch her. Penny seemed to be holding up much better than me, and was laughing and joking with our friends whenever they stopped by, as if nothing had happened.

When we were finally able to leave, we stopped at home to pick up clothes and supplies, then went to Kate's house to pick up Neo—who was fully recovered, according to the vet. And then, following Nolan's suggestion of hiding Penny and pretending she really had died, we went to my brother's apartment. He'd just moved into it recently, and my parents and I were the only ones who knew the address. Plus, since he was a former SEAL, I felt like Penny would be safest there. If I ended up needing to go into work, my parents had agreed to come over as well, as another layer of protection. I hoped that it would be nearly impossible for anyone to get past two former SEALs, Neo, and my mom—who promised to stab anyone dangerous with a kitchen knife.

The next morning, Penny and I ate breakfast with Grayson, and then she'd returned to the extra bedroom we were staying in, saying she wanted to read in bed. I planned to join her, but when my phone rang, I kissed her temple, then excused myself onto Grayson's deck.

"Hey," I greeted, knowing from my caller ID that it was Nolan on the line.

"Hey, Knox. Are you and Penny doing okay?" he asked.

“Yep. We’re here at our ‘safe house,’” I said.

Nolan knew we planned to stay with my brother, but he didn’t know the address either.

“Okay, great,” he said, sounding pleased. “Well, I wanted to let you know that the arrest warrants for Bishop and Annabelle are ready to go. And it’s a little unconventional, but I’m wondering if you want to be there when they’re taken into custody. Jonathan plans to apprehend Annabelle first—surveillance says she’s at her salon right now—and then he’s going to join the team when we arrest Bishop for the trafficking, and the attempted murder. No pressure, but if you want to be there, you’re more than welcome.”

I hesitated. “Give me a few minutes to think about it,” I said, and Nolan agreed, but warned me not to take too long.

I returned to the extra bedroom, where Penny was stretched out on her side, engrossed in a paperback book, with Neo curled up at her feet. I sat down next to her, gently pushing some hair off her face, and she gazed up at me lovingly. I hoped she still looked at me that way in 50 years.

“That was Nolan on the phone,” I told her, re-focusing on the present. “They’re ready to arrest Bishop and Annabelle, and asked if I wanted to be there.”

“Really? What did you say?” she asked.

She replaced her bookmark in the book and set it down, then sat up and scooted back until she was resting against the headboard. I studied her, looking for an indication of how she felt about the idea, but I couldn’t read her one way or another.

“I’m not sure,” I finally replied with a shrug. “I should stay here with you.”

“I can tell that you want to be there, though. Otherwise you would’ve already said no.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, taking a moment to figure out how to express what I was feeling. “It’s hard to explain,” I said. “But I feel like I won’t really believe you’re safe until I see them arrested, with my own eyes.”

“Then you should go,” Penny said encouragingly. “I’ll be fine here with Neo and your brother. I’m just going to read some more, and I’ll probably end up falling asleep.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I am,” she replied firmly. “Plus, I want to hear all about it when you get back, especially the look on Annabelle’s face when it happens.”

I laughed. “I love it when you’re ruthless,” I said.

“And I love *you*,” she responded. “Now get out of here, and go arrest some bad guys.”

* * *

I CALLED MY PARENTS, who promised they’d be right over, and then I left Penny reading her book as I went to confront the people who hurt her.

A short time later, I stood outside of Annabelle’s salon, watching her blow dry someone’s hair, a few other clients and stylists scattered throughout the shop at their own stations. After Annabelle almost escaped from that police officer in the parking garage, we decided to come up with a strategy to help her arrest go more smoothly. The plan was for me to go in first and distract Annabelle, so that Arlington PD would hopefully have an easier time restraining and handcuffing her. We were all waiting, though, because a female detective had instructed me to not to make my entrance until the client’s hair was dry.

“No one deserves to have their hair appointment cut short because their stylist was arrested. Having your hair brushed and fixed is the best part,” she’d said, and Jonathan rolled his eyes at her.

Finally, the client paid and left—I had to admit she looked content, and her hair did look soft—and it was time.

“Don’t forget to act like you’re grieving. Your girlfriend just died,” Jonathan reminded me.

I nodded, then made my move, a bell on the door dinging as I walked inside. Annabelle was sweeping up hair and didn't look up at first, which gave me time to notice the limp in her gait, and the large bandages on one of her arms.

"I'll be right with you," she finally said, but when she glanced up at me a moment later, her eyes went wide. "Knox?"

"Yeah, it's me," I said, suddenly feeling awkward—I'd never been a good actor—but Annabelle didn't seem to notice. She was probably too busy putting on her own show.

The look of surprise on her face transformed, and for a moment I could detect a calculating look in her eyes before they began to well up with tears.

"Did you hear about Penny? My family is so sad that she died. And they said it was a heroin overdose! I had no idea that she was a drug addict, did you?"

Before I could stop her, she hugged me, but I kept my arms at my sides. But then I heard a quiet ding, as if the detectives were coming inside and trying to keep the bell on the door silent, so I started talking, attempting to ramble on for a while.

"I didn't know she was a drug addict, either," I said, mentally patting myself on the back for that statement, which was technically true. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, so I kept talking. "I never saw her do drugs, ever, and I've known her for such a long time. I'm wondering if she just started using drugs lately, or if it started a long time ago. And I wonder if it was just heroin, or if she used other drugs, too. I just don't know what to do without her. I can't believe she's gone."

I'd been watching over Annabelle's shoulder as the detectives and uniformed officers moved into position, and when Jonathan gave me a thumbs up, I finally stopped talking, feeling winded from saying so much at once.

Annabelle didn't seem to notice that anything was amiss. "I know," she said sympathetically, rubbing my back for a moment before she let go and stepped away.

It was at that moment that Jonathan stepped forward, quickly grabbing her wrists, pulling them behind her back, and snapping handcuffs onto them.

“What the hell?” she asked angrily, turning around, and when she realized she’d been handcuffed, she began to scream. “Get these off me right now! You have no idea who you’re messing with!”

She continued to yell and make threats, but the female detective, completely calm in the face of Annabelle’s rage, ignored her and began to recite her Miranda rights. Annabelle didn’t take it well.

“What are you even arresting me for?” she shrieked, her face red.

“Attempted murder, ma’am,” the detective said.

Annabelle paused for a moment, as if processing that, before her gaze shot in my direction. “*Attempted?*” she yelled.

I just smiled at her. “Penny is actually alive and well, no thanks to you,” I said.

Her face turned from red to purple, and she tried to rush at me, but by then she had a police officer holding each of her arms, and she only made it a step before being yanked back. I watched as they escorted her out to a police car, and could hear her cursing and screaming the entire time, even as I remained inside the salon.

“Are you ready for the next one?” Jonathan asked, and I nodded my head.

We rode together and met the rest of my team at an elegant, and very expensive, restaurant, where Bishop was hosting a campaign fundraiser. That time, I stayed in the background as Ryder and Gabe arrested him in front of all those potential donors, making sure that the phrases “human trafficking” and “attempted murder” were loud enough for everyone to hear. I had to admit that Bishop wasn’t as loud as Annabelle as he was being handcuffed and led away, but his cursing was more creative than hers had been.

With both Annabelle and Bishop arrested, a feeling of relief washed over me, along with the knowledge that Penny was safe. And while I was glad I'd been there to witness both arrests, I was more than ready to get back to Penny, and take her home.

PENNY

I was surprised at how quickly I recovered from the heroin overdose, but I didn't take it for granted, knowing how much worse things could've been—especially since my heart had stopped and the paramedics had needed to resuscitate me. I was also glad that I wasn't having any nightmares or lingering fear—at least not yet—from what happened, and I felt that a lot of the reason was that Annabelle and Ryan Bishop were behind bars, and had both been denied any type of bail. They would likely be in prison for a very, very long time.

The week after I was attacked, I went back to teaching. My students seemed to have missed me while I was out, and I loved passing the previously missing girls in the hallways, and having Brittney back in my class. Her foster care worker had placed her with more caring foster parents, in a house that was still in the Green Valley school district. Brittney seemed happy with them, telling me funny stories about the foster parents, and the other teenager living there. I was also able to give her the *Anne of Green Gables* box set I'd bought for her, which she loved, and prompted her to gush about all the cool stuff her foster parents had bought her, including new clothes and shoes, lots of books, and some decorations for her room.

A couple of weeks after Annabelle was arrested, my mom texted me that my dad had asked her for a divorce, and I couldn't tell if she was heartbroken or relieved. She said my dad had admitted to cheating on her for years—most of their marriage, it sounded like—and that he'd recently fallen in love with a 24-year-old Mormon woman he met online. He'd decided he was going to convert and move to Utah to be with

her. My mom planned to move to New York, where she'd grown up, and where a lot of her family still lived.

I had to admit that I felt safer knowing they would both be far away.

Everything between Knox and me was also going really well, making it clear that we were always meant to be together. I was tempted to feel regret over all the time we lost, but I'd always believed that everything happens for a reason, and in its own time, so I was mostly successful at not fixating on what could have been.

It was a Friday, a few weeks after my attack, when I got home and opened the door to darkness. Knox's car was parked outside, but all the lights were off, and I could hear music playing from somewhere near the back of the house. I followed the sound, making my way to the backyard, where Knox and Neo waited for me. Knox held a bouquet of flowers and wore a black suit, looking especially handsome, as Neo sat patiently next to him, a bowtie around his neck.

"What's going on?" I asked, as the song "I'll Be" by Edwin McCain played in the background.

Knox began walking towards me, Neo right next to him, and we met in the middle. With a brief kiss, he handed me the beautiful bouquet, then went down on one knee and took my free hand in one of his.

"What are you doing?" I asked, afraid I was misreading things, or possibly hallucinating.

He grinned up at me. "Penny, you are *everything* to me. You're my rock when things get hard, my shelter when it storms. My heart beats for you, every minute of every day. Just by being yourself, you've taught me so much about love, and loyalty, and kindness, and I have a feeling I'd be a lot less happy, and a much worse person if it wasn't for you." He grimaced, then ran his fingers through his hair. "Shoot, I'm messing this up already. You know I'm not the best with words."

I laughed, happy tears trailing down my cheeks. “I don’t know, I think you’re doing pretty well,” I encouraged him.

He glanced at me, and as I smiled at him, he seemed to relax. “Anyways,” he said, his own grin returning, “to make a long story short, I’ve waited what feels like a lifetime to be with you, but you were worth the wait, and I hope to spend the rest of our lives loving you, cherishing you, and making you smile. So, Penny, will you marry me?”

I started to answer, but he interrupted me. “Wait, I forgot the ring. Don’t answer yet,” he said. “It’s on Neo’s bow tie,” Knox said, and the dog, who’d been looking bored, suddenly perked up at hearing his name. “Go ahead, Neo,” Knox directed, and the dog walked closer.

I leaned down, and it took me a moment to detach the small bag from the bow tie. Once I had it, I loosened the string and shook it until something fell into my hand. It was a beautiful, halo-style diamond ring, with two smaller diamonds on the sides. I slid it onto my finger.

“I was going to say yes even without the ring, you know, but this is gorgeous,” I told him. When he still looked expectant, and stayed on his knee, I realized he was still waiting for my official answer. “Yes, Knox, I will absolutely marry you.” I told him.

Finally, he stood up, cupping my face between his hands and kissing me. A few minutes later, both of us gasping for breath, he stepped back.

“Sorry that was so awkward,” he said sheepishly.

“No, it was perfect,” I told him. “You’re perfect.”

And then, he kissed me again.

EPILOGUE

PENNY

OCTOBER 2022

WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

We got married at my favorite place on Earth, Colonial Williamsburg, standing on the large stretch of grass in front of the Governor's Palace. The ceremony was sweet and simple, with only Knox's family, his teammates, Neo, and Harper, Evie, and Cassidy surrounding us.

Once the minister announced us as husband and wife and everyone cheered, we climbed into a Colonial-style, horse drawn carriage. With a grin, Knox helped me bundle all of my white, trumpet-style dress into the coach before climbing in next to me, and then we waved at our loved ones as the horses pulled away.

The carriage took us around the Colonial area and the campus of my alma mater, the College of William and Mary. With the air starting to turn cold, I savored the feeling of being huddled against my new husband, his arm around me and a blanket on our laps as we talked and pointed out different landmarks. We'd visited Colonial Williamsburg together many times, especially when I was in college and he was stationed at the naval base nearby, but I knew I'd always remember our first trip through the town as husband and wife.

About thirty minutes later, the carriage dropped us off at the tavern we'd rented out for the evening. Everyone else was already inside, except for Neo—he wasn't allowed inside the historic building, so Knox's parents had taken him to his crate

inside their nearby hotel room before returning for the reception. As we made our grand entrance, our friends and family cheered again, and then we made our rounds, talking to everyone.

Once we ate and cut the cake, musicians in Colonial garb serenaded us with 18th century baroque and classical music as we talked with friends and family. At one point, my throat became dry from all the talking, and Knox went to find me a glass of water. As he disappeared from view, his mom pulled me aside.

“I’m just so happy, and I need to hug you again,” she said, wrapping her arms around me. “You’ve always been the daughter I never had, and I’m glad it’s official now,” she said. “I always knew you were perfect for Knox, even when you were little. I can’t imagine anyone better suited for him. And even after everything your family put you through, you’re still just as sweet as when you were a little girl.”

After a few moments, she stepped back, wiping tears from her eyes, and causing some to form in mine as well, just as Knox returned.

“Everything okay?” he asked apprehensively as he handed me the cup of water.

“Definitely,” I said happily, and his mom hugged him as well. She whispered something into his ear, causing him to glance at me, and then she wandered away.

“What did she say?” I asked curiously.

“She told me how lucky I am,” he replied with a grin. “But I already knew that.”

He spun me around in time with the music, and after a few minutes, feeling overheated, we stepped out into the tavern’s well-manicured back yard to cool off. By then, it was dark, and the streets were mostly quiet, so when I heard a sound coming from the side of the house, it took me off guard.

“What is that?” I whispered to Knox, and he looked perplexed as well. As the sounds came closer, my gut told me

to hide, and I dragged Knox with me until we were concealed behind a large bush.

“I already told you—,” I heard a voice say before it was cut off.

“That’s Evie,” I whispered to Knox, and he frowned.

I didn’t hear anything else, and I was worried that Evie was in danger, which Knox must’ve been thinking as well. He motioned for me to stay put, and he peeked around the bush we were hiding behind. A moment later he made the signal his dad taught him, letting me know that everything was safe, but he also gently placed a finger against my lips, telling me to be quiet.

I nodded my understanding, and then he made room for me, allowing me space to peek around the bush as well. It was hard to see, with only a couple of old-fashioned cressets illuminating the yard, but as my eyes adjusted I realized I was looking at Evie and Gabe kissing. I glanced at Knox excitedly, trying to stay quiet and barely succeeding, so I backed up and moved further into the bush in an effort to muffle myself. He just shook his head at me, his lips quirking up in amusement.

It felt like a really long time, but Gabe and Evie finally began talking again, and then a door opened, the noise of our friends conversing and the musicians playing drifting out for just a moment before everything grew quiet again. I followed Knox’s lead, and we waited for a few more seconds, then he peeked around the bush one more time.

“They’re gone,” he confirmed.

He took my hand, leading me back to the open area where Evie and Gabe had just been, but I couldn’t stop laughing at Knox and me behaving like spies. I was giddy from my amusement, my excitement over Gabe and Evie kissing, and the general happiness of my wedding day, and as I got one bout of giggles under control, another one began.

Knox just shook his head at my laughter, smiling at me, but when he could tell I couldn’t stop, he took my hand and pulled me closer.

“Looks like you need some help being serious,” he whispered against my temple, his warm breath causing me to shiver. He wrapped his arms around me, keeping me warm in the chilly air, and I giggled again. My amusement was quickly cut short, though, as his lips brushed against mine. With a contented hum, I moved even closer, deepening the kiss, both of us lost in each other.

To my displeasure, Knox eventually stepped back, putting some space between us. Disappointed, I took a moment to catch my breath, suddenly remembering what we’d seen.

“Did you know about that?” I asked Knox, narrowing my eyes in a mock scowl, my tone somewhere between excitement and accusation as I pointed at the tavern.

“I had no idea,” he replied, his eyebrows raised. “Did you?”

“Nope!” I said.

I shivered again, that time from the cold, and Knox wrapped his arm around me, leading me towards the tavern and holding the door open for me.

“So much for them being ‘just friends,’” I told him excitedly, and then we walked back inside.

ALSO BY KRISTIN LYNN

Worth It Series

Worth the Risk

Worth the Fight

Worth the Wait

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristin Lynn has always had a passion for stories. Before she could read or write on her own, she was dictating “books” to her mother to write down. When she was older, she loved writing stories, and she often snuck in extra reading time after bedtime, using a flashlight under the covers. During college and for several years after graduating, Kristin worked as a journalist, before returning to school and earned her Master’s degree in Social Work (MSW).

During the day, Kristin is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), but books have always been her escape from reality. She fell in love with romantic suspense novels, and decided to write her own, beginning with the *Worth It* series.

Kristin has won multiple awards for her writing, both as a child and as an adult. She lives in Virginia and enjoys spending her time with her family, including her husband, son, and pets.

There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

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Becca Jameson: Destiny's Delta

Lynne St James, Gwen's Delta

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Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

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Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

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Eagle Point Search & Rescue

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Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

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Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (Oct 2024)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

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Protecting Remi (July 2024)

Protecting Wren (Nov 2024)

Protecting Josie (TBA)

Protecting Maggie (TBA)

Protecting Addison (TBA)

Protecting Kelli (TBA)

Protecting Bree (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

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Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

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Rescuing Kassie

Rescuing Bryn

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Rescuing Wendy

Rescuing Mary

Rescuing Macie (novella)

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Justice for Boone

Shelter for Adeline

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Justice for Hope

Shelter for Quinn

Shelter for Koren

Shelter for Penelope

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Protecting Alabama

Protecting Fiona

Marrying Caroline (novella)

Protecting Summer

Protecting Cheyenne

Protecting Jessyka

Protecting Julie (novella)

Protecting Melody

Protecting the Future

Protecting Kiera (novella)

Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)

Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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