



Be My

EVER AFTER

ANDREA ROUSSE

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CANAAN FALLS COYOTES BOOK 3

ANDREA ROUSSE

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DAPHNE

“Are you sure about this?” Shaw asks.

“Yes.” No. Maybe. Damn it. I’m not sure about anything. But I can’t tell my partner that. I know this suspect is somehow the missing piece of the puzzle for our case. “Let’s just watch for a few more minutes.”

“You mean hours.” Gavin Shaw knows me too well. And he should, we’ve been partners for two years and friends before that.

I turn to glance at him, his charming smile fixated on me. “Have somewhere more important you need to be?”

“Nope. I’m good here.” He reclines his seat a little, head resting back as he swaps the radio station. And of all the things he could stop on, he chooses the damn Coyotes baseball game. I don’t need another distraction.

“Then stop fidgeting,” I tell him, turning the volume down to zero.

“Me fidgeting? You’re the one who can’t sit still.” He’s not wrong. “Could it have anything to do with the fact that the captain told us to back off this lead?”

I bite at the inside of my lip, avoiding the question. Because he’s dead-on. Disobeying my superior isn’t exactly something I should chance. And usually, I wouldn’t go against him. Usually, I follow his command without question. But this time is different. Something about this case has been off from the jump. And now that I’m so close to solving it, figuring out how it’s all tied together, he wants me to back off. I hate to think it, but it made me question if he knows something more than he should—something more than he’s said. Because he’s not normally the play-it-safe type. Captain Arnold is more balls to the-wall; a let’s-get-this-shit-done type. And that’s why we’ve never butted heads. Until now.

“Answers that question.” Shaw turns the volume back up and cheering blasts through the speakers as the announcer shouts the Coyotes have scored a run. “Do you think he’ll fire you or me first? Or both at the same time?”

“You’re not gonna get fired. I’ll take the fall for this.” I make one last attempt to turn the volume down without showing how much I don’t want to listen the ballgame. “Besides, I told you I could handle this. *You* insisted on tagging along.”

He leans towards the console, a determined look in place. “We’re a team. You go down, I’m going with you.” He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he reaches over, twists the knob, and the sounds of the baseball game fill the car.

“Could we at least try to keep the noise down? You know, so we don’t draw unnecessary attention to ourselves?”

“Good point.” He turns it down slightly but not enough for my liking since I can still hear what’s going on.

“What’s with you not wanting to listen to the Coyotes game? Your dad is the coach. Seems like you’d want to cheer him on.”

Here we go. “He’s the pitching coach. And I do want to support him. I just don’t want any distractions.”

“Okey dokey.” Shaw finally shuts the radio completely off. “Maybe we can catch a game someday. I’m sure you can get some kick-ass seats.”

Another reason I usually don’t tell anyone what my dad does for a living. Only that was hard to avoid when we go by last names at work. It didn’t take Shaw long to ask if I was related to *Coach Dundee*. But this is the first time he’s mentioning the part I dread. Because more times than not, it was the only reason some guys at work would speak to me. I know that’s not the case with Shaw, but it doesn’t make the question any easier to digest. “Nope. And I don’t bother my dad at work.” Anymore.

“That must be a great job to have.”

“Yeah. Sure.” It’d seemed like the best job ever at one point. Not so much anymore. But that has more to do with my ex being on the team than the actual work involved. Glancing to Shaw, who’s looking out the passenger window, I try to keep us focused. “But I really think we should focus on our job. If we’re right, Zimmerman will be coming by soon. And he’s not going down without a fight.”

“There’s no ‘we’re right’ about this. This is all your guessing,” he mutters, but stays focused on our surroundings, falling silent as we scope out the area for another hour before a car pulls up to the warehouse.

I grab the binoculars from Shaw when he passes them to me. “That’s him,” I whisper even though there’s no way he can hear us from this distance.

“Now what?” Shaw asks lowly.

I don’t know. “Let’s watch him for a few. He’s meeting someone. And that someone might have information we need.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Shaw shifts in his seat, hunching down a bit as we both remain quiet. It’s about two minutes later when another vehicle pulls up. The truck stops about ten yards away from where Zimmerman is propped against his car. But he immediately stands straight up, his stance taking a dominant pose as soon as his guest pushes the driver door open. And thankfully the vantage point allows us a clear view as the new arrival steps out of their truck and makes their way towards Zimmerman.

“Wait.” I take a closer look. “Isn’t that Higgins?” There’s no way. Why would a police officer be meeting Zimmerman at an abandoned warehouse?

“Yeah. That looks like him.”

This is not good. But I don’t have time to weigh out which bad choice from all the shitty choices we have is best because Zimmerman lifts a pistol, pointing it squarely at Higgins. My instinct kicks in, as does Shaw’s. We both bail out of the vehicle, weapons drawn, as we order Zimmerman to put the gun down.

Zimmerman complies while scanning the three of us with our firearms pointed at him. He slowly lowers his weapon, laying it on the ground.

“On your knees,” Shaw yells. Zimmerman complies and my partner gives me a nod which says *Cover me* as he tucks his weapon away and grabs a set of cuffs. Placing them securely on Zimmerman, he searches him efficiently then hauls him to his feet to continue the pat down.

Higgins moves over to where I’m standing. “What are you doing out here?”

“Following up on a lead,” I say breathlessly, the adrenaline finally wearing off. “Are you good?”

“Yeah.” He glances over at Zimmerman. “I was about to bust this punk when he pulled a weapon on me.”

Zimmerman laughs, “Is that so?”

Higgins takes a step over towards Zimmerman, who looks smug and self-assured for just being apprehended by police. Higgins looks him up and down before saying, “That’s so.” Then he hesitates for a second before adding, “Or is there more? Because cooperating can mean the difference between being in

the jail or under it.”

Um. That is not how we get a confession, but Zimmerman makes his mind up quickly as he says, “Yeah. That’s the deal.”

“I’ll take him in,” Higgins offers, moving to grab Zimmerman’s arm.

But Shaw keeps a hold on him as he says, “I put the cuffs on him. Report is mine.”

I’ve never been happier to be headed back to the station for a report because something tells me Higgins had a different outcome in mind.

“Let’s go,” Shaw tells me, so I follow behind. He puts Zimmerman in the back seat of our unmarked car while the culprit shakes his head the entire time as he chuckles.

I make the mistake of asking, “What’s so funny?”

“You’ll see.”

Zimmerman doesn’t speak another word as we drive. And I don’t know about Shaw, but Higgins’s words are ringing around in my head louder by the second as we pull up to the police station. But when we step inside, and I see Captain Arnold standing there. The alarm in my head blares full blast.

DAPHNE

“What part of ‘stand down’ did you not understand?” my boss yells as I remain quiet in my chair. Shaw is seated beside me and goes to speak up but is immediately shut down by Captain Arnold’s next question. “Do the two of you have any idea what you did tonight?”

I keep my lips sealed because I know this type of angry lecture. It’s the *I’m in the mood to yell, so let me get it all out and I’ll let you know when I actually want to hear what stupid excuse you have for not listening to me* mood. Dad has resorted to it a time or two thousand. But this is definitely a first from the captain, though he certainly has had practice because he is nailing it.

“Months and months of undercover work. All down the drain because you couldn’t hold on for a few days. That’s it.” He throws his hands up. “A few days. That’s all I needed you to sit on this for.”

That’s *not* what he’d said. He’d said to drop it and move on. “Sir, I know it was a mistake.”

“A mistake?” he repeats, his head shaking with a laugh reminding me of Zimmerman. “A mistake that has hindered our top covert operation.”

“We didn’t know there was an undercover,” Shaw chimes in.

“That’s because he’s investigating *this* damn department. Higgins is at the top of the list of corrupt bastards and should’ve been the key factor to finding and cleaning out the other rotten garbage in this division. And now he’ll run and hide with his tail between his legs because the two of you spooked him.”

Shaw and I both go to say something, but Captain Arnold cuts us off, his finger lifting as he points between us. “No one in this department knows about this operation. No one. Not a single soul. Therefore, if word were to get

out, I'd know exactly who it came from. This is your one and only warning—none of this information leaves this room. We might have a chance at salvaging something if the two of you can keep your noses out of it.”

“Yes sir.” But one thing doesn't make sense. “Why would Zimmerman's prints show up from Thompson's crime scene?”

“Because Zimmerman was there. Thompson was murdered in front of him. We don't know exactly who ordered the hit, but we're getting close. Closer than sitting and watching a man who isn't an actual suspect. But you're right, he is connected to the crime. Just not on the side you'd guessed.”

“I didn't know. I was following where the evidence led me.” Which is what Captain Arnold has said time and time again. Even when the evidence doesn't make sense, follow the clues, and once you have the entire picture, it'll make sense. “I can help with the investigation.”

“Absolutely not. I need people I can trust to listen to me. This isn't some BS undercover assignment. This is life-and-death. These dirty cops will stop at nothing to protect themselves even if it means gutting one of their colleagues.”

I try to make one more plea. Anything to make up for my mistake. “You can trust me.”

“Can I though?” He gives me a judgy stare. “No. I can't. You're not ready for this. Your actions more than proved it. Until further notice, park your ass at that desk.” He points a finger out to lobby then stands, dismissing us. “And just in case you're getting some harebrained idea about helping from where your ass will be sitting in that chair ... don't. Cold case files. That's your only task. Those families deserve answers too. Since you're so eager to solve a case, start with those.”

Captain Arnold looks to Shaw. “You're on desk duty, too, until further notice.”

“Sir, it's on me. He didn't have anything to do with it. I made the decision to disobey you.” I keep a watch of my captain who just stares at me in frustration for a few seconds.

“And your partner made the decision to go along with it. So, both of you are benched.”

With that, he walks out of his office, leaving me and Shaw sitting there. I'm the first to speak. “I'm sorry.”

“Nope. I told you. We're in this together. We're going down, we're doing

it as a team. Apparently we're on desk duty as a team."

"Don't sound too eager. He might leave us at the desk forever."

"I might be able to get used to it. No one shoots at us in here."

"Agreed. But I didn't sign up for comfort, I signed up to make a difference."

"Yada yada," Shaw teases me. "I'm still considering that career at the ball field."

"I'll stick with the desk."

"Yeah. I'm sure your dad is very proud of you."

"I never said I was trying to make him proud."

"You didn't have to. I can spot a daddy's girl from a mile away."

"Well, good thing you're gonna be at a desk without bullets flying your way because your eyesight is shit." I laugh but there is some truth to what he said. Only my previous relationship—well, more like the breakup—put a gigantic wedge between Dad and me. And we've yet to get past it.

BRYCE

“Simplest part of your damn job, Parish. Show up. And you couldn’t even do that.”

Coach Dundee keeps steady on the reprimand as I sit on the dugout bench. The same one I’ve been sitting on since I arrived early to the stadium for practice. But missing yesterday’s is the current issue I’m getting lectured about. Though I’m sure if it wasn’t that it’d be something else. I screw up more than not. I look to the mound. That’s the only place I don’t make a mess of things.

“Where the hell were you?”

I don’t respond. There’s no excuse that will end his lecture quickly, and the truth will only serve to heighten his livid reaction. If I don’t respond, there’s a chance he’ll get tired of preaching and walk away.

But he’s not ready yet. Evidently. “Do you know how many guys would kill for your position? How many of your own teammates would be thankful to be in the starting rotation?”

All of them. Probably. But I keep that to myself as Coach continues asking questions he doesn’t want answers to. “Is this going to be how it is the entire season? Me sitting here wondering if you’re gonna show up to practice? What about the days you actually have to step on that mound? The days your teammates are counting on you to pitch. Tell me now. Because your ass will remain on that bench—permanently—unless you get your shit together. Even the days you’re not on the field, you still have a job and commitment to this team. Don’t let it happen again. I don’t care who wants you to play or how good your damn arm is, I’ll make sure you don’t step back on that mound if you keep pulling this shit.” He waves his hand in the

air like he's waving me away from him.

Once Coach has walked away, I lean forward. With my elbows on my knees, I train my eyes on the pavement. I'm glad that's over even if I did deserve it. To be fair, it's not only the one practice he's upset about. I'm betting me not showing must've been the straw that broke the camel's back.

DAPHNE

“So much for not bothering Dad at work,” I mutter, staring at the empty stadium lot. Not that it’s by choice. I’d stopped by my parents’ house, hoping for a few seconds to clear my head and talk to my mom about things, and somehow that turned into her pleading with me to stop by and drop off Dad’s supper. I’d bet big money that he hadn’t “accidentally forgotten” the healthy meal Mom packed for him. Nope, not from all the grumbling he does when she’s force-feeding him healthier options at home.

Thankfully, I spot the head coach walking towards the employee entrance as I stand near the gate and shout his name. It only takes Van Herten a few seconds to recognize I’m not a crazed fan as he gives me a warm smile and makes his way over.

“Hey, Daphne! It’s great to see you.” He pulls me into a quick hug as I step inside the gate. “Your dad didn’t mention you’d be attending the game tonight.”

“Oh, I’m not.” I hold up the healthy goody bag. “Just dropping off supper per Mom’s request.”

“He’ll be thrilled.” Van Herten chuckles, clearly aware of how much Dad loves my mom’s new meal plan.

Healthy meals aside, I really don’t want to be at the ballpark a moment longer. “Can you give it to him for me?”

Without even considering request, he responds, “Nah. I’m sure your dad would love a visit. Come on with me.” He nods his head towards the entrance, and I reluctantly follow behind him. “He’s been telling me they’re keeping you real busy down at the station.”

“Yes sir.” Not going to give details on that situation right now, and

thankfully Van Herten is a talker and fills the corridor with more bluster the whole way.

“You know where to find him.” He motions towards Dad’s office before heading the opposite direction. “Don’t be a stranger, Daphne. We miss you around here.”

He speaks with sincerity. And I feel every bit of it. I practically grew up here and hung out at this place any time Dad would allow me to tag along. It was usually at the urging of Mom, and I was excited to get out of her hair. He would always find some job for me to do, whether it was restacking the helmets or helping count the baseballs that didn’t need counting. I felt like I was doing something useful. Something that would make him proud.

It only takes a few seconds to remember why I avoid coming here, though. Rex McGraw—relief pitcher and my ex-boyfriend—heads straight for me. “Hey,” he says with a tense expression. “What are you doing here?”

He probably thinks it’s about him, because God forbid anyone do anything that doesn’t revolve around Rex McGraw. “Dropping off something for my dad.” I move to walk away, but he reaches forward, grasping my elbow.

“Can we talk for a second?”

Reflexively, I flinch without thinking, then glance to where his fingers are touching my skin. I want to break every one of them. Instead, I meet his eyes and jerk my arm out of his grip. “No.”

“Daphne, I—”

“I don’t have time for this.” I don’t need more of his usual. *I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.* Whatever other bullshit excuse he’s come up with for being a cheating scum.

“After everything, you won’t give me a few seconds of your time?”

Those words stop me dead in my tracks as I turn around and repeat, “‘After everything,’ you don’t deserve another second. You already wasted four years of my time.”

“Daphne.” I hear my dad call my name from behind me.

Shit. Out of all the ways for Dad to find me, here, fighting with Rex, isn’t my ideal option on any level.

I take a deep breath to settle my nerves as I turn to face Dad. “Mom wanted me to drop this off for you.” I hold out the paper sack, but his vision is focused over my shoulder.

He nods in the opposite direction behind him. “Go to my office, and I’ll

meet you there.”

There’s no point arguing with him. From the unyielding stance he has going on, I know better, so I comply. Once I’ve walked past him, I hear Dad ask Rex about his warm-up and if his shoulder is good. Of course he wants to make sure the pansy ass is okay. I’m nothing but the evil daughter who broke the chump’s heart in my father’s eyes. Even though Rex was the one who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants.

Once in Dad’s office, I drop the sack on the desk then plop down into the chair in front of his desk. This room feels more comfortable than it should, but I can’t shake the unease of being here. I need to go sooner than later. My head drops forward as I rub my eyes, then I make a sad attempt to wipe off any mascara I’ve smeared.

A noise draws my attention, and my head snaps up, thinking Dad has arrived. But it’s not him. It’s worse. Bryce freaking Parish is smiling at me as he parks his ass on the chair beside me. “You got called to the principal’s office too?”

I just give him my usual you’re-a-jackass look and shake my head. “I have to go.” Far away. And make sure next time I tell Mom I won’t be making any deliveries here. There’s a reason this place isn’t my second home anymore.

“I wouldn’t go out there just yet. Daddy is giving McGraw some pointers regarding his piss-poor performance.” Bryce chuckles. “I’m sure you know all about that hardship.”

Looking to Bryce, I decide he’s my least-favorite part of this impromptu pit stop. “Can you ever *not* be an ass?”

He slaps his palm against his chest. “I’m the ass?” He laughs again at my expense. “I think you have me and your boy confused.”

“No. You’re both jackasses.”

“That hurts.” His amusement says otherwise. “I’ve been working really hard on being a nice person and shit.”

“Yeah. Keep working on it.” I go to step out of the office, but before I can escape, Bryce is standing in front of me, blocking my path.

“That sounds like a great idea. Have dinner with me, and I’ll work on being a good person. You can give me tips and tricks since you’re such a warm and fuzzy person.”

“First tip, don’t trap people in a room when they’re obviously trying to escape a moron.”

“Noted.” His smile stretches across his face as his eyes drop to my lips. “What’s next?”

“Move,” I tell him flatly and fight the urge to take a step away from him. If I do, he might think I’m backing down. I’m not. I just need away from him and everything Coyote related.

Thankfully, he shifts to the side, but I stupidly don’t make a move to leave before he asks, “So, when are we having the next lesson?”

“Never.” My feet finally cooperate, and I walk out of the office. I’ll send Dad a text telling him I had to leave.

“He really did a number on you.”

The words hit harder than they should. Because they’re true. Rex ruined more than just baseball players for me; he ruined my trust in all men. Ballplayers just happen to be at the top of the list. “Seriously, Bryce. Go away.” I’m tired. I don’t want to spar with him. Usually, it feels good to jab back and forth with our insults. But right now, I feel defeated. “Please. Leave me alone.”

To my surprise, his cocky demeanor lessens, and I watch his face soften. He shifts to stand in front of me, blocking my path again, but thankfully keeps walking backwards as he warily studies me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Something is. What happened?” He turns back and falls into step beside me. “I can give pretty solid advice.”

Not on this. I can’t explain any of it to him or all people. “I’m fine.”

“Parish,” Van Herten yells down the corridor.

“Just escorting Ms. Dundee safely to her vehicle,” Bryce shouts back at Van Herten.

A loud laugh sounds before he yells back, “She could kick your ass, so I’m not sure what good you’re doing her.”

“I’d pay to see that,” someone else shouts.

Bryce leans over and whispers, “I’d pay to see that too.”

“Keep on following me and you won’t have to pay.”

If it was anyone but Bryce, I’d probably have more patience. But this dude has been driving me insane since the moment he arrived in Canaan Falls. He takes every opportunity to torment me during any function, party, banquet, or event I’ve had to attend. Even when I was with Rex, Bryce would throw out an insult at every opening about what a jerk my ex is. So now, his “I told you so” hits even harder. And maybe I’m still embarrassed that he

witnessed my most humiliating, agonizing night of my life.

“Daphne.” His soft voice matches the way his fingers tenderly grip my elbow, the same one Rex had previously grasped. Only this time, I didn’t unconsciously flinch. Because it doesn’t feel invasive like Rex’s touch. But his hand still shouldn’t be on my skin.

I look to Bryce and pull my arm out of his grip and tell him quickly, “Really. Everything is good. Go back to practice before you get in more trouble.” I’m smart enough to know he wasn’t in Dad’s office for a friendly chat.

He finally stops following me, and I hurry out to the parking lot, slip through the side gate, then drop into the safety of my car. When I look at the lot this time, I decide I won’t be back for a while. It’s been over three months since my heart was ripped out and I made an enormous fool of myself. But clearly not long enough. My emotions are already being pulled in too many directions with everything going on at work, so dealing with an ex-boyfriend, an egotistical baseball player, and a sullen dad isn’t an option right now for sure. Good or bad, I just need it all to settle down so I can clear my head.

BRYCE

She takes off and I let her go. She usually tells me to shove it, but this time is different. She gave up too easily. There's something going on with her. And my guess is whatever it is that's bothering her is serious, because it has her sincerely flustered. And I don't think it was me for once.

"Dude, Coach is gonna ream your ass if you keep going after his daughter. He's already been in a mood since all that shit happened over the summer between her and McGraw," Murdock tells me as we walk in the direction of Dundee's office. And my teammate is right. Dundee would be pissed if he knew how many times I've hit on his daughter. Most of it has been in good fun, but all of it has been genuine, even if my delivery method is flawed. I know she'll never return the feeling ... I watched McGraw treat her like shit. So she's spot-on for avoiding any and all of us dipshits.

She deserves better than me, or any other fool around here, but that doesn't stop me from wanting her. All it took was our first meeting where she put me in my place and didn't fall at my feet. It's obvious she's not a clout chaser. She has a better in with the organization through her father than most guys coming in on the roster do. There's no need to use me for likes and follows like the last chick did when she posted a candid shot of me taking a dip minus swim trunks. Everything wasn't showing, but I was exposed enough that I called in by upper management for social media training.

"Parish," Dundee shouts. "My office."

Yeah. I was there, Coach, then followed your daughter down the corridor like a lost puppy. Surprisingly, when I enter his office and sit in the chair opposite him, he simply keeps a watchful eye on me, remaining silent. Damn. Maybe the lecture isn't that bad because I'm dying for him to say something.

Anything.

So, I break the silence. "I'm sorry, Coach."

He remains quiet for another two minutes before he says, "I don't want to hear that you're sorry. I only want to hear why it happened and what you're going to do to make sure it doesn't happen again. *Show me* you're actually sorry and stop flaking out on the team."

Shit. I can't tell him *Sorry I missed practice yesterday, Coach. I was driving back from Houston because I had to help out a friend.* No thanks. So, I go with: "I don't have a good reason because there isn't one. It won't happen again. I won't let it. I'll be here."

"And I'm supposed to take your word for it?"

"Yes," I respond quickly.

"You seem to be the only guy on the roster who enjoys making my job more difficult. Your word doesn't mean shit to me after all the bullshit you've pulled the last few years."

Yeah. Not surprising. I'm not Coach's favorite and don't want to be. Not that it'd ever happen anyways. I'm the screwup, the one he can't depend on. That's my roll. I'm not the shiny, well-behaved pitcher that he has a bond with. I'm the problem child who's good enough on the field to justify dealing with my bullshit off the field. Only, Dundee looks like he's had about enough. I have too. I just want to play and forget about all the other shit.

"Well, that's all I got. My word. And a hell of an arm." I let out a little laugh, but he doesn't find any humor in it.

"There're plenty of other guys who can step onto the mound, play just as well, if not better, and actually show up for practice. Don't forget how many guys would kill to be in your position. If you're not hungry enough for it, someone else will come along and make the choice between you and them seem like a no-brainer."

"I know." Better than anyone. "I'm replaceable. Everyone is. So, pull me from the lineup."

There's plenty of frustration in his expression as he studies me. He's used to my sarcasm. I'm used to his hostility, which has been heightened the last few weeks. But I think we're both still trying to find the boundaries. Even though we've been testing them since day one.

"What were you talking to Daphne about?"

I didn't see that coming. And from his stiff posture and accusing tone, there's no correct answer to the question. I have a few guesses who told him

in the first place, but it doesn't change anything. "Just checking in with her. She hasn't been around here much lately."

"For good reason," he states bluntly, then gives me his listen-here-boy look, "and even if she's here, that doesn't mean she needs you 'checking in with her.'"

Protective. I can understand that, but I have a feeling he's grouping me in with McGraw's ignorant ass. I *can't* get behind that. "Understood." Not that I'm good at following directions, and doubt this time will be any different, but there's something about Daphne that makes me want to be around her, push her buttons, and maybe even get her to yell at me a little more.

"Like you said, everyone is replaceable. Don't forget that." Coach stands from his desk, grabs his phone out of his pocket and leaves me sitting there alone. I wait a few minutes before I stand and join my teammates in the locker room.

"Did Daphne kick your ass? Please tell me I didn't miss the show," Gunner goads as he moves next to me.

"No such luck," I mutter, more disappointed than I should be.

"You're lucky Coach didn't see you chasing her down to beg her to give you a chance. Again."

Okay. So, maybe I haven't kept my flirtations a secret. Ever. Not even when she was with that other dipshit because it gave me so much satisfaction to get under his skin. But like I told McGraw on more than one occasion, if he treated her right, he wouldn't have to worry about me. And when I spot the dickhead following the conversation, I get even more irritated. "I'll get my chance when she realizes we're not all cheating dumbasses."

McGraw is on his feet, heading my direction as I stand in place, watching. He stops in front of me. "Stay away from her."

Gunner wedges between us. "Okay. Time out."

"And what are you going to do if I don't, dipshit?" I ask McGraw with a smirk on my face, because I know there's nothing he could or would do. He's all talk.

"Don't push me." He watches me with what I'm sure is supposed to be an intimidating mug, but it reminds me of a dog who only barks when it's behind a fence.

"Why? Gonna run to Papa Dundee and tell him I hurt your feelings again?" Yeah. Wouldn't doubt it if he runs off again and does just that. He's done it before because Dundee pulled me in for a sit-down when I'd

apparently hit a nerve with McGraw. Coach told me to keep our personal lives out of the clubhouse. Only, it rubbed me the wrong way because it felt like Dundee was taking McGraw's side instead of Daphne's. But my guess is Dundee never knew the full story. Of course McGraw would give him a skewed perception where he's the victim and we're all out to get him.

"Y'all need to cool it," Gunner says, placing a hand on each of us, trying to add some distance.

I don't budge and just tell McGraw, "One day, you're gonna get exactly what you deserve, and I pray I'm the one who serves it to you."

There's a flash of fear on his face. It doesn't last long before he tries to maintain his tough-guy persona. But I saw it. The weak-ass bitch who needs a good lesson in how to not only treat woman, but people in general. He's a trash human to everyone from the equipment manager to the custodian. The only people he treats well are the coaches and upper staff. Only the ones who can benefit him. That told me from day one he's nothing but a piece of shit, and it's why we immediately butted heads even before Daphne was in the picture. Because the true test of a man is how he treats someone who can't do shit for him. And by that measurement, McGraw is the biggest piece of scum on this planet. And that's saying a lot because I've dealt with my fair share of dirtbags.

The remainder of the day isn't much better because I'm constantly wanting to punch the bastard. And things take an even grimmer turn when I get out to the parking lot. I freeze when I see TIME'S UP painted across the driver's side of my truck. A note attached to my window is what really catches my attention.

The team will be better off without you.

I grab it to study the words and picture of me that's attached. There're marks and symbols over my eyes that appears to be red paint. At least it looks like paint ... a red-brown color that reminds me of blood.

“Who’d you piss off now?” Murdock asks as he looks over the damage.

“Who knows.” But they won’t be the last. I’ve endured plenty of threats during my time in the League. Nasty messages telling me how I blew the entire series last season because I shook off one call or how I caused someone to lose money because they made a wager on a game. I’ve heard it all. From how they couldn’t believe the Coyotes kept me on board to how I’d be better off in a hole under the field than on the mound. The remarks usually don’t get to me. This one is no different. It’s nothing more than some lunatic who has nothing better to do.

“Think it was McGraw?” Murdock glances over the parking lot. Most of the players have cleared out. I’m only late because Dundee wanted to give another lecture and I have a feeling Murdock hung back intentionally to make sure I was good after the crap with McGraw today.

“Doubt it. He’s all talk.” Glancing around, I figure I’ll chat with security tomorrow. Give them a heads-up that some overzealous fan made it into the staff lot. Then they’ll be able to check the cameras to see who it was.

Murdock starts to his car as he tells me, “You know that’s not true, right?”

“Thanks,” I shout back to him. I’ve been told I’m worthless plenty enough, but all it does make me want to prove them wrong.

Climbing into the driver’s seat, I toss the note and photograph in the back seat. What a fitting end to a shitty day. And it’s not over yet, because when I push the Engine Start button, nothing happens.

“Fantastic.”

There’s no alert about the key fob being out of range so I didn’t lose it along the way. Must be a dead battery. I pull the hood release and get out of the truck to unlatch it as I notice Murdock pulling out through the gate. Just as I take a look at the battery, I spot headlights in the rear of the lot before I register that it’s an older pickup truck barreling in my direction.

Everything happens so fast, but I instinctually know that truck isn’t going to stop. And they don’t as I dive away just before the truck clips the front bumper of mine.

What the fuck. The truck keeps flying across the lot until it circles around and heads back in my direction. There’s a split second where I debate if I should get in my truck, but that feels like a dead end. Stumbling, I make it to my feet and take off running as fast as I can towards the corridor entrance of the stadium. The rumbling of the engine gets louder behind me, and in my

mind's eye, I envision the worst. I anticipate the impact, but I make it to the door and slam against it as I turn back to see the truck jump onto the sidewalk, taking out a metal sign but veering away from hitting the stone benches that line the front entrance. But I still feel like that won't stop whoever is behind the wheel as I punch in the door code. It unlocks and I tumble into the safety of the building, while tires screech and more destruction sounds from outside.

“What the hell is going on?” Dundee hollers as he approaches.

“I don't know.” At first, I thought maybe it was a fluke. Maybe the gas pedal stuck. Maybe I was seeing things. But when I think about the message left along with the photograph, I realize ... *Time's up*. “Someone wants me dead.”

DAPHNE

“What’s that?” Shaw keeps his coffee mug at his lips as he motions to the report on my screen.

“Just a case file.” It’s the truth ... it’s just not the case file I’m supposed to be looking at. But since Shaw has taken his seat behind his desk that butts up to mine, he can’t see that it’s Higgins’s last few arrest reports. I know I shouldn’t be looking, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to take a peek since I’m now questioning everyone around me. Well, everyone except Shaw, who keeps an amused gaze on me.

“Fine.” I click out of the report, then pull up the cold case we’d decided to take a look at. “Did you find anything that stands out?” I ask.

“Nope. Nothing,” Shaw responds.

I continue reading over the report details until I notice one of the record clerks approaching.

Megan passes a file to Shaw. “Here’re the records you requested.”

She all but stamps the folder with her blood-red lipstick before sauntering away. Shaw makes it more than obvious he’s enjoying watching her do so. When I clear my throat, his amused face meets mine as he innocently asks, “What?”

“You were supposed to be researching our cold case, not her.”

He gets a cocky grin on his face as he utters, “I can do both. I’m that talented,” then gives me a wink to top it off. And I swear if I didn’t know him outside of this flirtatious persona, I’d probably push his chair back and enjoy watching him tumble over onto his inflated head.

“Yeah. Well, I’m going down to check out the evidence box, so you don’t have to focus on Gomez *and* the case simultaneously. Besides, I don’t think

that charm will get you anywhere with him, and it's got to be too crowded in that noggin already." When I pass him, I lightly thump the back of his head with my finger, earning a chuckle from him.

"There's plenty of room up here. Besides, Gomez loves me."

I look back in time to see him pointing at his temple before I roll my eyes and keep walking down the hallway and catch the elevator. Taking it down to the first floor, I then follow the winding corridor that seems never-ending before finally coming to the desk of our evidence room clerk. His sullen demeanor doesn't brighten as he looks over the rim of his thick glasses at me, not saying a word.

I place the case number I wrote on a Post-it in front of him. "I need to check out the evidence box for a case."

When I reach for the log, he grabs it before I can fill out the line. "That case is twenty years old."

"Yes sir. Captain Arnold has me working cold cases."

He does a once-over of me. "What'd you do wrong?" His smug, knowing chortle peeves me, but I wouldn't expect anything different.

"What makes you think this is a punishment?" It is. But it's really not. A case is a case. And these need to be solved just as much as active ones—for the loved ones who are still waiting for answers. But most cold cases are nearly impossible since leads turned up nada and trails have ended.

Gomez isn't buying it though. "Arnold pulls y'all from the action and then sends you on a wild goose chase every time anyone steps out of line." He keeps a lingering stare on me before jotting something on the ledger then pointing to where I need to sign. "Here."

"Thanks, sir." I try to give him a warm smile, but his sourpuss expression doesn't lessen.

"This way." He escorts me down a row with shelves stacked to the ceiling with boxes. I'd be so lost in this place. But Gomez knows exactly where something is without even looking it up. Once we reach a shelf in the far corner, he grabs a box and nods for me to follow him to where a table is set up near his workstation. Once he sets the box on the tabletop, he passes me a pair of rubber gloves then gives me the go-ahead. "Have at it." He begins walking away before adding, "If anyone can crack these, it'd be you."

I'm taken aback by that comment for a few because, coming from Gomez, it's definitely the highest compliment. Just very unexpected. Maybe he is softening a bit. A little. Not much, but anything would help. I laugh to

myself as I pull the gloves on then remove the lid of the box.

This is the part that I hate. Digging through someone's belongings who's no longer alive. Not that it always helps or even makes sense when you hear who and why. The pieces should fit. But sometimes they don't.

I remove a few items, the protective bags crinkling as I examine them through the clear plastic, checking out a necklace and broken charm from it then scan over the inventory list. "That's odd," I mutter to myself and get a bit startled when I get a response.

"What's odd?" Shaw chuckles at the fact that he obviously scared me but says, "Didn't mean to scare you."

I shake off his apology. "There's only one item of clothing here. But the list says there're four."

"Must be a mistake."

Shaw is reaching into the box when Gomez yells, "Gloves, hotshot, or no touching."

"No touching it is." Shaw holds his hands up. "Not sticking around here anyways. Just came to tell you Cap wants to see you in his office."

That does *not* sound good. At all. Especially after our last visit to the captain's office a few days ago. "I'll be right there." Anticipation is worse than facing whatever it is head-on. So, I pack everything back up (per Gomez's instructions) then make my way to the captain's office.

After taking a deep breath, I knock on the door and step into the doorway. "You wanted to see—" The simple word *me* doesn't leave my lips to finish the sentence because of who I spot sitting in the chair.

Bryce Parish.

Why am I terrified to find out the answer the very simple question I have—What in the actual hell is *he* doing here?

BRYCE

I've seen Daphne pissed before. But whatever the level beyond that is, that's what she's at now.

"Have a seat," Arnold instructs her. She doesn't mask her confusion as she hesitates in the doorway for a few seconds. Several beats pass before she has a seat in the chair beside me, her sight locked on her boss who tells her, "I'm assuming you know Mr. Parish."

I see the twitch in her cheek like she's literally biting back her words before she flatly responds, "Yes sir."

"Well, he's acquired a demented fan who tried to murder him with their car. So, it's your lucky day." Arnold claps his hands together. "No more desk duty."

"Excuse me, sir. I'm not understanding." Her movements are tense and quick as she ignores my presence and stares to her boss. Something tells me he's getting as much of a kick out of this as I am. He'd spoken very highly of her, but anyone can see she needs to take a breath before she passes out.

"Until we can figure out who wants Mr. Parish dead, you'll be on his protection detail." Arnold grabs a pen and jots something down on the paper on his desk.

"Sir, I'm still not following." Her voice is steady, but her posture is rigid and anxious, like she's ready to bolt out of the chair at any second.

"Keep him in one piece. That's your new assignment."

Damn, never thought I'd be glad my life was in danger, but this is great. Her full focus will have to be on me, which lights me up since mine has already been on her. "You get to hang out with me. What could be better?" Not her idea of a good time I'm guessing, because her head slowly rotates,

her eyes on me as she stays silent. Maybe the attempted murder by some deranged person is the least of my worries.

“There’s extra security in place during the ball games and around his residence, and you’re going to shadow him.” Arnold reclines in his chair. “It makes sense for it to be you. No one will think twice about you being at the ballpark. You know the place like the back of your hand. And we need a body on the inside because there’s a chance it’s someone affiliated with the team somehow since they gained access to what should’ve been a secure area. Could be anyone from the management to the vendors to a fellow teammate. And you can go in there without sending up flares to the media.”

She hurriedly says, “I rarely visit the field anymore.”

“So, you stopped by yesterday to see me then, right?”

Ignoring me she adds, “I don’t think my dad is going to happy about this.”

“He said there’s no one he trusts more.” Arnold folds his hands over his desk. “Can I follow his lead?”

“Of course.” I pat Daphne’s knee. “Daph is exceedingly trustworthy.”

There’s the jaw clench again. But she doesn’t conceal her distain as much when she says, “Sir, with all due respect, I’m not the person for this. I’m good at my desk. You really should find someone else for the job.”

Arnold takes an assessment of her for a second before asking, “You’re telling me I can’t trust you? That you’re not up for this assignment or accomplishing the task at hand?”

“The task isn’t the problem.” She glares at me. “He is. I’ll probably end up maiming him myself before anyone else gets the opportunity.”

Laughing, I watch as she gets further exasperated. “I’d die a happy man.”

“Captain”—she takes a deep inhale on the word and closes her eyes—“there has to be someone better suited for this assignment.”

“Is anyone else’s dad a Coyotes’ coach?”

She flinches like she’s been struck by the words, and it doesn’t take much to figure out why when she asks, “So you’re only assigning me to this case because of my dad?”

“No. Your dad being on staff allows you privileges at the stadium that others won’t have access to, sure. But at the end of the day, what’s important is keeping Bryce safe. And that I know you’ll do to the best of your ability. You’re a damn good detective, Dundee, and whether you want to admit it or not, you’ll unquestionably be able to spot anything out of the ordinary at the

field before most—it's your area of expertise.”

“Yep. You do know the game. And still owe me some pointers on my form.” Probably shouldn't have added that, but I'd rather her be irritated with me than witness the dejected expression that has yet to leave her face for another minute.

“I'm sure there will be plenty of time for that since you'll be spending every moment together.” Arnold waves his hand in dismissal. “Cahill has all the details and will brief the both of you at Parish's residence. He's ensuring the apartment is secure before the two of you arrive. Dundee, your colleagues know you're on special assignment, but no one is privy to *all* the details, even Shaw. Keep it that way. We can't rule out a connection within the force.”

She agrees then stands and walks out. I quickly thank Captain Arnold before following her across the police station's lobby. Abruptly, she stops and turns to look at me as she takes a step, putting us nose to nose. “Get in my way, and I will shoot you myself.”

Damn she's gonna make this so much fun. “Promise, Daph? Because I'm not good with empty promises.”

From the look she gives me, I'm certain she wants to make good on her promise right now and isn't far away from it.

DAPHNE

This has to be a joke. There's no way this is real. Maybe it's reality TV gone wrong, and someone is going to jump out and reveal they've been recording me the entire time and it's all a big prank. *Please*. It would make more sense than what is actually happening as I ride the elevator up the high rise and step off on the twenty-first floor. The one Bryce's luxury apartment is on.

Silently, I follow behind Cahill as Bryce opens the door and motions for us to walk in. His smirk really makes this worse. He's enjoying every bit of this—particularly the part where he's working my nerves and knows I can't get away from him.

"The building is secure enough. It shouldn't be a concern when you are here. But we will have an officer posted downstairs round the clock. The stadium will have extra measures. And away games will be a little more challenging, but Captain Arnold has already reached out to Hawks management for the next out-of-town games. Everything should be set before y'all fly out."

"Wait. I'm flying to Georgia with him?" I point in the direction of the sofa where Bryce has plopped down.

"Yes. Until the threat is neutralized, you go where he goes."

I hear a little chuckle from Bryce before he says, "That sounds like a really good plan."

There's no point in responding to the fool. I just maintain a pleading look on Cahill. "This isn't a good idea. I'd rather keep watch on the perimeter. Another officer can stay up here. I'll gladly patrol." All night. Away from Bryce.

"That's not going to fly with the captain. He made himself clear that

you're the one assigned to Parish and we're to provide backup."

"Too bad. You're stuck with me," Bryce adds to further my misery.

"I can't do this," I take the moment to look at the smirking idiot on the couch. "With him. He'll be better off with someone else protecting him."

"Do you really want to refuse an assignment from your superior after what happened with the Thompson case?"

Ouch. The fact that he's aware of what happened means the entire station knows how Shaw and I botched the Zimmerman arrest. Everyone's been told we blew it with bad procedure instead of what we'd actually done: blown up an undercover sting.

Cahill is the last person on the force to spread or listen to gossip, which is probably why he was assigned to this detail. I motion for Cahill to follow me into the hallway, because I really don't want to have this conversation in front of Bryce. Once we're in private, I close my eyes and take a much-needed breath.

"That's the problem. I just messed up. This will be another mark against me. I can't do this. Not with him." I fling a hand towards the door that the lug is sitting behind. "He's an overgrown child who goes out of his way to push my buttons. Not to mention my dad ... we have enough issues between us without me tagging along with one of his players to the field." Especially considering the Rex drama—and that was recent enough, and things still feels way disjointed between Dad and me. But I can't blame him. I'm the one who made the scene. Even if Rex deserved it, I shouldn't have let my personal feelings override my rational thinking. Though I still believe Rex deserved his clothes to be strewn on the sidewalk below the hotel room's balcony after I caught him having sex with some random woman. Showing up at his hotel room during the team's last leg of a two-week stretch of road games was supposed to be a fun surprise for him. And boy, it sure was surprising. For both of us.

"Your father understands."

"You talked to my dad about this?"

"Briefly, when we had a quick meeting at the stadium about the extra coverage and reviewed what little surveillance footage there was available. More cameras are being installed, and plenty of extra measures are now in place. The GM wants Parish safe, and the head coach was adamant about it being you who 'tags along' at the stadium. They have a point. You're best for the job with all your knowledge and being a familiar face around the

stadium ... The team doesn't want the news to get out, but they want their player safe. They're paying for the extra manpower, and they had very specific requests, which included you. So, I'd suggest you figure out how to get the job done. Because that's all it is. Another assignment that you can handle. Don't let anything get in your way." He lifts a hand to give me an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Backup is downstairs for the first shift. Call the cell number I gave you and you'll get whoever is on duty. I'll be in touch."

I nod. Unable to speak because I feel like I'm about to cry. And I don't cry. At least not often. But this feels like I'm being set up to fail.

"Hey, kid," Cahill says. "When it's too much, give me a call and we'll get it figured out. And we *will* figure it out. At the end of the day, the job is to keep Parish safe. That's the only thing that matters."

"Keeping him safe is the easy part," I mutter to Cahill.

He knowingly chuckles. "Truth. Even if you have to resort to some Duct tape." He gives me a joking wink but doesn't know how tempting it is to hog-tie Bryce and leave him in a closet until this is over.

"I might do just that."

He laughs then waves a quick goodbye before stepping on the elevator. I wait a few seconds before I go to the door and rap my knuckles against it before entering.

Bryce still has his signature smirk as he tells me, "No need to knock. You live here now." He moves to kitchen as he calmly continues his asinine joke. "It is a little sudden. I thought we'd have a few steps between. Like dinner, maybe a date or two ... and I figured I'd have to ask your dad's permission first."

He really is going to make this a million times harder than it has to be. "Stop it, Bryce. Just let me do my job and get back to my life." Away from him and everything baseball-related. "Can you tell me anything else at all about the vehicle or anything else you remember from that night?"

"Nope. Everything Cahill relayed to you covers what I recall."

"Great." Because it wasn't much information to go off of other than a white older model pickup with dark tinted windows that will have some damage to the passenger side fender.

"So, what happened on the Thompson case?"

"None of your business." I clench my teeth together to avoid adding any extra words to that.

“I’m guessing that’s what led to the desk duty thing Arnold mentioned?”

“Again. None of your business.”

He walks over to me and stops a foot away. There’s a different, less-smug vibe about him as he says, “We’re going to be together for a while. So, if you want to talk about it, because I’m guessing that’s what was bothering you the other day, I’ll listen.”

I really hate how sincere he sounds. It reminds me how well some people can lie. Because there’s no way Bryce Parish wants to sit and listen to my problems. His offer is probably a means of getting some ammo to use against me. Playing up the nice guy card since his egotistical, cocky personality has failed him. But new flash, all of his performances will fail with me.

I take a step towards him but leave a little space. “I’m here because I don’t have a choice. The only thing we will talk about is how to not get you killed. And it will make my job much easier if you don’t give me reasons to want to strangle you.” A slight smirk moves across his lips. It’s a joke to him. “Really, Bryce. This is my career, not to mention *your* life, on the line. Please don’t make this harder on me than it has to be.”

Something I said must’ve clicked because his smirk fades. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Doubt that’ll be helpful, but hopefully it’s not just lip service. “Thank you.” I glance around and realize no one is going to jump out and tell me it’s all a hoax. “I’m going to grab my bag.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. It’s safer for you to stay here.” I hope. The building does seem more secure than most. The residents can only access their own floor with key fobs. That narrows down who has access where. But I’m still waiting on information about Bryce’s neighbors on this floor, because right now, I wouldn’t know if they’re supposed to be here or not. Between the concierge downstairs and the added security measures inside and outside the building, it should make this place a little more insular, provide me a little more peace of mind, but it only gives me a false sense of safety. “Please stay in here, though, and don’t go wandering around.”

“Alrighty. I’m gonna shower and get in bed. Do you sleep on the right side or left?”

“I’m not sleeping in the bed with you.”

“But who’s going to protect me if someone breaks into the apartment?”

He can’t be serious. “Me. Just yell.”

“It’d be much more convenient if you were already in the bed next to me though. Right?”

So much for not making this harder than it has to be. “No, because I’d smother you in your sleep to avoid another day of this.”

“We haven’t even had a full day together yet.”

“Exactly, and I’m already considering what my next career will be when I resign.”

He laughs but it’s not condescending or arrogant. “Now that is a lie.” His face turns determined as he says, “There’s no way you’d back down and give up. You’re not made like that.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “You don’t know anything about me.” Though he does have a valid point. I’m not the person who walks away. Especially from someone whose life is in danger. Even if I threaten him myself, I don’t actually want him to get hurt.

He bends down, whispering in my ear, “Then I guess it’s a good thing we’re going to spend a lot of time together.”

No. It is *not* a good thing. It’s bad. Extremely bad. Particularly because even after he walks away, I still feel him smothering me. They could’ve assigned me to protect anyone else in this city, even another egotistical ballplayer, and I’d be grateful. Why oh why did it have to be him?

BRYCE

“Where’s Daphne?” Because it’s surely not her propped up at my kitchen table reading my newspaper.

“She went out for a few.”

“Gotcha.” So, at least it sounds like she plans on returning. I really thought she might have had enough and quit on me. But I know her well enough to know how stubborn and determined she is. Both of which mean she will stick with this for the long haul. Is it crazy that I’m hoping the deranged individual won’t be caught anytime soon?

Heading into the kitchen, I wait for the automatic coffee maker to finish up with the programmed cycle before filling my mug and taking a seat at the table.

“I’m Freeman.” He keeps his eyes on the paper as he flips the page.

“Alrighty, Freeman. I’m Bryce and that’s my newspaper.”

He finally looks at me then glances over the paper before passing it to me. “I didn’t realize anyone actually reads the paper anymore.”

“I do.” I grab out the only section I need then pass the rest of the paper back to him. “And obviously you do too.”

“Not usually. Just trying to pass the time.”

It can’t pass fast enough. A few minutes later, there’s a light, synchronized knock on the door before the lock clicks and it pushes open. Daphne steps over the threshold with a bit of surprise on her face as she hurries inside then locks the door behind her. She looks to the newspaper nabber and gives him a breathy, “Thanks, Freeman.”

“No problem.” Freeman stands and walks to the door where Daphne still stands. They discuss something I’m unable hear, but I’m less focused on

what they're saying and much more focused on Daphne herself. I wouldn't mind hearing her breathlessly say my name. Shit. Not the right thought on any level.

"Good morning, buttercup," I tell her after Freeman leaves.

She drops into the seat across from me and drinks down a gulp of water.

"Morning."

"Hit the gym already?" I ask, my attention focused way too much on her mouth.

"No, just went for a quick run." She hurriedly rises from her seat and moves to the kitchen to refill her water jug.

"I would've gone with you if you'd woken me up." Gladly.

"Not a good idea. And I like to run alone."

Laughing, I focus back on the newspaper. "Of course you do."

She moves beside the table, her already annoyed stare on me. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"That I'm sure you do a lot of things alone in order to illustrate your I-don't-need-anyone attitude." I should stop there, but I make the mistake of finishing my thought. "But you have to know some activities are better enjoyed and much more fulfilling with ... company."

Her eyes dart away from me as she shakes her head. "You're such a jackass. One-track mind ... and thinking with the wrong head, as usual."

I smile, watching as she looks away. "I never said what activities, but it's nice to know where your head is at once you've cleared it out."

When her eyes return to me, she doesn't look very relaxed. And she looks even more rattled when I add, "But if you want company for *any* activities, I'm available."

Daphne has a tight expression as she takes a seat across from me, her back leaning against the chair as she keeps a pissy stare on me.

So, I take the moment to go on, "You know, there's a gym on the seventh floor if you want to work out. I've only used it a handful of times because the stadium has more equipment. But I'd understand if you didn't want to work out there with *Rexy*."

Her arms fold over her chest, her aggravated stare pinned on me. "Rules. Here they are." She leans forward, her palms against the table. "One—remain professional. The only discussions that will take place between us should regard your safety. At no time will you mention my ex or my father unless they're trying to kill you and your life is in immediate danger. No snide

comments or suggestive remarks. Second—”

“Damn. That’s all one rule? You’re taking the fun out of this crazy stalker operation.”

“Second, don’t be an ass and let me do my job. This isn’t a joke, Bryce.”

For a minute, I decide to not give her a hard time and tell her sincerely, “I know. But that doesn’t mean we have to be strictly business around the clock.”

“Yes, it does.”

I know she won’t give in, so I pick up my pencil and keep working on the crossword puzzle. It’s much easier to solve than her. “Twelve across. Five letters. Clue is ‘sees eye-to-eye.’”

“Pain in the ass.”

“That’s way too many letters,” I tell her as I jot down the answer *agree*.

“What time do you want to head to the stadium?” she asks.

“Not in a hurry. Unless you are.”

“Nope, not at all.”

It’s safe to say she’s not looking forward to tagging along at the ballpark, but I can’t admit how excited I am to have her around. “Five down. ‘Blank we all.’ Five letters.”

Standing, she doesn’t acknowledge my clue. “I’m going to shower. Don’t leave the apartment before I get out.”

“No prob. Let me know if you need a hand,” I add, just to push her buttons a little more. Then I jot down the answer *aren’t* and continue working on it as I drink my coffee.

It’s about ten minutes later when Daphne walks out, dressed in a Coyotes T-shirt and leggings. “No suit today? I mean, I’m not complaining”—*at all*—“but you usually have your work attire on.”

“I’m not supposed to look like I’m working, remember? Blending in.” She points to the Coyote logo stamped on the fabric across her chest before brushing her hands through her wet hair for a few seconds then she stops and impatiently asks, “What?”

Getting up from the table, I walk over to her. The smell of my soap on her skin is heavenly as I whisper in her ear, “You won’t blend in no matter how hard you try.”

I head to my room before I do something stupid like bury my nose in her neck or drop to my knees and beg her to give me a chance. She’s not exactly where I’m at, but there have been times where I thought I sensed her wanting

the same thing as me. But I can't act on it until I know for sure. I won't cross that line. But damn, she's not making it easy ... because there's nothing professional about my feelings for her. Never has been. Not from the moment I laid eyes on her. Then, getting to know her when she was helping out at the ballpark did nothing but increase my desire to be near her. And now, I get that opportunity. I just need to chill before I blow it completely.

Showering and getting dressed is the best thing I can do to keep from doing something stupid. We still have a while before I'm required to be at the field. And if I'm honest, I'd probably go in a little earlier had she not been here with me. But right now, I want to be selfish with her and keep her all to myself for a little while longer.

DAPHNE

The closer I get to the stadium, the harder my heart thumps against my chest. And no matter how many deep breaths I take, I still can't seem to catch my breath. This isn't a big deal. It's a job. A task I've been given. It just so happens that my ex and my dad work there too.

As I steer through the side gate of the ballpark, I find a parking spot and pull into it. I clutch the steering wheel. I'd been here days ago and had sworn I wouldn't be back anytime soon. And here I am with this place on my daily agenda for the unforeseeable future.

"Were we gonna head inside? Or just watch the place from out here? It is the scene of the crime."

Bryce Parish is not going to make this transition any smoother, but I must at least try to get him to cooperate. "As far as everyone outside of the Coyotes organization knows, I'm just helping out while I'm on vacation. The staff was briefed about extra security measures, but don't let your guard down with anyone."

"Not even your dad?" Bryce asks seriously, then jokingly adds, "Though with how temperamental he's been, it wouldn't be a stretch that he wants to kill me. He *was* the one who appeared first after I discovered my truck."

Everything is a joke to this fool. "Seriously, Bryce. Just let me do my job so I can get back to my real life." Away from all things Coyote.

He gives the stadium a once-over as he exhales, and there's two seconds where I think he'll take this (and me) seriously. But then he opens his mouth. "You know you're gonna miss me after this is over."

"Like a toothache." As my dad always says.

Bryce laughs in response, and we both get out of the car and head inside.

We barely make it into the corridor before I spot Van Herten waving us in his direction. Falling into step behind him, the walk to his office is definitely more nerve-racking than the drive over, even if the head coach has a smile as he takes a seat behind his desk. “The circumstances are unfortunate, but I’m happy you’re gonna be around, Daphne.”

“Me too,” Bryce adds cheerfully.

There’s a sharp knock on the door before it flies open. Dad steps in then closes it behind him. His eyes look everywhere but at me. And it feels like shit.

“Everyone who needs to know does.” Van Herten looks to me. “Just give me a shout if there’s anything else you need.”

A different ballplayer to protect? “Yes sir.”

“Do you have anything, Dundee?” Dad shakes his head. “Well, let’s make sure this goes off without a hitch. Glad to have you back, Daphne.”

I want to say “I’m not back” but instead respond with a quick and simple thanks before we step out. Dad takes off, clearly in a hurry to get away. I can’t work like this. If I’m concentrating on him, I won’t be able to focus on protecting Bryce.

“Dad.” He stops and turns to face me but doesn’t say anything. “Can we talk for a second?” I ask as Bryce stops beside me. I look his way. “Alone.”

His mouth stretches into a grin as he holds his hands up. “I’m picking up what you’re laying down.” And he continues walking on before turning to look back at me. “But I hope there’s no psycho around the corner.”

Yep. Still not sure if I’ll strangle him before anyone else has the chance to get to him. But I turn my attention to Dad. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want this assignment, but I didn’t have a choice.”

“Because you screwed up on the job?” he flatly asks.

Damn. That stings. And how did the news travel all the way to him?

“Yes. I did. But that’s not why I didn’t have a choice. They picked me because of you. So please don’t hold it against me.”

“I don’t. Opposite in fact. I hold myself responsible for whatever happens to you because I lugged you alongside me to this place throughout your whole childhood.” He takes a look back to Van Herten’s closed door then back to me. “There’s a lot of disarray and tomfoolery causing distractions off the field this season, and it’s affecting everyone. But there’s no one I trust more to keep one of my guys safe. I just need them to keep their heads in the game, and with all the past baggage, this isn’t going to help.”

Past baggage. He means the aftermath of Rex's indiscretion and my outburst—but Dad still seems worried about Rex's comfort. "It's not your fault. I wanted to be here. And trust me. I'm going to stay as far away from Rex as possible."

Dad remains silent for a few seconds, his eyes finally meeting mine as he bluntly states, "McGraw isn't the one I'm concerned about."

Me either. I've faced some of the scariest guys in the city, had bullets flying at me on more than one occasion, had suspects pull knives, screwdrivers, and even a box cutter to try to evade arrest. So why does this feel like the hardest assignment yet?

BRYCE

Coach rounds the corner first. His sight on me, he states, “Get to the field.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” When he stops and glances back to me, I feel his anger without him speaking a word. When Daphne appears seconds later, Dundee breaks his hard stare and continues walking away.

“He was a drill sergeant of a father, right?” I ask teasingly, but she doesn’t say anything. Peeking over at her, I see the defeated expression on her face. Damn it. I know I’m making her job difficult, but I don’t want to make her life hard. I stop, reaching gently for her forearm. “Daphne, are you good?”

She looks flustered. “Yes. I’m good.”

When she goes to step around me, I shift to block her path and bend down to tell her, “I sure hope you’re a better cop than you are a liar.”

“Hope you’re a better ballplayer than a human being,” she huffs and walks past me.

I’m a step behind her when I admit, “Definitely a better ballplayer.”

“Yes, agreed,” she replies.

“So, you think I’m a good pitcher?”

“Just a good *player*. You all are.” From the muttering under her breath and her stiff posture, I know she’s not talking about my on-field performance.

“Yeah. I’m not sure we’re talking about the same game.”

“We’re not.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small device that resembles a key fob. “Since I can’t shadow you when you’re in the locker room, keep this on you. It sends a signal to my phone to let me know you’re in trouble.” She passes me the device as I study it. “Oh, like *The Bodyguard*.” When I meet her eyes, I spot her confusion. “You know, he gave her the

thing to push the button. But don't jump in front of me to take any bullets. That's much more painful than it looks in the movies."

"Do you take anything seriously?"

"Yes. My crossword puzzles. Still trying to figure out ten across. 'Fester and scar.' Six letters."

Her jaw clenches as she instructs me. "Rule three. Do *not* push the button unless it's a life-and-death emergency. Like a bullet is about to fly at you, not because you just want to remind me that you're a pain in the ass."

Before I can respond, she hurries down the corridor towards the field.

I trail behind her and watch as several staff members walk up to her. Smiling, hugging her, generally welcoming her back. And she's returning their sentiments. She looks happy, in her element, the complete opposite of how she seems when I speak to her. Maybe my bonehead tactics aren't the best, but I never had any luck getting through to her any other way.

"So, Daphne really is here to be your keeper?" Lynch asks as I try to focus. I'll be on the mound in a few hours and really need to have a good game so I can get in Dundee's good graces ... or at least back to him tolerating me.

"Until further notice."

"Yeah. Looks like McGraw is already trying to pry himself back in her life. He needs to leave her the hell alone."

When I look over, her smile—her entire demeanor—has shifted. She looks upset, miserable, and annoyed all at once. Even more than when I'm the one bothering her, and that's saying a lot.

"I'll be right back," I tell Lynch as I head straight for Daphne. When her eyes meet mine, I see fear, maybe panic. But why do I feel like they're pleading with me to save her? I can't hardly help myself, but I'll do whatever I can to protect her.

"Rexy, aren't you supposed to be in the bullpen warming up? I'm betting a dry hump is in your future." I lean over and tell Daphne, "He doesn't get much on-field action. He gets all hot and bothered in the bullpen ... and then ... nothing. Oof. So close and yet so far."

"We're having a private conversation. Can you back the hell off?"

It's taking everything I have not to haul him over the wall by his shirt. But I'm already on thin ice with Dundee. "Nah. Daphne and I have more pressing matters to discuss." I look to her. "Did you want to grab a bite to eat later or just pick something up and take it home?" If I make it until then,

because she looks like she's about to murder me right here. At least she does after her initial shock wears off after a few seconds.

"How about you focus on the game instead?"

"I'm trying"—and it's the truth—"but you've got me a bit distracted."

She shakes her head and walks over to the dugout to speaking with Barlowe. I see her slowly loosening up, her smile returning. And I know it has to do with her not being near me or her dickhead ex who's lurking just to my left.

"Stay away from her."

"Can't." Another truth. "Though I'd suggest the same to you. She obviously doesn't want you near her."

He laughs. "Like she wants you around. She hates all ballplayers, Parish."

It pisses me off because there's plenty of truth to it. But unlike that dipshit, I wasn't into taking an opportunity to screw her over. "Doesn't matter who had her, it matters who gets to keep her." But I don't think Daphne will ever allow herself to be vulnerable again. And I don't blame her.

DAPHNE

I've attended so many Coyotes games in my lifetime, I've lost count. But this one is different. For starters, I can't just sit back and cheer for my team. This time, I'm too busy watching everything *but* the game. I continuously scan every little thing from the staff to the fans to the vendors walking around. Anything that could pose a threat. And there's no way I can watch it all. So, my eyes find Bryce more than not, whether he's on the mound or in the dugout, and this is one of those annoying times where those dark, deep-brown eyes staring back at me are accompanied by a sexy smile.

I point to the field and his smile grows. Thankfully, it's time for him to take the mound so there's no choice but for him to focus on the field as he jogs out. It's the bottom of the fourth in a scoreless game, but the trend ends quickly when a batter hits a home run with two on base.

When Bryce walks off the mound with our opponents up by three, I can see the disappointment in him as he steps down into the dugout. Dad looks pissed as he tells him something then walks away, but not before he points in my direction.

Bryce looks less than concerned as he glances to me, a smug expression on his face. I resume watching the crowd and do my best to not look into the dugout or at the mound for the remainder of the game. Bryce doesn't return to the game after the sixth when Murdock takes over. Thankfully, the Coyotes are able to put five runs on the board, so we capture the win by the time it's all over.

As the fans clear out, I make my way into the dugout and follow behind Bryce until he enters the locker room. It bothers me when he's out of sight, but Dad and a few others know to keep an eye out for trouble.

“Daphne.” I hear a familiar voice and turn to see Cahill. “Stadium is clear for the most part. There’re a few stragglers, and the parking lot is still backed up, but we’re going to head out if you don’t need us anymore.”

I need them to take over now, so I don’t have to go sleep at his place again. “Thanks, I’m good. I have it from here.”

I’m waiting for Bryce to come through the door but am shocked when I spot Dad. He steps up in front of me, hesitating for a few seconds. “What’d you think of the game?”

The question catches me a bit off guard. Dad hasn’t asked me a baseball-related question since everything went to hell with Rex. “Good game from what I saw. I was trying to focus on my task.”

“Yeah. It could’ve been a better game, but your *task* was more focused on you than the hitters.” Dad pauses before he asks, “Is there something going on between the two of you?”

I can’t believe he’s asking me this. “Other than me trying to keep him alive? No.”

Dad takes a calculated look at me; one I’ve seen way too many times growing up. “I’m happy to hear that.”

He sure doesn’t look happy. And that look gets even more sour when the door swings open and Bryce strolls out and throws his arm over my shoulder. “We’re headed home. See ya tomorrow, Pops.”

Before I can respond, Bryce is basically dragging me along the corridor. I’m almost thankful to be out of the awkward conversation. *Almost* because our exit is only going to leave my father thinking there definitely is something between us. But there’s not. There can’t be.

“Why the hell did you do?” Shoving against this rib cage, he finally releases me.

“Do what?” He gives me his grin that says *I’m trying to appear innocent, but I know exactly what I did wrong*. “We are heading home, right? Or did you want to go grab something to eat?”

“This isn’t a field trip of fuckery, Bryce. I’m here because someone wants you dead.”

“Other than you?” He laughs then appears less entertained. “Sorry. Just looked like it was an intense conversation, so I figured I’d give you an out.”

“I don’t want an out.” Well, I want an out from this assignment, an out from getting questioned by my father. But I don’t want Bryce trying to come to my rescue for sure. “But if you want to do me a favor, at least pretend to

pay attention to your job and the actual game you're pitching in, so *I* don't get a lecture about your performance on the field."

"Damn. Still getting lectured by Daddy. That has to suck."

The comment completely rubs me the wrong way—not that there's a right way to take that. "And I'm sure you get lectures daily about your behavior."

His arrogance is on overload as he turns a cheeky grin to me. "Yep. But I get paid to listen to his bitching. What's your reason for still taking it?"

"Rule two, remember? 'Don't be an ass.' So could you not for like five seconds?"

He holds up his hand, his fingers curling in one by one as he counts down five seconds. "I think you're still wanting Daddy's approval."

I take a step forward, brushing my chest against his. "I think you need to mind your own goddamn business before I hand you over to whatever lunatic is out to get you."

Instead of backing away, or having a lick of self-preservation, he simply bends down, moving his mouth closer to mine, as he whispers, "You wouldn't do that. And not because of me, but because you won't fail. You can't; you have to be perfect no matter what it costs you."

I back away, because he's too close. And it feels like a weak move. But I can't handle his judgments, because maybe there is some truth to them. I do want my father's approval, but I obviously don't want this bonehead rubbing my own issues in my face. "Just stay in your lane and stop making this harder than it has to be."

I turn to walk away, but he hurries past me. "Oh, it is hard. Trust me."

My feet halt in place as he continues walking. And it takes every ounce of strength not to run in the opposite direction and just continue walking behind him. And I don't bother reminding him of my first rule. Because I already know it's impossible for him to remain professional.

We're out in the parking lot, almost to my car, when I see it. A person running in my peripheral. In two seconds, I'm pissed at myself over how I let my feelings get the best of me and have let my guard down. I was too worried about being angry at him that I forgot about protecting him. And I go full force because he's right. I can't fail. I can't let anything happen to him.

BRYCE

“Get down!” she hollers before rushing past me and colliding with someone. My first instinct is to jump in and grab her, pull her away from whatever she’s running headfirst into. Anything to help her.

But I quickly recognize the guy she tackles to the ground. I’m speechless as I stand and watch as she swiftly manages to get his arm pinned behind his back, his face pushed against the concrete.

“What the hell is going on? I didn’t do anything,” Jasper shouts. “Bryce, help me.”

That’s when Daphne’s eyes dart to mine, her surprise at the new development obvious, and I actually feel bad for letting it get this far. Even more so when she asks, “Do you know him?”

“Yeah. He’s my best friend.”

“Best friend?” she repeats like she’s trying to accept the information as her eyes study Jasper while she keeps him restrained on the ground.

He looks utterly conquered, and I can’t help but laugh as he asks her, “Can you get off of me now?”

She takes a second before she releases him, stands, and takes a few steps back from him and closer to me. “How’d you get in this parking lot? It’s the staff lot.”

Jasper sluggishly stands and rubs his elbow. “One of the guys let me in.”

“Who?”

“Shit. I don’t know.” Jasper brushes off his jeans. He moves his arm back and forth. “I’m great by the way.”

Daphne grabs her cell phone out her pocket. “I have to make a call. I’ll be right over here.” She moves a couple parking spaces away, her phone at her

ear as her eyes constantly scan over the area.

“Damn, she’s a spitfire,” Jasper huffs, and when I look at him, he’s eyeing her a little too much. “What is she, like your bodyguard?”

Stepping to impede his line of sight to her, I say, “Yes. What are you doing here?”

“Just drove in for the weekend.”

“No, you didn’t. Why are you here?” Because he doesn’t drive in from Houston just to hang out in Canaan Falls for the weekend.

Jasper lets out a frustrated breath, and I’m not shocked at all by his next words. “Eliza told me what happened.”

“Big shocker.” Of course Jasper’s sister called him to keep shit stirred up.

“It’s her decision, man.”

“It’s the wrong one. But I’m staying out of it. Let her screw up her life. But remind her why I’m not around when she decides to grow a pair and leave the son of a bitch behind.” And God I pray she does.

Jasper shifts on his heels, his mind already made up about who he wants to blame everything on. “It’s your fault she’s mixed up with him to begin with.”

That hurts. It’s also true. And I don’t need him to remind me. “I’m aware. Thanks.”

“Shit. I do have a plan though. It’s risky. Like she’ll-hate-me-forever risky. But maybe it’ll get her away from him and the drugs,” Jasper mutters under his breath. “Look—”

Before Jasper goes into the details, I spot Daphne making her way back to us as she ends whatever call she was on. I really don’t want her involved in this conversation. “It’s fine.”

Jasper gets the hint and stops talking.

Daphne is aware there’s something she wasn’t meant to hear as we both look to her. “Am I interrupting?”

“No. We’re done,” I tell her, then look to Jasper. “Call me if you need any reinforcement.”

“Yeah.” Jasper looks like there’s much more he wants to say, but it’ll all have to wait. The entire situation has cost me enough headache already. And I don’t want Daphne hearing about it. She already knows I’m a screwup, the last thing I want to do is go into detail about how my best friend’s little sister, who happens to be my ex, is in a bad situation all because of me. And there’s not a damn thing any of us can do to help her.

DAPHNE

“How’s it going?” Shaw asks from the other end of the phone line.

If it were anyone else, I would lie and give a generic answer; anything to avoid the truth. But it’s my partner, and we don’t lie to each other. “Terrible. I’m not sure if I can handle this one.”

“Bullshit. You’ve got this.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.” Between Dad, Bryce, and me tackling his best friend in the parking lot, it feels like it’s already spiraling out of control. I did apologize to the guy and to Bryce for the takedown, but I still don’t understand how he easily got into a restricted area.

“Eh. I have no doubt you’ll ace this one. But is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yes.” I push the papers to the side of the bed and search for the one I was just looking at. “Can you pull an old report and email it to me, please?”

“Still working that cold case during your current assignment?”

I look over the files and papers spread across the bed that I’ve been searching through for the last hour. “Just taking a glance at it while I have some downtime.” More like hiding in the guest bedroom and using it to occupy my mind and distract me from the baseball player on the other side of the door. “Are you ready for the case number?”

“Yep.” I hear Shaw fumbling with some papers before I relay the information to him. “On it. Don’t forget, Daphne, you got this. It’s a piece of cake.”

I tell him thanks before disconnecting the call, then I focus back on the cold case. It’s about thirty minutes later when there’s a light knock on the door. When I open it and spot Bryce, he’s freshly showered, in a T-shirt and

cotton pajama pants, holding a bowl of popcorn. “Up for a movie?”

I glance down at my watch and realize it’s not as late as I’d thought but still later than most people would be starting a movie. “No thanks. I have some work to catch up on.”

When I motion to the bed, Bryce peeks past me. “Detective work. Solving the crime one clue at a time.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I’m good at puzzles, maybe I can help.” He moves past me and sits on the edge of the bed as he puts the bowl of popcorn on the nightstand, then proceeds to pick up the nearest paper to him. “Oh, this looks much more complicated.”

“I thought you had a movie to watch?”

“Nah. It can wait. Seen it a million times.”

“Then why are you watching it again?”

“Because it’s one of my favorites.” Bryce holds up another paper. “Did she really get stabbed on Halloween?”

I grab the paper from him. “Yes. And this is confidential.”

“Who am I going to tell?” He leans back against the headboard and stares at me. Him on the bed is doing nothing for my concentration.

“Maybe a movie break is a good idea.”

“Are you sure? This seems much more important.” He eyes another stack of papers on the bed. “How long have you been researching this one?”

“Just since I got benched a few days ago.”

“That’s the punishment for insubordination in your world? Solving the forgotten crimes?”

“They are not forgotten. Just went cold or hit a snag somewhere, but we want to close these cases as much as the families need and deserve answers.”

“Still doesn’t seem right that y’all only work on them when you’re in trouble.”

“It’s not the only time. We just don’t have the manpower to devote the time needed for every case.” I go to explain more, then realize ... “Why am I telling you this?”

He looks around the empty bedroom. “Because you’re stuck with me.”

“Don’t remind me.” Not that I forgot, I’m more than aware, especially as he looks so comfortable perched against the headboard. And he should. He’s in his element, his space after all. “Just don’t mix up the papers. And understand that everything is confidential.”

“Got it.”

I want to reiterate that it's even a respect thing to the victims to handle their personal details with care. But I feel like these instructions are lost on Bryce.

“Any witnesses?” he asks with sincerity, and I answer because I don't think I've ever seen him take anything seriously.

“No. At least none that have come forward in the last twenty years.”

“Ah. Understood.” He shuffles to the next page and continues reading. It's about twenty minutes later when I finally look up to check my phone. It's odd that Shaw hasn't sent the report yet. I wonder if there's some issue with it. Nothing else about his case is standard.

“Waiting on a phone call?”

“An email.”

He glances to the clock on the nightstand. “At midnight?”

“Yep. Where is the printout of her bank transactions?” I look through the papers but before I find it, he lifts the report and hands it to me. “Thanks.”

I'm looking over it when there's a knock on the front door. “Are you expecting anyone?” I glance to Bryce who is standing from the bed while I grab my service weapon.

“Nope. But if it's Jasper, you're welcome to tackle him again.”

“Not funny.” I shove past Bryce, hurrying to the front door. I peek through the peephole to see Shaw. Why is he dropping by? “It's fine.” I open the door but keep my guard up until Shaw safely steps inside the apartment and I close the door behind him. “What are you doing here?”

“Bringing the report you wanted.” He presents a manila envelope with one hand, then lifts the other which holds a to-go box I recognize immediately. “And a piece of cake. Chocolate fudge to be exact.”

“My favorite. Thanks, but you didn't have to. The cake or report.”

“It's no problem. I was missing you anyways, Dundee.”

That's when Bryce asks, “And you are?”

“Shaw.” He extends his hand, but Bryce doesn't immediately take it. His usual jokester persona gone.

“Bryce, this is Gavin Shaw, my work colleague. Shaw, Bryce Parish.”

“Yes. No introduction needed.” Shaw chuckles as Bryce finally returns the gesture and shakes his hand. “Great game tonight.”

“Thanks,” Bryce replies flatly.

“Am I intruding? I didn't mean to wake you or anything.” Shaw glances

between the two of us.

“Yeah. We were in the bedroom,” Bryce says.

I know he meant for it to sound exactly as suggestive it does so, I add, “Looking over Nadine Baker’s case.” I move to the kitchen bar and set the cake down. It’s a few seconds when I notice there’s an odd silence and look up to see two sets of eyes watching me. Awkward.

“Thanks so much, Shaw. This is exactly what I needed.” I motion to the cake that I consider digging into right now. “I just hate that you brought it all the way here.”

“Again, no problem.” He smiles then places his hand on mine as he steps to the island. “Miss having my partner around.”

“Ditto.” And it’s the truth. I’ve spent the last two years seeing Shaw nearly every day.

“At least we’ll get to hang out some in a few days.” When Shaw notices my confusion, he adds, “The Georgia trip. I’m your travel buddy for the Hawks games. Arnold said he’s letting me tag along because we work well together. I’m excited to not be stuck behind that desk all alone.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I agree but it takes me a second to comprehend this isn’t ending anytime soon, which means I’ll be traveling with the team. And apparently Shaw will be also.

“See ya later.” He gives me a quick pat on the shoulder then heads out the door. I stand there trying to figure out how to prepare a bag and my brain for the voyage.

“So, chocolate fudge, huh?” Bryce asks as he taps the to-go carton.

“Yeah. It’s my favorite.” I move to the bar and sit on the stool but don’t open the container. “It was sweet of him to drop it off.” Bryce laughs as he steps into the kitchen. “What?” I ask through gritted teeth, having to bite down to keep from adding a not-so-nice name to the question.

“You may not be as good a detective as I thought, Detective.”

“And you are?” I go to stand from the barstool until my muscles freeze at his laughter.

The volume has increased, and his head is shaking. “I am. Because I know the only thing sweet about it is the cake, because your *partner* is after a different title with you. And that definitely doesn’t align with your first rule.”

“No, he’s not. He’s a good friend and someone I trust with my life. Same for him. Maybe you don’t understand the concept of having to put your life and trust in someone’s hands.”

“Kind of like I’m doing now with you?” he mutters, taking a sip of water as he studies me. “I trust you. But trust me when I say Shaw wants to be Mr. Dundee.”

“Stop it, Bryce. Not everyone has hidden motives like you.”

He gets a look on his face as he walks around the bar. He sets down the water, then places a hand on either side of me against the counter, pinning me place. His face is inches from mine. His lips feel even closer when he asks, “I know what I want and go after it. Without resorting to sweet gestures or passive aggressive tactics. I make my desires clear. Even if I know you’ll never give me a chance. No hidden motives here. Just unreciprocated offers.”

His directness throws me, but I keep the shock off my face. I hope so, at least. “You’re right. Because I don’t date baseball players. Especially pitchers.” Fuckers.

His voice is low, playful as he tells me, “Oh, give our position a second chance. Please.”

God, I could melt just from looking at him. Thankfully, my brain still works. Because under the appealing, charming exterior is nothing but heartbreak. “No.”

“Why? Scared you might enjoy yourself?”

“Highly doubtful. Because the last time went so well.”

“Rex is a jackass even off the field. But I think you should give me a chance to show you the difference between his relief-pitcher ass and a starter. Do you know one of the differences?” Bryce leans down, his mouth next to my ear as he whispers, “Starters have better endurance.”

“And bigger egos.” Well, not all of them. But definitely the moron in front of me making me feel something I shouldn’t with his words because I know the endurance, he’s referring to isn’t on the field, it’s off. And that isn’t something I should be thinking about with him. Or any of these other fools. Dad was mad enough when the last relationship with one of his players went down the drain and caused a rift between us. He’d flip if he thought I was dating another one of his players—which is only one of the many reasons Bryce needs to get it through his thick skull. “We are not going to happen. So you’ll need to test your endurance out somewhere else.”

He eliminates the little bit of remaining space between us, and I don’t think he’s going to stop until his lips don’t touch mine, but he does as he tells me. “Be careful what you wish for, Daphne. Because watching the one you want get used by someone else is a painful undertaking.”

“So is this assignment to keep you alive.”

“Touché.” With that, he shoves off the counter, turns his back to me, and walks to his room, closing the door behind him.

Now my nerves are really in overdrive. Traveling with him? I knew this would be challenging but I hadn't thought that it would last long enough for me to wander around the country with the guy. Or how much his words are hitting me. Because just the thought of watching him with someone else does bother me. But it'd bother me even more if I gave him the chance then had to experience that same thing. He's not Rex. But their lifestyles are the same. And their egos. My heart can't take another hit from a ballplayer, and neither can my relationship with my father or my career—if I have any hiccups on this assignment, it'll be bad news for me with my captain. Bryce Parish is more than off-limits. He's lethal.

BRYCE

When I step out of my bedroom, I see Officer Newspaper Nabber at the table. This time he's on his phone and doesn't look up as he says, "Good morning," and motions at the newspaper sitting on the table.

"Good morning." But it'd be better if it were Daphne instead. I grab a cup of coffee then sit at the table and get started on the crossword for today.

It's about twenty minutes and two more cups of coffee later before Daphne breezes through the door. She gives Freeman a breathy thanks and he's gone. She's moving around the kitchen, and I'm unreasonably glad she's comfortable here. But she's giving me the silent treatment. From Freeman, I didn't mind being ignored.

"How was your lonesome run?" I ask as she has a seat across the table from me.

"Good," she responds before looking down at the folder on the table.

"Great," I say, then look back to the puzzle. "Five across. 'Fireplace item.' Three letters." Silence. So, I jot down *log*. "Seven across. 'One-person performance.' Four letters." Nothing as I write *solo*. I make up my own. "For bonus points ... lucky number fifty-eight across. A stubborn refusal to speak with someone. Two words. Fifteen letters. And something you've mastered."

That gets her attention as she turns a frustrated stare to me. "Can you not just find something to occupy yourself with that doesn't involve conversation?"

"Oh, this doesn't require conversation." I hold up the paper before placing it back on the table. I fill in the next answer and decide to tell her. "That's why I started doing them. Boredom. No one to converse with since Mom was busy pursuing the flavor of the week. But eventually it became a

favorite pastime for Granny and me.”

I see the uncomfortable shift in her posture before her eyes meet mine. “What about your dad?” Before I can even respond, she backtracks. “Never mind. That’s none of my business.”

Shifting in my chair to face her, I fold my arms on the table and let out a deep exhale. “Dad ran off before I was even out of diapers.”

“Sorry,” she mutters as her eyes fall to the table.

“I’m not. I was better off without the bastard. His mother, on the other hand, was an angel. Granny stepped up more than both my parents. Worst day of my life was at age twelve when she passed.”

“I’m sorry.” She pauses for a few seconds, then asks, “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. Just me.” As much as I’d wished for a sibling, I was thankful my POS parents didn’t bring another child into their miserable existence.

“I didn’t know that,” she mutters, her eyes drop to the papers on the table.

Grabbing my mug, I stand and lean over the table and tell her, “That’s because you don’t know anything about me. Only *assumptions*.”

And now she’s back to pissed again as I smile and move away from the table. “Well, the ass part is correct.”

“Touché,” I laugh as I pour myself another mug of coffee then sit back down as she gets up and heads to her room. “I thought we had a case to solve?” I motion to the papers on the table.

“I do. We don’t. I haven’t needed your help before, and I don’t need it now.” She almost says it like she’s trying to convince herself and not me.

“Alrighty. Here if you need input. I mean, I haven’t needed your help for my crossword puzzles, but I’m happy to not have to do them alone.” There’s something on her face but she doesn’t translate her thoughts into words and instead steps into the guest room and closes the door. I go back to the puzzle because I actually have a chance to unravel these riddles, unlike the mystery that is Daphne Dundee.

DAPHNE

I watch as Bryce stretches, his eyes meet mine more than once, and once was a time too many. But I have no choice other than watching him since it's kind of difficult to keep tabs on my assignment without looking at him.

"Daphne, I'm so glad we have you back around here!" Murdock shouts as he runs up and gives me a tight, warm bear hug.

"Yep." Unfortunately and unwillingly.

"Coach has been extra sour lately."

I hate to break the news to the relief pitcher, but my being here is not helping that case at all. But I'd rather not get into it. "How's Tate doing?"

"Good but bad." Murdock laughs and goes into a story of how his son got a hold of a permanent marker and decorated the walls in his house.

Every time I glance at Bryce, he's looking. But he doesn't make a move until I spot someone else who is walking my way—Rex.

Bryce all but sprints over, and I worry he's going to crash into me until he stops a foot away. "I could use your help."

Of course he can. "With what?"

"Still have it in you to catch a few pitches?"

I itch to accept the challenge but hold off. "I'm sure there's someone else who will help out. You know, like a catcher."

He smiles, and I'm guessing it's because he already knows he's going to win. "Scared of a little heat?"

Only from him. "Fine." Plus, sadly I'd rather deal with him than Rex, who tries to say something as we walk off.

My back is already to him, but I hear Bryce tell him, "She's busy."

We walk out to left field, past where a few other players are stretching.

“Was that really necessary?”

Bryce stops next to me, leans over, and tells me, “Yes.”

He quickly stretches his arm across his chest, forcing it too fast, too hard.

“Are you trying to hurt yourself?”

“Just seeing if you still know what you’re doing.”

I strap the protective gear on my legs and chest, get the mitt then stoop down and get ready for him to make the throw. “It’s like riding a bicycle. I’ve caught fastballs for as long as I can remember. I couldn’t forget even if I wanted to. And sometimes I want to.” I don’t mean to mumble out the last part, but I do.

“You just haven’t ridden the right machine.”

Standing, I lift the mask off my face and glare at him. “It really is astonishing.”

His grin stretches across his face as he asks, “What’s that?”

“The way you make everything sound sexual even when it shouldn’t.” I get back in position to catch the damn pitch.

But he doesn’t throw one, only tossing the ball in the air, catching it as it lands in his glove. “Or maybe that’s just how it sounds because that’s what’s on your mind.”

“Focus, Bryce. On baseball, nothing else,” I instruct.

He smiles and says “Yes ma’am” in a way that makes me wonder if my mind really is in the gutter. Damn it. *Focus, Daphne, and not on sex.* And that’s what I’m finally able to do for a few seconds until he asks, “Did you want me on my knees first?”

It takes me a few beats before I tell him, “I want you to stop talking and throw the damn ball.” I’m well aware of the drills they do where they throw the ball while kneeling, but Bryce has to make that sexual too.

And he has a sexy smirk for me as he drops to a knee and throws the ball. We make it through the drill before he rises to his feet and pitches a slider.

I’m bracing myself for a little pinch when the ball hits the catcher’s mitt, but even his four-seam fastball is lackluster. Three pitches later, I stand and keep the ball in my hand as I stare at Bryce.

“What?”

“You’re holding back.” I know he is. I’ve caught plenty of pro pitches and there’s a feeling when the momentum hits the glove. The speed, the force, and I’m more than aware of what Bryce is capable of throwing. And it’s not what he’s giving me.

When I toss the ball back, he sends another pitch. It's a little faster but not anywhere near the speed he would release if he was throwing to a different catcher. Standing, I go push the mask up then start to unhook the chest protector. "I'll find someone else to catch for you."

He shakes his head as walks over to me. "Quitting on me already."

My fingers freeze on the leg guard strap before I stop and face him. "Yes. It's pointless if you're scared to pitch to me. My brother threw harder than that when we were in junior high."

There's something solemn in his voice as he says, "Maybe I don't want you to get hurt ... and certainly not by my doing."

I don't think he's talking about getting hit by a wild pitch. "I'll be fine. You'll be fine. Just throw the damn ball and stop acting like this is my first rodeo, Parish."

There's no sign of his usual humorous manner as he says, "I hate rodeos."

But it's the painful tone in his voice makes me ask, "Why?"

He unhurriedly walks back over to his spot, moves into his wind-up stance, and holds it. "My mom forgot me at one." His movement starts at the last word, then the ball releases from his hand, and when it hits my glove, I know it's a real pitch. Just like he's sharing something real with me as he continues. "My grandma didn't have a car, and I knew she didn't have the money for a taxi but would've still called one for me anyway, so I walked home." He lets out a little chuckle. "My mother never asked how I got home that night. I'm not even sure she knew she'd left me behind."

How horrible. And he's talking about it like she forgot some trivial detail. But I'm guessing that's how he deals with it. I don't know. When I toss the ball back to him, I hesitate for a few seconds before I ask, "How old were you?" I'm not sure what I'm expecting his answer to be since I know his grandma passed when he was twelve, but I can't believe when he responds.

"Nine."

My mom wouldn't let us use a public restroom alone when we were nine, and Bryce was wandering across an entire city alone? He releases another pitch, and I've already tossed the ball back before he responds.

"She was distracted with her man, Wayne. He was the one that kept coming around and didn't want me there when he did. But he never stayed with her for long. And she'd move on to the next flavor of the week."

I really don't want to pry but also don't want to disregard what he's sharing with me. "Where's your mom now?"

He goes through another entire wind-up and releases a four-seamer. “Shreveport, last I heard.” Searching for anything to say to make him feel better is pointless because he stops mid-wind-up, his eyes locked on me. “Don’t pity me. My childhood sucked. But it taught me a valuable lesson.” He resumes his wind-up and throws another pitch. The splitter hits my glove with a satisfying thud.

“And what lesson did it teach you?”

“If you want shit done, figure it out yourself.” He gets some of his playfulness back as a smile stretches across his face. “Maybe that’s why I find you so appealing. You don’t wait around for someone else to get your shit done.”

Doesn’t feel like I have anything figured out or done right now. “Thanks. I think.”

“And your not-so-subtle longing for me.”

Stopping, I give him a frustrated glare, but it only makes his smile grow as I tell him, “Right there. You couldn’t have just stopped while you were ahead.”

“Hm. I was ahead, huh?” he teases.

“Anyways.” I don’t really want to go back to solemn Bryce instead of the jokester. But maybe a middle ground where he’s not trying to push my buttons would make this easier. “I think you should give rodeos another chance.”

“Like you’re willing to give ballplayers another chance?”

I’m going to ignore that. “Just reconsider it. Promise it’s worth it.”

“Sounds good. My advice is to begin and finish with a starter. Promise I’ll make it worth it.”

“That’s enough talking. Just throw the freaking ball, Parish.” I open the mitt, waiting, as he grins and watches me for a minute before he finally delivers a curveball. The ball clips the side of my catcher’s mitt and soars off to the left. After chasing it a few yards away, I throw it back to him. “Keep it in the strike zone.”

“Alright, Lil Dundee.” He smirks before he adds, “Can you do me a favor?”

“Probably not. But what is it?” I wait for his question, which arrives after the slider hits my mitt.

“Help me get over my loathing of rodeos. Be my tour guide, and we can call it a date. Let’s get over our loathing of the past together.”

Why do I want to say yes? I just write it off to wanting to help the little boy who was brokenhearted. But I can't deal with the jester who will be there in the present. "No."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Same place my patience went."

He laughs. "I have that effect on people."

We finally agree on something.

BRYCE

After I grab the popcorn from the microwave, I walk over to her room and knock on the door. It swings open as she eyes me and my movie snack. “Wanna watch a movie with me?”

She leans on the doorframe, her arms folding over her chest. Nothing about her attitude is surprising. Even after the win tonight, she was quiet on the way back to my place and hasn’t spoken to me since we arrived.

“Come on. Everyone needs to take some time off. And you’ll be protecting me, so you don’t have to feel guilty about relaxing on the couch for a few minutes. You’ll still be working, technically. And doing a killer job since I’ll be within arm’s reach. Should anything happen, you’ll be ... *on me.*”

“Bryce,” she breathes, rubbing her eyes. “Netflix and chill won’t happen.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. More like VHS and rewind to unwind.” And she really does seem like she could use a bit to unwind.

She gives me a confused look as I step back from the door and make my way over by the entertainment center and point to the VHS player that I paid way too much for after the last one quit on me. “See. I have the movie in there rewinding already, but you can pick something else.”

I open the cabinet beside the TV where I store all the tapes and wave my hand over it. “If it was made in the eighties, I probably have it. Maybe some early nineties too. But anything from this century is out.”

There’s definitely some interest on her part because she moves beside me and scans over the tapes and picks up one to examine it. “There’s a number written on it.” She points to the label on the spine.

I grab the folder off the bottom shelf. “Number order.” Then spin the knob on the Rolodex. “Alphabetically.”

Her fingers flip a few of the paper cards before she glances over the movies. There’s disbelief and maybe more puzzlement as she stares to me. “You created a movie collection on VHS?”

“No. My grandma did. She was obsessed with movies. That and soap operas. But I wasn’t much of a fan of daytime TV. The movies stuck though.”

Daphne places the tape down and rubs her fingers along the row of clear plastic cases. “She collected all of these?”

“Yep. There wasn’t a garage sale or thrift store in walking distance of her apartment that didn’t get a visit.” I smile at the recollection of searching for movies with her. “I did buy digital copies of a few, but it’s just not the same.” I look over the mass collection. “I just can’t get rid of them. Along with the crosswords, movies are something that occupy my downtime.” There’s the pity look back on her face and I hate it. “Want to pick the movie?”

I’m surprised when she grabs the popcorn bowl from the shelf and even more blown away when she says, “Nah, I’m good with what you pick.”

“My pleasure.” I leave the one already in the player and push play. It’s a movie that is a favorite of mine and one I think she will like watching too. “This one is hilarious. And has one of my favorite songs in it.” I hold the old paper case up for her to see. “*Mannequin*. Ever seen it?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Don’t think so.”

“You’d know.” I laugh. “It’s a great movie but definitely a stretch from reality. And—well, I’ll let you watch it before I give it away. I hate spoilers, even if it is a movie older than us.”

“Sounds interesting.” She laughs and I feel a bit of success that I actually picked one she hasn’t seen before.

“It is.” And so is this ... I never thought she’d actually sit out here with me. And I realize something that doesn’t sit completely well with me. “I haven’t had a movie night with anyone since Granny was around.” I bypass the couch and grab two waters out of the fridge.

I place both on the table in front of us as I drop down on the sofa and reach over to grab a handful of popcorn. I don’t even have to look at her to know she’s watching me. But I turn her way anyways. “What is it?”

“You’ve really never had a movie night with anyone since you were twelve?”

Why does it make me happy that she recalls such a specific detail about something so dreadful to me? “Nope, never wanted to.”

There’s a thoughtful expression on her face as she stares at the television and silently places some popcorn in her mouth as the movie starts up.

The mood is somber and awkward. And I don’t like it. “It’s supposed to be fun.”

Her shoulders relax against the couch as she leans back. “Oh, I’m sure it will be. Because rule number four—no talking during the movie.”

“Agreed. Good thing I only sing while watching.”

“Oh my God.” She laughs like it’s a joke, but she’ll find out the truth soon enough.

And Daphne does as the movie wraps up and I start singing along with the tune by Starship just like Granny had a habit of doing.

Daphne places her hands over her face as she laughs. “You can’t be serious.”

Hearing her contagious laughter urges me on as I stand from the couch, my off-key singing getting louder. Before either of us can think twice (especially me), I take her hand in mine and guide her to stand. I keep her hand in mine while placing her other on my shoulder, then slide my free hand to her lower back as I hold her to me and start swaying. It’s impossible to miss the way her body aligns perfectly against mine. Her smile disappears for a second before she it returns with an eye roll. “You’re insane.”

God, I really am. Because I don’t want this to end. Ever. So, I sing a few more lines before our swaying gradually halts. Her captivating eyes drop to my mouth, and I hope and pray the same thoughts are going through her head, because I want nothing more than to kiss her right now.

But I don’t. And she’s not on the same page because she breaks away, releasing my hand and backing out of my hold. “I’m gonna to bed,” she mutters. “You should get some sleep too.” When she reaches the bedroom and closes the door behind her, my head drops back to stare up at the ceiling.

Damn it. I don’t know what to think. We had a moment where we got along and were actually having fun. But I know she’s more scared of letting me in and getting hurt again. But I really worry that she’ll never see me as more than an arrogant, selfish baseball player who will use and discard her. Which couldn’t be further from the truth.

This movie night was simple but something that I want to do every night. And only with her. The dancing was probably too much. But hopefully,

Daphne wasn't terribly bothered by my off-key singing. Because I'm going to make sure she hears it again.

DAPHNE

The drive over to the stadium has been quiet, though not unpleasant; it's a comfortable silence. Which is surprising after last night. I mean, nothing happened. Except we actually sat and watched a movie together, and I enjoyed it. And even more when he started singing and pulled me up to dance with him. We almost crossed the line ... at least I think that's what he was thinking. I surely was. But I'm writing it off as being caught up in the moment. Though maybe I even enjoyed his company. He was just different. Sharing about Granny and his childhood has made me see him differently. He's still the annoying, pain-in-the-rear guy who wants to drive me crazy. But now when I look at him ... it's not that I pity him, but there is a part of me that feels some sympathy for him. Absent parents were never an issue for me. If anything, mine hovered too much. But now, I'm more than grateful for that and them.

"I was thinking—" Bryce starts.

And I can't help but say, "That's scary."

He just chuckles at the friendly jab and continues. "About the cold case, have you checked out Nadine's boss?"

His fascination with helping me on the cold case still surprises me a bit. But I wonder if he's focusing on it to avoid thinking about his own case. "Yep. Solid alibi."

"Hm." He glances out the passenger window of my car. "Well, alibis can be bought."

"True. Everything can be bought." I've seen plenty buy a cover story plus more.

"Not everything," he mutters, and I don't like the seriousness of his tone.

“Mm, you’re probably right on that.”

“Wow. Can I hear that again?” he teases as I look over to him and he eggs me on. “Just once more, say it again. ‘Yes, Bryce, you’re always right and you’re the best.’”

“You were right about one thing, Bryce, don’t push your luck.”

He smiles and claps as he looks out the passenger window. “I’ll take it.” Then he occupies himself by asking a few more questions regarding the case.

When we steer into the stadium parking, he stays quiet until we exit the car. He leans back against the passenger door, obviously not ready to go in as I move around to stand near him. The parking lot is pretty empty since we’re here a little earlier than normal. And I don’t see any reason we should hurry in, but that doesn’t make me feel great about just lurking around here.

“Let’s head inside.”

He doesn’t move and just watches me for a few seconds. “What case were you working when you got put on desk duty?”

Not one I want to talk about because the failure is still a sore topic for me and partly the reason I’m here. Though I doubt even if I hadn’t gotten in trouble, that I could’ve passed on babysitting one of Dad’s star pitchers. But I feel like I need to answer him. “A homicide case. But I messed up because my captain told me to back off and I didn’t. And I almost jeopardized an even bigger case.”

“Bigger than murder.”

I can’t give him all the details, but I can speak about it in general. And for some reason, it almost feels like a relief to talk about it. Moving beside him, I lean my back against the car and gaze at the ballpark as I explain. “Yes. Because it’s the investigation that’ll find the person responsible for that murder plus numerous others.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the bad guy.” He sounds ten times more confident than I feel. Mainly since I’m not allowed on that case and have no clue what’s going on with it other than some random updates Shaw has heard around the station. “Can’t do much until I catch your bad guy.”

He shoves off the car and shifts in front of me. And I suddenly realize I’ve allowed him to trap me. “Bryce, we really need to get inside.”

He doesn’t move away, but closer instead, as he asks, “What happens after you find my bad guy? Back to ignoring me and not joining me for movie nights?”

Son of a bitch. This conversation just went entirely where it shouldn’t.

“Yes. Falls back to rule number one. This is a professional arrangement. That’s all it can be.” For so many reasons. But this is the first time I’ve said it that it felt difficult to admit. Double SOB. I can’t feel something for him. “Let’s go.” I place a hand on his chest and shove him back. He doesn’t budge.

And now the shit is about to get deeper because I spot Rex walking over. I don’t know who the bigger hazard is at the moment. Dealing with Rex isn’t appealing, but Bryce is blocking me from protecting him, which is my literal job.

“Everything all right over here?” Rex asks as Bryce finally backs away.

He looks to my ex, only he doesn’t say anything and keeps a tight expression that worries me, because I don’t think I’ve seen Bryce truly angry.

“Yes,” I respond quickly and grab Bryce by the bicep to shift in between the two lugs. “We’re just about to get to the pitcher’s meeting.” And another reason we needed to be here so early.

“I didn’t realize you were going to be glued to this chump’s side every waking second. But I’ll walk you in so we can talk,” Rex offers.

As I’m about to refuse, Bryce chimes in, “You just can’t get it through your head.” His anger mixed with humor is almost scarier than outright fury. But I know him. Or at least I feel like I know him well enough to know he’s only frustrated and not going to flip his lid. Though, Rex could bring out the need to punch someone in the nose rapidly. Not that I would, but the urge had certainly been there when he explained how it wasn’t his fault his dick slipped into another woman.

“I was speaking to Daphne, not you.”

“That’s enough,” I say a bit louder than intended. Mainly because my stomach is in knots at the memories of that night when things just escalated out of hand way too quickly. “Bryce, let’s go. Now.”

He remains in his juvenile stare down with Rex for another minute before he finally takes a step back. “Yes ma’am.”

Even with my back turned, I hear the chuckle come from my dumbass ex who is behind me. “That’s why she’s sticking with you. For now, I guess. Because you’re already whipped.”

When Bryce turns around quickly, I prepare myself to block him, thinking he’s about to make good on the nose decking. But I’m wrong. Instead, he shuffles in front of me, bends down, and puts his shoulder in my stomach and lifts me in the air. Then waves at Rex.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” His hand pats my outer thigh before he rotates towards the entrance and heads that way.

“Put me down.” The more I squirm, the tighter his grip gets. When he enters the building, I’m aware of the eyes watching us as he weaves through the corridor. There’s a moment where I relax, mostly to take a breath but also to let him think I’m not going to fight against him until I lock my knees, throwing myself back as I swing my elbow that lands a good enough blow on the side of his head to release his hold on me. A few more twists and shoves later, he finally drops me to my feet. I waste no time shoving him away, his back hitting the wall. “What the fuck are you thinking? Not only was that uncalled for, but how can I protect you if you’re too busy pulling shit like this and I’m focused on fighting you?”

He moves forward, his mouth next to my ear. “You’re too busy fighting yourself to worry about anyone else.” Then he continues coolly on his path down the hallway.

I can’t decide what I want to do more, run outside and scream at the top of my lungs to release some frustration so I can make it through the next few hours, or give up and go to the station and turn in my badge—because for a split second, I convince myself there’s something more to him than his caveman ego and childish antics. Then he pulls this.

“So much for either of you keeping your heads on straight,” my dad says as he walks by.

Shit. “Yeah, well I tried.” I follow behind Dad, and even though I feel like a bratty teenager following behind their parent, complaining along the way, I say, “He won’t listen to me. So, any advice would be helpful.”

Dad just lets out a humorless chuckle. “Welcome to my world,” he says, stepping into the room where the pitchers and staff are gathering.

Bryce is seated next to Murdock, telling him something out of earshot. It’s not hard to figure out the topic as he motions over to Rex then me. Ignoring him, I take a seat two rows back. Great. I really hope he behaves himself, because I can’t handle more than keeping the stooge out of trouble with Dad, and from the irritated way he regards me when facing our way, I know he’s on the edge of his patience as much as I am.

Surprisingly, Bryce actually does behave himself. Mostly. Other than a few quick glances in my direction, he focuses on all his pre-game routines. Once the team heads to the locker room to get dressed, I let out a breath and sit by the entrance. The next few hours should all be downhill from here since

he'll be in the dugout for the game and then I can hole up in his guest room and avoid any movie watching tonight.

It's not long before the team heads to the field, the stadium is packed full for the Sunday afternoon game.

After taking my seat, I halfway watch some of the pregame ceremony. It shouldn't be long before we sing along with the national anthem, then watch the guest of honor throw out the ceremonial first pitch. Only it's not the anthem that starts to play over the speakers.

No. It can't be. But I know it is. The song is already burned into my brain after dancing to it last night. And when I look up and find him, I know things are about to get much more complex than the feelings that arose from dancing in his living room.

Bryce has a sexy smile on his face and four other ballplayers twirl behind him. He's heading my way as he belts out the lyrics along with the tune. *Kill me now.*

BRYCE

There's pure shock on her face when her captivating deep-brown eyes meet mine. I know I'll pay for this one. But it'll be so worth it. I hope at least. Because me and Gunner spent a good hour in the locker room coordinating our dance moves before Murdock, Johnson, and Lopez volunteered to be backup dancers.

Is it a desperate move to show her I'll make a fool of myself for her? Maybe. But it's too late to turn back now. Because I'm at the wall, standing on the warning track as I hold my hand out to her. She doesn't take it, her stunned expression fixated on me.

Leaning forward, I tell her, "You really going to leave me hanging?"

I see the determination in her eyes as replies, "I'm going to strangle you."

At least that's what I think she yelled over the cheering crowd. So, I go all in. Reaching forward, I take her hand in mine and help her over the wall, never missing a word to the song that I've sang a million times. But between dancing to it last night and now, it's definitely my top favorite.

I spin her around before releasing her from my arms but keep her hand in mine as I drop to my knees and keep singing to her. Gunner and Murdock do as we rehearsed, circling around us as Johnson and Lopez encourage the already cheering crowd to clap along with the beat of the song.

There're so many emotions on her face as she keeps her vision locked on me. There's still some shock there but I'm catching some nervousness and bewilderment. And maybe even a hint of a smile. But I know one thing for sure. I'm never going to hear the end of this. And that's before we do another two synchronized eight counts then I drop into my air guitar solo.

When I hop to my feet, I find her with her hands over her mouth. Her

gaze locked on me. And soon, it's time for the big finale. I'd planned to just belt out the last part along with Starship. Instead, I pull her back into our dance position from last night and spin her around before dipping her back.

I'm still singing the words as I hold the position, her fingers clinging to my shoulders. And for a few seconds, it's not about the stadium, the cheering fans, the spectacle. Because all I see is her. I lose the little sense I have remaining (which isn't much at all) and close the distance between us. I press my lips to hers, like I'd wanted to last night, and to my surprise, she hasn't kneed me in the balls yet. There's still a chance. But even more shocking, she kisses me back.

I keep a steady arm around her, slowly guiding her up to standing as we stare at each other. The music has ended, but I doubt we'd be able to hear it over the shouting crowd if it was still playing. Her hand still in mine, I bring her knuckles to my lips for a soft kiss before lifting our hands in the air and bowing to the fans as the guys line up beside us and do the same.

Lowering our hands, I keep her fingers entwined as I lean over and admit, "By far, my favorite moment on this field."

She doesn't say anything for the few seconds, staying with me in the moment, before she looks over the stadium like she's just comprehended everyone is watching us. She gives a shy wave and what I recognize as a forced smile before she leads me off the field and into the dugout. Not stopping there, she continues into the corridor, walking until she pulls me into an empty room.

"What in the actual fuck was that?" Well, between her words and stiff posture, I know she's not waiting until after the game to ream me about the impromptu performance.

Leaning forward, I tell her, "Just wanted to finish our dance."

There's no doubt she doesn't like my answer because her erratic movements grow more flustered even though I didn't think it was possible.

"In front of the entire damn stadium, Bryce?" she yells. "What the hell were you thinking?"

I wasn't would be the proper answer. But it's not the truth. I thought about it way too much. About her way too much.

Stepping forward, I move in front of her but don't touch her. "Look me in the eyes and answer one question. But not to me, don't say it aloud, just admit it to yourself. You felt something last night. Honest answer: did you want to kiss me as much as I wanted my mouth on yours? Or are you still

lying to yourself?”

The frustration leaves her posture and is replaced by what I read as disbelief. “None of that matters. How am I supposed to do my job now? My boss will see that. Not to mention my father ... and after I assured him there was nothing between us. He already hates me for dating his other player.” Her voice breaks a little, her eyes searching mine, and that’s when I’m certain she’s fighting back tears. And I feel like the biggest jackass ever. I knew she wouldn’t be thrilled. But I thought maybe we could get a good laugh about me making a fool out of myself.

“Your dad doesn’t hate you. I’ll tell him it was all me. And maybe we can use it to help with a cover story. Because now the public will assume we’re together and not that you’re just trying to save me from some madman. But I will tell your father the truth. There’s nothing between us.” It’s meant to make her feel better, but I see her swipe at her cheek. And realize this is the moment I’m making a bigger joke of myself now than when I was dancing on the field.

“No. Please don’t do me anymore favors.” She stomps away, leaving me in the small room alone for a few seconds before she appears back in the doorway. “Get your ass back to the dugout and don’t move until the game is over.”

I follow her out and take a seat on the bench. A few of the guys give me high fives, pats on the shoulder, and fist bumps. When I catch a glimpse of Dundee, I know he’s pissed at me. But there’s nothing about him that scares me. It’s his daughter I worry I really screwed up with.

DAPHNE

For being bright and early on a Monday morning, the police station is buzzing. I don't make it to the captain's office without spotting Shaw, who gives me a warm smile.

"I would've picked you up one if I'd known you were coming in, Dundee." He holds up a paper coffee cup from my favorite café across the street.

"I wasn't planning on it. Just need to speak with the captain."

"Oh yeah. Can you believe it? Higgins is going down, and his old partner, Ackerman, was dirtier than him. It was a long night, but twelve arrests in all. Cleaning house." Shaw hoots as a detective who's at his desk nearby returns the action. And I feel so out of the loop here. The place I usually feel so in my element. I'm off at the field too now. And I don't like that either. I need things to get back to normal.

"Did Zimmerman find out who killed Thompson?"

"Yeah," Shaw explains excitedly. "It was Ackerman. Apparently, it was one some deal that went wrong. Higgins knew all about it and was planning to get rid of Zimmerman that night we showed up. The jackass denied everything. But the evidence against him is solid."

Case solved. And without my help. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad Thompson is on his way to getting justice, his family has answers, and the station has less dirty cops on the force. But I want to be a part of the solution, not babysitting a man-child whose idea of lying low is lip syncing in front of an entire stadium that could contain someone who wants him dead.

"Oh, I have to swing by my place and pack up real quick." He stands, grabbing his keys and phone. "I've been here all night and haven't had a

chance to pack. But hey, can't wait to watch baseball as my job this week. How was the game yesterday?"

Sucked. "Coyotes won."

"Awesome. I'll meet you at the stadium so I can hitch a ride on the bus to the airport with the team," Shaw tells me as he walks away but I'm hoping that after I plead with my superior, Shaw will be escorting Bryce to Georgia with a different partner tonight, and I'll be off the protective detail.

Instead of getting into that wishful thinking with Shaw, I head to Captain Arnold's office. And when I knock on the door, he yells, "It's open."

"Sir, I need to speak with you."

He tilts his head to the side, clearly giving me an assessment. "Have a fun weekend?"

"No sir."

A slight smile peeks at his lips. "Are you sure? Because it looked like a hell of a celebration before the game yesterday."

"That was not my doing. My apologies. Trying to keep Bryce under the radar is more impossible than you can imagine."

"Oh, don't apologize." He waves his hand before he looks back to his computer monitor. "It helps your cover and keeps the media from digging too deep. Now everyone assumes the two of you are dating." He pauses long enough to take a peek at me when he adds, "At least that's what I'm assuming—it's just a ruse ... right?"

"I believe for the sake of the case and Mr. Parish's safety, I need to be removed from his detail."

There's confusion on his face as he leans back, his chair squeaking under his large frame. "Is there something going on between the two of you that's jeopardizing the job or your work?"

Fuck, I don't know. "No sir. I just don't think I can do my job properly because of his outlandish conduct."

"He does seem like a real challenge. But I've never known you to back down from one."

"Because I don't."

"So, that answers your question. Assignment is yours to see through to the end. That will come sooner once you find who is responsible for trying to run him over."

He's right. Instead of being reactive, I need to be proactive. "Can I get take a look at the original threat and photograph?" I've only seen copies of

both along with a few snaps of the aftermath of the scene.

“Of course. It’s all with Gomez.” He lets out a chuckle knowing the notoriously rigid records keeper usually gives everyone a hard time. But I find him easy to deal with. All you have to do is follow his rules. Why do people find that so difficult? Particularly one person.

Captain Arnold takes look at his watch. “Shouldn’t y’all be heading out of town soon?”

“Yes sir.” Regrettably.

“I’m sure he’s informed you, but Shaw is going to tag along.” He looks like he’s considering something, but says, “Have a safe and uneventful trip, please.”

“That’s the plan.” At least I get a familiar and sane person to speak with for the next few days. The team only has one series before we’re back in Canaan Falls for the final stretch before the postseason. And I’m hoping to wrap this up before then for sure.

“Thanks, Captain.” I head down to see Gomez. And though most everyone around here dreads interacting with him, someone who follows the rules is someone I really don’t mind dealing with right now.

I was able to avoid Bryce this morning—Freeman is babysitting him in my place—and last night by going straight to bed. But being that we’ll be traveling together to the Hawks games, I know I won’t be able to avoid the inevitable. Him. And now after his stunt, I’m even more convinced I need to stay far away from him. Because as much as I wanted to crawl in a hole under the field, I also answered that one question he told me to admit to myself. And he was right I did want to kiss him. But unlike him, I know some impulses shouldn’t be acted upon. There’re only meant to be a fleeting thought; something that you don’t latch onto and let pass by. Not Bryce Parish; no, he gets a good grip on a momentary notion and sings in front of thousands of people before kissing me.

And of every truth, the one I hate to admit most—I kissed him back.

BRYCE

I almost think she's gone off and joined the circus because usually her morning run doesn't last this long. But she finally breezes through the doorway and relieves Freeman.

She avoids eye contact with me as she says, "We'd better head to the stadium. Buses leave for the airport soon, and I need to swing by my place to grab a few things."

Yeah. I'm aware of the itinerary, but I'm confused about everything else. "Daphne," I say as she continues to avoid me. "Wow. You really are reeling from that kiss."

Got her attention. And she's fuming, a piercing glare shoots my way. "I'm not *reeling*. I'm trying to figure out how to do my job and not stab you in the eye with that pencil."

"Gruesome. But nice to know you're a *Dark Knight* fan. I'm more old-school, Michael Keaton era. But Heath was brilliant in the role."

From the way she leans her hip against the counter and folds her arms over her chest, I doubt she's amused or wants to talk actor performances. Not that it matters, because I don't want to amuse her, I want her to admit she felt something. But I know that won't happen. At least not to me. Though, I think she might've to herself which is why she's more prickly than normal. All I get from her is a "Be ready to leave in five minutes" as she walks past me.

And it's about four minutes later when we're in her car, driving across town to her house. It's cozy, though nothing fancy, and as we step through the door, I go to follow her down the hallway. She turns around, holding a hand up for me to stop. "Wait here. Literally just need two minutes to grab some clothes."

“Will do,” I respond as she gives me her I-know-you’re-lying expression before heading out of the living room. I’ll stay in this general area, but I can’t help but walk a few steps over to the small office. Looking over a bookcase, I glance at the pictures and recognize Daphne and her brother in a few along with Coach and his wife. Without thinking, I reach over and pluck the picture up of Daphne and her brother. She looks so happy and carefree, a scene I rarely recall witnessing in person.

“Put that back. Let’s go,” she instructs, appearing in the doorway.

Placing it carefully back down, I take a lingering stare at the carefree girl that is very unfamiliar. “Just trying to figure out what makes Daphne Dundee tick.” I let out a little chuckle. “D.D. What’s your middle name?” Silence. “Ashley? Anna? Ava? Because it’d be funny if your initials were D.A.D.” Nothing. “How about Odette? Olive? But would they really stick you with D.O.D.?” I’m not as worried about that as I am just getting her chatting again. “Where they’d get Daphne from? Family name? Or movie lover? Scooby Doo wouldn’t be the same without Daphne.”

She doesn’t respond to my question but just repeats. “Let’s go.”

I follow her out of the house and as we’re getting in the car, I make one last poke at her and pray she doesn’t jab me in the eye in return. “What about Daffy Duck? Was he the inspiration? Initials are D.D. too.”

Her hands drop from the steering wheel onto her legs as she lets out an exaggerated huff before she faces me. “Are you done yet?”

Never. “Just curious.” I give her a smile. “I’ll tell you mine. I’m named after some soap star my grandma had a crush on. Your turn.”

“This is going to be a long-ass trip.” She rotates to look forward before driving off.

“Come on. At least tell me your middle name or give me a hint.”

“If I do, will you shut up for the rest of the day?”

“I’ll try.”

She doesn’t look convinced but tells me. “Abigail.”

“Wow. So D.A.D. it is. You really didn’t have a choice but to be a daddy’s girl.”

“Stop talking now.”

I nod. Glancing out the window. A million thoughts run through my head, the main one I shouldn’t say aloud, but it comes out anyway. “Just think ... if you marry me, you’d be D.A.P.”

I see the muscle in her jaw tighten along with her arms as she grips the

steering wheel and keeps her vision straight ahead. I don't nudge at her anymore and just sit in silence on the way to the ballpark.

We still have a little while before the bus leaves, so we head into the stadium to wait. I have a feeling Daphne would rather wait inside so she can be rid of me while I'm in the locker room.

But before I go through the door, I have to tell her one more thing. Maybe it's to get a reaction, but I have to. "See ya in a few, Dap."

There's a reaction all right, it's surprise and maybe some irritation, then I slide through the doorway and head back to my locker. A smile still on my face at her shock.

"Ah, all smiles," Murdock says as I drop on the chair in front of my locker.

"Wouldn't you be?" Gunner adds as he stands nearby. "Especially when Daphne is waiting right outside."

Murdock ignores him and takes a seat beside me, a hushed whisper as he says, "Dude, I can't believe you went for it. Coach already has you on his shit list. And now you're sleeping with his daughter."

"It's not like that—" I try to clarify, but my words are lost on Murdock because Gunner starts bouncing around the locker room.

"Parish is screwing Coach's daughter," he singsongs over and over.

"Dude, sit down and shut up," I yell at him.

"Cut the shit," Murdock grits out.

But Gunner doesn't, and the shit gets deeper because Coach is on the other side of the locker room. I have no doubt he's heard Gunner's tune, which comes to a halt when he spots Dundee watching him as he mutters, "My bad."

Coach doesn't have to say anything; I see it on his face. The slight head nudge tells me he wants to speak with me. Damn. I follow him out into the corridor where Daphne is waiting, and then we both follow him back to his office. God, I spent plenty of time in the principal's office when I was younger, but this feels worse than all of those trips combined. Because I truly didn't give a damn about the outcome back then.

I pull the chair closest to the door back for Daphne to take a seat in as I plant my ass in the one beside her. Coach keeps his silent, judgy stare in place as he watches us from across the desk.

"Dad, I—"

Coach cuts her off. "I don't want to hear it—"

But before he can finish, I speak up. “It was all me.”

Coach looks a little baffled as he studies me. “I figured as much, and I’m surprised you’re taking responsibility for your actions”—he leans forward—“but I don’t care. All I need to know is that this”—he waves a hand over us—“won’t interfere with *anyone’s* job.” He zones in on Daphne. “Your job is dangerous enough without you misplacing your focus.”

“I’m not losing focus,” Daphne says, but I notice it doesn’t have her usual determination behind it like she typically has when she tells me to stick it.

Coach doesn’t seem concerned enough to continue the discussion as he stands, “Let’s just get through the trip and be done.”

He’s out of the office within seconds, leaving me and Daphne sitting there in the most awkward silence to date. Because as much as I like to joke and tease her, I never wanted to cause problems between her and her father. I can handle him yelling at or lecturing me, but not her.

“Daphne, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for him to take this out on you.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” She stands and turns away from me, but I don’t miss her hand swiping quickly at her cheek.

“Do you ever just say what you think, or are you always too busy trying to please everyone else to worry about how you actually feel?”

She whips around, eyes boring into mine. “I feel like shit. Happy now?”

I slowly reach up to place my palm on her cheek, brushing my thumb across her skin. “No. I won’t be happy until you are.”

She pulls away from my touch, saying, “Then help me solve this case, figure out who wants you dead other than me. Because the sooner this is done, the happier I’ll be.” She quickly turns and walks out of the office.

DAPHNE

We're already at the airport and there's no sight of Shaw yet. Did he get bumped to another case? Surely, he would've let me know. Everything seemed fine at the station this morning (better than fine, actually). Dialing his number, I listen as the call goes unanswered again.

I'm debating on calling Captain when I get the alert for a text.

About to go through security. Be there in a few.

Okay. We're at gate C12.

I know.

There's a sense of relief that Shaw is here and will be going on the trip with us. But there's still something that feels off with him. I can't recall a time where he's never answered my call or at least returned it with a ring back. He's never been one for texting and claims that it's quicker to just call and say whatever it is that needs to be said. Apparently not today.

"What's wrong?" Bryce asks from beside me.

Glancing around the terminal, I spot mostly familiar faces. "Nothing."

I hear a chuckle from Bryce as he stretches in the stiff airport chair. "Hope you have a better poker face when you're playing cards."

"Sure. Because I care if you know I'm lying or not about something insignificant."

"Do you want to know your tell? In case you decide to venture into a casino?" He rubs his fingertips along my jawline. "It's right here. You tense

up when you lie.”

Okay. The man reads cues and signals for a living. That’s all it is. He’s reading my body language and thinks he has me figured out. Doubt that very seriously because I can’t even figure this shit out. I just know something is off. “Maybe you just drive me crazy and it’s the way I keep from decking you. Or perhaps you’re good at reading people because you’re so damn nosy.”

“Nah. I just pay close attention to you.” He leans back in his chair, his head on the glass as he closes his eyes. Relaxed is an understatement.

Wish I could take a cue from him. But that won’t be happening. Between being on the road with him and making sure he keeps breathing, there’s no way I can let my guard down. Some of my nerves dissipate when I spot Shaw heading our way.

Standing, I go to tell him something before he states flatly, “I thought the flight was scheduled to leave later, or I’d have been here earlier.”

“They purposely booked the charter flight hours later than they planned to leave so no one would expect us at the airport now. I thought you knew. Or I would’ve told you this morning.” No clue why he would’ve be abreast of the full strategy.

“No problem. I know you had other things on your mind.” His cold demeanor is a complete contrast from this morning.

And even Bryce seems to take note of the tension. “Anything you need to get off of your mind?”

Shaw doesn’t reply, but the tight expression on his face bothers me to no end. I lightly grasp Shaw’s elbow as I pull him a few feet away from Bryce, who keeps a watch on us as I speak to my partner. “I thought Captain Arnold would’ve given you the details.”

“He didn’t. But it’s cool. I made it on time.” He goes to walk back towards Bryce, but I shift in front of him, blocking his path.

“Are you okay? Did something else happen?”

He takes a step back, his eyes on Bryce before he looks to me. “Nope. All is cool.” Then proceeds to take the seat one over from Bryce, leaving the one between them empty.

You don’t even need to read people to get the drift that’s there’s nothing *cool* about his current attitude.

Great. This is going to be a really fun trip.

Instead of sitting between them, I opt for a seat across the aisle while we

wait until it's time to board the flight about ten minutes later.

Stepping onto the plane feels like a death sentence. Maybe because it's more out of my control. We absolutely have no way to get out of a bad situation and nowhere to go if anything goes wrong during the flight. But hopefully the decoy flight was enough to steer any negative intentions away.

"Aww, I get to sit with the blissful couple." Gunner drops into the seat on the other side of the aisle.

I glance over my shoulder and spot Shaw sitting about five rows back. His sight on the seat in front of him.

"Your boy will be fine by himself." Bryce motions towards Shaw before taking a glance his way. Before he relaxes back against the seat with a chuckle. "Even better, he's next to your father."

There wasn't much humor or amusement in his words. And even less in his posture as he focuses on the newspaper he dug out of his carry-on before stashing it in the overhead compartment. "Four across. 'A tool that has teeth.' Three letters." He pencils something onto the folded paper.

"I thought that was a morning ritual," I say as I look to the flight attendant who's starting the safety demonstration.

"It is. But flying makes me nervous, so I make sure to save some of it for the flight."

Why does his honest, vulnerable admission surprise me? "You're scared of flying?" Not a good thing when your profession requires you to travel constantly.

"Nope. Just crashing. Have you ever seen *La Bamba*?"

Gunner pulls the strap on his seat belt tighter as he shouts, "Don't jinx us, asshole."

The flight attendant keeps a pointed stare on Gunner, and thankfully, his antics are kept to a minimum. She wraps up the pre-flight instructions then strolls towards the tail of the plane.

"Ten down. 'TV room.' Three letters." Bryce jots down the answer.

"Why are you asking me if you already know the answers?"

He searches over the puzzle. "Here. I don't know this one. Thirteen across. 'Feathery scarf.' Three letters."

"Boa."

"See, we make a great team."

"We'd make a better one," Gunner chimes in. "Just saying. No one will blame you if you dump Parish and get with a real ballplayer. Offensive and

defensive, baby.”

If it were anyone else, I’d probably be bothered. But it’s Gunner, who I take even less seriously than Bryce. “The *player* part is correct.”

“Uh. That’s hurts.” He leans forward and speaks to Bryce. “Are you gonna let her do me like that?”

“Yeah. You’re actively trying to steal her.”

“Whatever, man. Can’t take a joke.” Gunner looks at me. “But I wouldn’t say no.”

Thankfully, we’re done taxiing, and the engines rev up and drown out the conversation.

My head is against the seat back, my eyes forward, but I see him tense up in my peripheral vision. When I turn to look at him, I realize there’re very few times I’ve seen him nervous. But this is one of them.

“What’s the next clue?” I ask and I see the shock when his eyes meet mine.

“Fourteen across. ‘Not as much.’ Four letters.”

“Less, but you already knew that.”

“Yes. But the reassurance helps.” He slowly reaches over, interlinking his fingers in mine. I let him, holding his hand as the plane takes off. But even when we level in the air, I don’t release it right away.

“We’re in room 4211.” Together. How did I not comprehend that was part of the arrangement? I asked the hotel agent about adjoining rooms, but they weren’t able to make a switch for us since the hotel is pretty much booked. I’d ask Shaw to stay in the room and I’d take his, but he’s been even more standoffish since we’ve arrived at hotel. This assignment is stressful enough without my partner giving me the cold shoulder.

With Shaw walking down the hallway in front of me, I ask, “Can we talk for a second?”

He stops and turns to me, but his vision is focused behind me. I turn to who I’m assuming he’s looking at and tell Bryce, “I’ll be in in a second.” Thankfully, Bryce goes into the room without comment. So, I turn back to my partner. The person who usually has my back and who I can share

anything with ... as long as he's not freezing me out. "Please tell me what's going. Because we need to work together on this. And if something bad happens, I don't want you to be distracted."

He chuckles and it takes me a second to fathom the change in him as he asks, "Me? Distracted?" His hand rubs over his mouth as he takes a step closer to me. "I saw the highlights of the game yesterday. Including what happened before the game. But please, tell me how you won't be *distracted* while you're screwing the guy we're supposed to be protecting."

"That's what your problem is?" I ask it aloud. I'm slow to fully comprehend that his entire sour demeanor and 180-degree personality change was because of the absurd lip-syncing routine.

"No. *He* is my problem." Shaw nods towards the hotel room door that Bryce is behind.

"Trust me, I'm not happy about it either. It was just Bryce being Bryce. I can't control him any more than I can control you. And yeah, his antics caught me off guard, but I'm focused on this assignment. I'm ready to get back to the station and assigned any other case."

"Got it." He turns his back to me and calls over his shoulder, "I'll be two rooms over in case you need anything job-related before morning."

Yeah. I need all these fools to stop acting like fools.

I wait for a minute before I swipe the card and enter the room. Even the few seconds helps to mentally prepare for Bryce. Well, as much as I can possibly brace myself to deal with his fuckery.

"Told you he wants to be more than work buddies."

Could there is any truth to Bryce's assumptions? I'm not prepared to mull it over, so I go with denial. "That was about *work*. He thinks I'm distracted because of your little performance yesterday."

"Ah. He's jealous." Bryce walks over to me, stopping just before his lips touch mine. "Because I had the balls to go after what I want while he's played it safe."

Staring into the depths of his dark-brown eyes, I notice for the first time how much he truly gets to me without laying a finger on a morsel of my skin. Because I still feel him everywhere. His hand pressed against my lower back. His fingertips tracing my jawline. His lips on mine. There is nothing safe about Bryce. Because he's not supposed to make me feel things when he touches me, much less when he merely looks at me. And he sure as hell shouldn't make me crave more. *Shit.*

BRYCE

“I’m starving. Want to go grab something to eat?”

“It’s late, Bryce. Can we just order in?”

“Pizza?” Sounds even better ... get to keep her here and all to myself.
“Let me guess ... supreme?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m good with whatever you decide.”

“You shouldn’t be.” It’s not even about the pizza. How often does she bend to accommodate everyone around her? I never would’ve guessed that from her determined persona. But I think it has more to do with the people-pleasing side of her. I can’t relate. Because I was a screw-up from the beginning and knew that’s the way it would always be. I was a disappointment, so I never tried to win anyone’s approval. Well, except Granny’s. But she didn’t need conditions or convincing. She simply loved me, even when I did screw up. “So, what will it be? Pepperoni?”

“Oh my gosh. Okay. Supreme, extra sauce, thin crust.” She acts like it was a challenge to tell me her choices. But I don’t agree.

“See, that was easy.”

“Yeah. Totally.” She breathes then adds, “Please have it sent to Shaw’s room under anyone’s name but your own. And I’ll give him a heads-up.”

She grabs her phone and sits on the love seat while I use my own to order from the pizzeria across the street.

“We have to be at the field at two o’clock.” She tells me, like her father didn’t lecture me for half an hour about being on time since I’m starting in tomorrow’s game.

“Yep. Maybe we should aim for earlier. I need all the brownie points I can get.”

“Then I’d recommend not singing before this game,” she adds nonchalantly, then stays quiet as she glares at me for a solid minute. “Seriously, Bryce, don’t do anything. Concentrate on pitching.”

“Will do,” I tell her sincerely. “I ordered dessert too in case Shaw doesn’t come through for you tonight.” And I really hope he doesn’t. I’ve never been the jealous type, but with her I am. Or more like possessive. Which is idiotic seeing as how she’s not even mine.

She responds by grabbing her overnight bag and heading into the bathroom. “I’m going to take a shower. Do *not* leave this room. Don’t open the door without checking to see who is there.”

“Yes ma’am.” I walk over and grab the remote. “I’ll find us a movie to watch.”

“Not interested,” she mutters before closing the door.

I still drop down on the love seat and flip through the movie selections, scrolling for a while until there’s a knock on the door. Walking over, I decide to listen to her advice and look through the peephole. Shaw. It’s tempting to not let him in but I see the pizza he’s holding.

Opening the door, I muster up a smile. “Thanks. Give me a second, I’ll grab my wallet and get you a tip.” Is it a dick move? Yes. Do I regret? Nope.

His frustration is obvious as he asks, “Where’s Daphne?”

“She’s in the shower.” That makes him even more bothered. “But I can let her know you stopped by when she gets out. Or did you want to join us for some pizza?”

Doubt he does from the pissy glower he’s giving me. “Just tell her to call me in the morning when she’s ready to head to the stadium.”

“Got it, Shane. Anything else?”

He shifts uncomfortably. “It’s Shaw.”

“That’s right. Shaw.” Fuck. I feel like I’m back in grade school. I didn’t even stoop to this level of pettiness in high school. I’ve never done this over a woman. But she’s not just some woman. So, I really can’t blame Shaw for wanting the same as I do. Her.

There’s a bit of confidence that comes across his posture as he steps in front of me. “I can understand why someone would want you dead.”

Damn. I kind of deserved that. But he doesn’t wait for me to react, and instead walks out of the room.

I set the food on the table and consider his words. None of it bothers me except that he’s right. Someone wants me dead over a game. But I don’t

understand why it's me. Why is *my* time up?

About ten minutes later, Daphne emerges from the bathroom, a cloud of steam following her. She's looks comfortable in a cotton tank and pajama pants. And beautiful. But I don't tell her and just say what's still tugging on my mind. "Why just me?"

She gives me a puzzled expression. "What's just you?"

"Why is the threat just to me? What about the other players? Should someone be looking out for them?"

"We are. Just not one-on-one. But there's been extra security measures put in place for the entire team."

"That's good." And I am thankful that no one else is a target, but I don't understand why I am. "It doesn't make any sense. I know some fans weren't happy about my contract extension. But not to the level of wanting to get rid of my existence entirely."

"You're the one they decided to blame for whatever reason. It could be as simple as that. Or maybe they bet on a game you started in that you lost. It could be anything. The real question is who." She pulls a yellow legal pad out of her bag, sits at the table, and starts writing something. "Are you sure there's no one in particular you've upset who could be holding a grudge?"

"You."

She drops the pen on the pad and glares at me. "I need you to take this seriously for a change. Please."

"No, I don't know who it could be." I've pissed off plenty of people in my former life, and a few in the current, but nothing explains the level of rage for someone to want me dead. Besides, none of my old enemies were the types to play games with spray paint and ominous notes. They would just eliminate the problem before anyone saw it coming and move on to their next endeavor.

"Well, think about it. The smallest detail could be what helps." She pushes the notepad to the side and grabs a slice of pizza, placing it on the paper plate. "All that talk about get what pizza I want, and you only got the kind I picked."

"The chicken parm sub is my fave. Pizza is secondary, but I usually get half supreme, half cheese. No in between for me. All or nothing. So, I figured a whole supreme would do since we both like it. Two supremes make a right, right?"

She rolls her eyes as she laughs. "That doesn't even make sense."

“It doesn’t have to.” It accomplished what I’d been trying to do for the longest time, though. “But be sure and try a bite. I order it every time we’re in town.”

When she reaches over and takes a section of the sub, I feel way too thrilled over her trying some chicken on bread. “So, make any headway on Nadine’s case?”

“No. Still waiting to hear back from Ridgewood PD about the report she filed with them on her ex. So, let’s focus on yours.”

Let’s not. Because the sooner it’s solved, the sooner I’m either dead or she’s gone. “Not much to focus on.”

“Yes, there is. What about your mom? When is the last time you heard from her?”

The thought of her alone rubs me the wrong way. “Six years ago.”

She stops eating and looks at me before she chews silently for a few seconds, takes a sip of water, then asks, “You haven’t spoken to her in six years?”

“Correct. Next topic.” Please. But I’ve already shown that it’s a sore subject.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to discuss. She despised me when I was a kid and hated me even more when I was a teenager, so I got the hell away from her the moment I could. Yes, she’s tried to contact me, but I’ve made it clear I don’t want anything to do with her.”

Daphne shifts uncomfortably, her focus not leaving me. “What happened?”

I really don’t want to answer the question but do anyways. “After a stint in juvie, I decided I was better off on my own. So, I begged a local mechanic for a job, and it thankfully came with a place to sleep—he let me stay in the room over the shop. Then I got called up to the Show, and the rest is history.”

Her head tilts to the side as she says, “I think you missed a few steps there.”

“Just a few.” Of really messy ones. “How about you? I know some of the more recent history but what was adolescent Daphne like?”

“Not much different. I don’t think.” She looks like she’s really considering it.

After a few minutes of small talk, my phone rings. When I see the number, I want to ignore it and send Jasper to voicemail, because I know he’s

calling about something I don't want to deal with. "I really need to take this." I stand to leave the room, but she stops me.

"No, I'll go wait out in the hallway if you need privacy. Let me know when you're done."

I watch as she exits the room, and just as the door closes behind her, my phone stops ringing. I quickly click the button to call Jasper back and he answers on the first ring.

"Man, I don't know how much longer I can keep this up for before Eliza figures it out."

"Just tell her the truth."

"Hell no. She'll hate me."

"She's going to hate the both of us." But it'll be worth it when she's away from that lowlife. "I'll call her and take the full blame, so she hates me more than you."

"Are you sure?" Jasper asks.

"Yep. I'm used to it. You're her brother—she needs you. If she's mad at the both of us, she'll spiral even worse."

"Thanks, bro. I don't know what I'd do without you. She has a new number because that jackass wouldn't stop calling her," Jasper says as I reach over and grab Daphne's notepad. Flipping to the back, I jot down the phone number on a blank page.

"Got it. I'll take care of it." I tear the sheet out, fold it up, and drop the notepad as I turn the pages back. I don't mean to look, but I do. Because my mother's full name catches my attention. Her date of birth, address, phone number. Several notes are written below, including some arrest dates and charges, along with the name of the loser who despised me. And their wedding date. She *married* him. But before I can let that set in, I spot the name Timothy Fowler along with a spouse's name written by it. A woman I've never even heard of. An address in Houston. The place I was until the Coyotes called and I moved to Canaan Falls. But what is really interesting is the date listed beside his birthday. The date of his death. I don't give a fuck about the man, yet the news feels like a punch to the stomach.

I spot a few other notes, all about me. My juvie release date. Years I went to community college, then uni, the date I was drafted. She didn't need me to tell her. She's already dug through my past and probably knows more than I could ever tell her. Shit. She knew my dad was dead. And I don't even want to think of the two names listed below his that share his surname. Because

that means he went off and had more children. And I don't want to know if he was a good or bad father to them. Because it'd suck either way, as selfish as that sounds. They either got the dad I wished for or the one I had.

"Hey, you there?" I hear Jasper and realize I'm still on the phone with him and have totally zoned out.

"Yeah. I'll call Eliza tomorrow and let you know how it goes."

There's no way I have the headspace to make that call tonight. After I finish up with Jasper, I drop my phone onto the notepad with a thud. I don't know what to do with this. And I don't know why I feel betrayed by Daphne, but I do. Maybe it's because I thought we were actually sharing about ourselves—more than facts and figures that could be pulled from a file. But this makes it even more evident that I'm no more than a case to her, a report that crosses her desk that she'll focus on for a while until it gets filed away. It's not real.

Walking over to the door, I take in a deep breath to settle my mind. But it doesn't help. All I see is Timothy's death date. And it bothers me that I'm trying to figure out what I was doing that day. It doesn't matter. It wouldn't have changed my routine. But that's the problem. Someone's death—a significant person like a parent—*should* have an impact on your life. And his didn't because he was insignificant to me.

When I pull open the door, she's standing there. A half-smile on her face. "All done with the call?"

"Yeah." I turn my back to her and walk back over, clear off my place at the table. My appetite is nonexistent now because my gut is filled with knots.

"Are you done eating already?" she asks with a slight snicker. "You usually eat three times what I do, and you've barely touched your favorite sub. It is really good." She holds it up to her mouth and takes a bite. Her smile drops as she looks to me. And I realize I'm just staring at her like an idiot. "What's wrong? Was that call a bad one?"

"No. But I did find out my father is dead and my mom married the guy who hated me. Both news to me." I move my phone off the notepad then grab it and drop it in front of her. "Any other important info you've dug up that you might care to divulge?"

"You read my notes?" She automatically gets defensive and stands from the table, flipping through it like I took something out of it by reading it.

"It was entirely by accident. But yeah, I did. You left off a few important dates for me. May 8 ... that's the date I went to juvie because my mother

blamed me for Wayne's drug possession. She didn't want him in trouble, but she didn't give a damn about me getting locked up. And when I was seventeen years old ... December 3 ... that's the last time I ever touched a controlled substance because it's the day I saw her in my eyes and swore to myself I'd never be her. I needed to make something of myself despite her. So instead of just tagging shit with a baseball diamond, I set out to prove that I was good enough to stand on the field. And finally, September 8, six years ago. That's when I paid my mom fifteen thousand dollars under the condition she never contact me again." It was the easiest decision I've ever made; I just wanted her to leave me alone. "A grand for every year she claimed I was in her care. But the money didn't last her long. I guess Wayne came back to help her snort through it."

Daphne's shocked expression is frozen on her face as she moves in front of me. I watch her hands reach up, study her palms pressing against my chest. And when my gaze flicks back to her face, that's when I see the pity.

I gently wrap my fingers around her wrists and remove her hands. "Don't feel sorry for me. That goes against rule number one. I just figured you'd want some facts and figures that are meaningful to who I am that you won't find in any search through my file."

She looks down to where my hands are still around her wrists before her eyes meet mine. "You can't use my rules against me only when they suit your needs, Bryce. Especially since you've never followed them from the start."

"Needs." I half-heartedly laugh at the word. I need what I'll never have. Her trust. Tonight isn't the time to say anything, though. Because right now, I'm worried I'll say something I'll regret. Releasing her, I take a step back. "I need to get some sleep. I have a game tomorrow." I pull off my T-shirt but keep my pajama pants on before sliding under the comforter.

Daphne remains in the same position for about two minutes, just watching me as I lie in the bed. I close my eyes, and it's a few seconds later when I hear her shuffling around the room, apparently cleaning up our supper. When I open my eyes again, she's turned out all the lights. It takes a minute before my eyes adjust to the darkness, the hotel room barely in view when I spot her sliding under the covers of her bed.

It's completely silent until she softly speaks, "It's not pity I feel for you, Bryce, but I am sorry that you found out about your father that way."

Another thing that stood out was the phone numbers next to the names that are my half siblings. "Did you speak his kids?"

“No. I only have their information in case I needed to. But there was nothing concerning that popped up that led me to believe they needed further investigation.” She pauses for a few seconds. “I would tell you before I made a call to them.”

“Okay.” I don’t know what I’d say if she’d told me she needed to call people whom I didn’t even know existed. And now that they do, my world feels off-kilter.

BRYCE

“Parish,” I hear Dundee call out. “Warm-up pitches. Now.”

When I look up, I know he’s pissed from his harsh stare alone. But I really give even less of a shit on this particular day than any other. Because after discovering the news about my father, not to mention some half-siblings, I tossed and turned most of the night—or more like all night—and I’m freaking spent.

But I really think what’s bothering me more than anything is *how* I found out. Or more like *who* I found out from. I know Daphne didn’t have bad intentions when she dug into my background. Only there’re certain things and people I want nothing more than to leave in my past. And my father is definitely at the top of the list, only surpassed by my mother and her now deceased husband. The bastard my mom chose over me. Funny part is he ended up leaving before I even got out. She blamed me for that too. Said he left because I told the court the truth, not that it mattered since none of them believed me.

Coach moves closer as I throw a few more pitches. I see him gauging me. But it’s different from his usually stance. It’s more intense, and I know he’s studying more than my slider when he asks, “What’s on your mind?”

The concern behind the question throws me off. We’ve never been on the same page. Our rapport hasn’t been the best by any means. It’s not because he isn’t a great coach—he’s probably the best I’ve had to date—but we’ve butted heads since our first meeting. Usually the only concern he has over me is how big of a headache I am. And he’s never been one to ask me what’s on my mind. I’d like to tell him as much, but there’s no way I can unpack this with him, especially considering his daughter is at the center of it.

“I’m good, Coach. Just a little lagged from the travel.” I throw a four-seam fastball that Dundee doesn’t even watch.

“Do you want to try again, Parish?” He moves in between the catcher and me. “Not the pitch, the bullshit answer.”

“No sir.” I don’t want to try again. I just want to get through this damn game.

This is bullshit. I’ve never had trouble concentrating during a game. My life prepared me to step onto the field and put all the other noise aside. I had to. Because I needed the time on the field to count. Off the field was nothing but a shit show; I was constantly involved in cleaning up one mess after another. I figured it out as I went, and worrying about it wasn’t an option.

Trying to center my brain, my concentration, I keep my vision on Lynch. He gives me the first sign, the four-seam fastball that was discussed beforehand for this hitter. But it doesn’t feel right. I shake him off and make the call for myself, switching to a slider.

I deliver the pitch. The batter swings and hits the ball. It’s a pop-up to center field, falling between the outfielders, resulting in a single. Damn it. One pitch and a runner on first. This is going to be a disastrous game. I felt it before I even stepped on the mound.

And if I let the news of my father’s death or the thought of my mother marrying that POS throw me off course, they win. And none of them deserve an inkling of victory.

Lynch signals the next pitch call, another four-seam. The one I should’ve went with for the first batter. So, this time decide to follow the preplanned strategy.

Pushing the noise from my mind, I throw the ball. The pitch doesn’t reach the speed or location I intended, but luckily, the batter only gets a piece of it, fouling off for his first strike.

Before Lynch tosses the ball back to me, I bend down and rub my hands through the dirt. It’s not something I normally do, but my grip feels way too slick. Like I can’t get a firm grasp on the ball no matter how I place it in my hand. Before Lynch throws to me, I dust the excess dirt from my hands. But

then, as I hold it, it still doesn't feel right.

I wind up and deliver a splitter. It's off. Everything about it. And when the bat connects, the telltale *crack* confirms what I know will happen next. The ball rockets over the left field wall for a two-run homer.

Son of a bitch. Two batters in. Two runs on the board.

The stadium is still erupting in applause when the third batter in the lineup steps up to the plate. Taking a deep inhale, I try to steady myself. But the first fastball is outside the box.

One ball. No strikes. It's not dire. But I'm not comfortable standing here. I should be.

Looking over to the area beside the dugout where Daphne is sitting near the media team, I'm met with her uneasy stare. There's barely a tilt of her head as she mouths, "You've got this." But she's not any more confident than I am. I see her fear, her worry, her dread. We both know what's going on in my head is controlling me more than it should be.

After Lynch signals the next pitch, I deliver. This one going where I planned and earning a strike. Just when I think I might be able to get through, my next slider gets knocked into center field and goes over the wall. Home run.

What the actual fuck. I've had off days. This is not that. It's worse.

Yet the only thought bouncing around my head at the moment is the question Daphne asked me this morning. Who's set to inherit my estate?

There was an apology along with it, and I know she hated to ask, but I get why it's a warranted question, being that someone wants me dead. So, who is set to benefit if that mission is carried out successfully? Daphne had paused before she asked if my mother would be receiving anything.

I assured her that my mother gets nothing. It's written in stone. Or at least the most ironclad will I could buy. My best friend gets everything. He's the closest thing I've got to family these days, so it was a no-brainer.

The next difficult question from Daphne ... Does Jasper know he is the beneficiary?

Yes. Well, he knows he's in it, but he doesn't know he gets everything. At the end of the day, Jasper is the only living person I've ever been able to count on without doubt.

Nothing offended me about this line of questioning until I got the gist that she was essentially asking if Jasper would try to kill me for a quick buck.

There's no way. Not to mention, I'd give him whatever he needed now,

without question, without hesitation. All he'd have to do was ask.

It's not him. And I'd bet my life on it. Which I really am. Because I trust him fully.

By the time I wind up for the next pitch, I don't even remember what Lynch called and just throw a fastball. It gets under him and goes behind him as he chases it.

Before Lynch even gets to it, I notice Coach Dundee walking towards me. I'm pretty certain this is the first time I've ever had a mound visit in the first damn inning. It's understandable why my coach is standing here, though. I anticipate him yelling, but when he covers his mouth he asks the question at a calm, level tone. "Are you good?"

Even more unexpected is my response of the truth. "I don't know."

"If you're not, I need to know. If there is something you need from me to get through this inning, name it. But I can't help you if you don't communicate with me."

That's the moment I realize I've always hidden my struggles from him and have never outright told him when or exactly why I was having an off day. I've always given one BS excuse after another, each of which he's known is a crock.

"I don't want to come out of the game. I'm sorry that I'm not always coachable, but I'm listening now."

Coach lets a little bit of his surprise show before he tells me, "Your arm isn't the problem. We both know that. I can't fix what's up there." His eyes glance to my forehead before he adds, "Can you?"

"I'll try." I've never given a damn about proving to him that I belong here, that I deserved to be on this mound. But as I watch him walk away, I feel with all of my being that I have to. And it's not because of hits, runs, strikes, or any other game shit. It's to prove to him, and maybe to myself, that I'll do my best to be good enough for her.

When I spot Daphne again, the concern is still evident. Breaking away from her gaze, I focus back on the batter. He's ready. I'm not. But I windup and deliver a changeup anyway.

Strike. Thank God the next hit is a pop fly that's caught.

The next batter steps up. He only swings at one pitch, the rest are out of the box, and he walks to first.

It doesn't escape my notice when Coach picks up bullpen phone. He's losing faith in me, worried I won't make it through this. And he might be

right. It's definitely justified to warm up my replacement. But being pulled from this game would be difficult. And so would stepping out on the mound in five days.

Fortunately, a line drive goes directly to Gunner who throws to Hartman at second base, who hurls it to Fallon at first. Double play.

Counting on people has always been a challenge. But I know my teammates have my back. And they just saved my ass.

Thank God the inning is over. Those three outs felt like the longest of my life. They weren't. I've had a few innings that went off the rails, mostly during my college years. But those were my fault whether from being out partying too late or just slacking when I knew better. The cause was never mental, never about my parents fucking taking up space in my head. I've never allowed them the satisfaction of accompanying me on the daily as a chip on my shoulder. But from that last inning, I decide they're more of a problem than ever. Miles away and from the grave, they still have reach. I let them in.

When I drop down onto the bench, Coach takes a seat beside me. "Are you up for another inning?"

"Yes. I'll try my best." And hope that it's adequate.

"Just let me know if that changes." He stands and that's when I really get puzzled about him being more patient with me.

Did she tell him about my past? "Did you speak with Daphne?"

He gives me a bewildered look and he shakes his head. "Not since we've arrived here. But is there something either of you need to tell me?"

"No sir. It's just some shit that's going on with the case. But nothing between us if that's what you're worried about."

He gives me a pause and a quick look before he says, "I don't think I'm the one struggling with that."

DAPHNE

This is by far the most agonizing Coyotes game I've ever watched. Only it has nothing to do with the score, how many outs we have, who's in the lead. It's because I knew from the first pitch that Bryce was struggling. Bad. And it affected his game tremendously. That's so unlike him. After his last media storm, the guy strolled onto the field like nothing happened and pitched six no-hitter innings the next morning.

Today, Dad was on the mound in the first inning. Thankfully, with each subsequent inning, Bryce seemed to get back in the right headspace. But he was pulled sooner than normal in the fourth.

The Coyotes managed to counter each run the Hawks scored with one of their own and put one additional point on the board to win the game. But I'm not quite ready to celebrate because I'm watching Bryce's mechanical movements fist bumping his teammates as they exit the field and head down the tunnel towards the locker room.

Once the closer and Lynch give him a congratulatory nudge, Bryce turns. He walks towards the dugout but stops when he spots me. There's no sign of the self-assured jokester who I'm used to dealing with. All I see is a blank, unemotional mask that I don't recognize. And I don't like it. At all.

I realize he's waiting on me when he asks, "Ready?"

No. I'm not ready, not for him. But I stand and make my way over to the dugout and follow him into the corridor.

"Bryce." He stops at the sound of his name, his body stiff as he turns to face me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." His flat response is more unnerving than him just turning and continuing on his way.

“That’s it?” I ask, not moving from my position.

He rotates and strides back in front of me. “What do you want me to say?”

The defeat in his voice, the anger in his face, makes me answer, even when I shouldn’t. “Whatever you’re feeling, thinking, or want to say. You’re allowed to be upset about it, or angry, or even sad. However you’re feeling is okay.”

He breaks away from my stare quickly then turns and walks away. “That’s never gotten me anywhere.”

All right. Maybe I should’ve worded that better because I don’t want him to bare everything. I just want him to be able to talk to me about what’s bothering him or tell me that he’s still pissed over how he found out. I’m not used to him being tight-lipped. I’m used to the oversharing, rule breaker.

But he’s out of sight and in the visitors’ locker room. I wait outside for about an hour before he emerges, freshly showered and with a few of his teammates.

Gunner is the one who tells me. “Are you coming with?”

“Where to?” Not that I have a choice if Bryce is going.

“Out on the town. Get some food, drinks; do some team bonding like Coach is always preaching at us about.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure that’s what he had in mind.”

Gunner drapes his arm over my shoulder and leans in like he’s about to tell me some big secret. “There’s no better bonding than over alcohol, Daphne.”

I don’t think Dad would agree. Looking over to Bryce who appears to be resolute, I ask, “You want to go?”

“Yep.” His reply is swift, and he doesn’t wait for mine.

When we make our way out to the parking lot, I spot Shaw standing next to the rental car.

“Change of plans,” I tell him as he goes to get in the driver’s seat. “The guys are heading to grab something to eat.” And hopefully not a lot to drink.

“You don’t need to come. Take the night off,” Bryce says as he walks past me. “I’ll catch a ride with the guys.”

“Are you serious right now?” I ask, tired of his back to me.

He doesn’t face me as he replies, “Yep. I’m sure whoever wants me dead has gotten over their fit or they would’ve tried something already.”

“Sure. That’s perfectly logical. But you’re stuck with me, remember?” I

repeat the slogan he used to irritate me plenty of times, and I have to admit maybe that's what I'm trying to do to him in this moment because he's acting so stubborn. But he decides to not be a bigger pain and drops into the car with Shaw in the driver seat. "So much fun," I mutter before dropping into the passenger seat.

By the time we get to the restaurant, I'm more than ready to get out of the tension-filled vehicle and deal with the rowdy crowd of people in the bustling eatery that serves more liquor than food.

"We really shouldn't be here, Bryce." I try to reason with him, but I know he's not going to change his mind.

"It wasn't planned, so no one should be inside waiting to slit my throat."

The casualness of his words sends my irritation up at least five notches. "Good thing you've thought ahead."

"Always," he quips before he makes a beeline towards the entrance.

"I'll keep an eye from there." Shaw points across the area after we've entered, then heads in that direction.

The place is packed, and I can barely hear myself think, so I don't bother replying.

Gunner yells over to everyone at the table, "First round on me."

And once they're four rounds in, I know this is definitely not the kind of team bonding Dad would approve of. Especially since they have a game to play tomorrow.

But it doesn't look like Bryce is going to stop anytime soon as Gunner orders another round of drinks and asks again if I want one too. Of course I don't. Even if I weren't on duty, I'd stay sober. Because the longer we're here, the more Bryce is getting back to his regular self. He's yet to say a word to me, but that is what I wanted, right? For him to let me do my job and not constantly push my buttons.

His words—"Be careful what you wish for"—float through my mind more than once. Mainly because I don't even know what I'd wish for. But getting back to normal, whatever that means, is currently the first thing that pops into my head.

"Maybe we should head back to the hotel."

Lynch agrees with my suggestion, but Gunner apparently doesn't. "What's the hurry?"

Standing, Murdock tells Gunner, "Some of us still have to play tomorrow."

“Hey, it’s my first game off in forever. But I am sleepy.”

He’s as indecisive as I am. But I’m relieved when the tab is paid and we’re heading out about ten minutes later.

Once back at the hotel, Bryce is a little unsteady on his feet. With his hand pressing against the wall, he says, “Hold up.” Then he bends over for a few seconds and draws in a deep breath. I fully expect him to puke, but he stands and starts walking again.

Shaw mutters, “You really can’t hold your alcohol, buddy.”

“Nope. I don’t drink often. So, I don’t care to hold that badge of honor.”

“You don’t have to drink often to not be a lightweight,” Shaw laughs.

This reminds me of two toddlers arguing. “Okay. It doesn’t matter. Let’s just get upstairs.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’re ready to get up there,” Shaw murmurs.

And before I can rein in my frustration, I ask, “What the hell do you mean by that?”

Bryce laughs this time, his shoulder against the wall as I push the button for the elevator. I’m glad he’s at least a happy drunk. But Shaw doesn’t share in the glee and opts not to answer me. Instead, he turns to Bryce. “What’s so funny, man?”

We step onto the elevator, Bryce props against the side. “Just thinking about a recent conversation. What about you? Dating anyone special?”

How slow is this elevator going? It’s just inching along.

Shaw gives a blunt “No.”

“Anyone on your radar?” Bryce inquires.

Holy shit. All I want to do is wipe that smug grin off his face. He knows exactly what he’s doing. And whether there is truth to his assumption or not, this is not the time nor place. Not to mention, it’s none of his damn business.

Thankfully, the elevator finally arrives on our floor. “Let’s go.” I hold the door open as both toddlers hesitate a seconds before stepping off.

When we’re in front of our room door, Bryce tells Shaw, “We’ll finish chatting later. Night, buddy.”

Shaw doesn’t acknowledge his obviously sarcastic comment and keeps walking down the hall. Once we’re in the room, I close the door behind me and stay facing it for a few seconds while I attempt to calm down. But I’m so aggravated with him I can’t. “That was uncalled for.”

“What?” Bryce asks innocently as he finishes kicking off his shoes. Reaching down to the hem of his shirt, he pulls it over his head along with his

undershirt and drops them to the floor. Unbuttoning his jeans, he says, “Scared I offended your boyfriend?” When he pushes his jeans down, he’s left standing in only black boxer briefs before he adds, “Or just pissed because I’m right?”

He coolly climbs on the bed, lying face down on top of the comforter, his arms wrap around a pillow and he tucks his face against it.

Looks like he’ll be sleeping soundly in minutes, if he hasn’t already drifted off. Just in case, I tell him, “Don’t leave the room,” before heading into the bathroom to shower.

I know he’s struggling with his own issues, but that doesn’t give him the right to be a bigger pain in the ass than usual. The former version was plenty enough.

BRYCE

Morning comes way too early. And so does her bossy attitude. “Get up or we’re going to be late.”

I pull the blanket over my face to shield some of the sunlight. “Technically, I’m the only one who will be late. You’re already on the clock.”

About three seconds later, the covers are ripped off me, and she’s standing next to the bed. “I’m not getting paid enough to deal with *this*.” She waves her hands over me as she seethes the last word.

“Hm. I’ll give you a raise if you stop yelling at me.”

She leans down, her face in mine as she hovers over me. “I can’t be bought. Remember that.” Her voice elevates as she yells, “So get your ass out of the bed. Now.”

I casually stretch. A little because I’m sore, a little to further her torment before I slowly slide off the bed and stand. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you actually care about me.”

“Good thing you know better.” She pushes past me as there’s a knock on the door. “We’re leaving in ten minutes whether you’re ready or not.”

When she opens the door, Shaw stands there. His eyes immediately snap to me as I grab a bottle of water. But my guess is the beverage in my hand isn’t what he’s looking at. Because I’m inadvertently standing in middle of the room in my boxers. Holding up the bottle to him, I say, “Good morning, Shane.”

“Shaw,” Daphne corrects me as she ushers him into the room and shuts the door behind him. “It’ll be a few more minutes before he’s ready to leave.” Then she looks at me. “Nine minutes to be exact.”

“Damn. I love when you’re bossy.” I drink down a few more gulps of water before I drop the bottle on the table and head into the bathroom.

I see the way her expression twists at my insinuation, and she’s probably about to yell at me before I close the bathroom door behind me and get ready for the field. I’m three minutes past her deadline by the time I’m heading out the door, which is an accomplishment in my mind since my head feels like it’s about to implode.

“I need to grab some aspirin.”

“You can get something at the field.”

“I need it to take effect before we get to the field and there’s another Dundee yelling at me.”

Before she can remind me again about how late we are, I head down the block towards the drug store.

She doesn’t tell me anything and instead asks Shaw, “Will you go with him, and I’ll grab the car from valet.”

When I turn to tell her, her back is already to me, “Trading me off already?”

There’s no response from her as she continues walking away and Detective Shawnie and I head to the store. He’s watching those around us, glancing down the aisle as he shuffles back and forth on the balls of his feet. When I reach the medicine aisle, I stand and look over the selection for a minute.

“Just pick one and let’s go.” Shaw keeps a jumpy stance as he looks around.

“You’re much edgier than Daphne.” I grab a bottle of aspirin, but when I go to head to the checkout, Shaw shifts in front of me.

“Is there something going on between the two of you?” he asks, his stance a lot less threatening than he’s probably intending.

“Are there any specifics you’re looking for?” I know exactly what he’s asking. I just can’t tell him what he wants to know that easily. Because whether Daphne wants to face the fact or not, her partner wants to be more than work buddies.

He’s not amused by my response. He moves closer. “She’s too good for you.”

“I know,” I respond truthfully and will give the guy some credit since it seems like he’s actually taking up for her. But why did he have to remind me of what I’m already clearly aware of?

The answer must satisfy his curiosity because he moves to the side before he steps away and heads towards the register. I hesitate for a few seconds before following behind him.

Once I grab a bottle of water and have paid, Shaw and I step outside to find Daphne waiting in front of the store. I climb into the passenger seat as Shaw gets in the back. She's even more impatient with her words. "Are you good now, or do we need to add a few more stops? Any other errands you need to run?"

"I'm great." I down some of the water along with a few of the pain relievers, praying they kick in sooner than later.

But no such luck. By the time I'm walking into the locker room, Dundee yells, "Parish, you're late."

"Yeah. I've heard." All morning.

Coach makes his way over, stopping in front of me. "I figured after that performance yesterday you'd be ready to get to work to ensure it doesn't happen again."

"It won't." Daphne was right. I should've been here on time. After how Coach treated me yesterday, I still flaked out on him. "My apologies. I'll be on time."

"Let's hope so," Coach says as he walks away.

It's a good hour before the meds kick in and my headache lessens. But there's a dull ache that never fully goes away.

DAPHNE

I'm beyond relieved when he says he doesn't want to go out after the game and just wants to pick up takeout on the way back to the hotel.

One. More. Night. At least, one more night in a hotel room with him. Not that it's any less challenging staying at his apartment. Speaking of, this is a better time than any to try and get a few details to possibly figure some of this out.

"I'm at a dead end." When I tell him, he doesn't look up, just silently eats his dinner and lets out a little *humph*. "Are you sure there's no one else who comes to mind?"

"Nope." One-word answers. So, unlike him. Even earlier today he was a little chattier, particularly when it was to be an ass about Shaw.

"I understand you're upset about your dad. But I really need to get to the bottom of this before something happens."

He drops his fork, picks up his tea, and takes a sip before his eyes meet mine. "I'm not upset about my *dad*. That's just it. I don't give fuck whether he's alive or dead. There's no change to my world. And that's what pisses me off." Bryce rises out the chair, paces a few steps around the room, then looks to me. "The bastard didn't even show for his own mother's funeral. I thought there was a chance he would be there. To see me, maybe realize he made a mistake leaving me behind." There's a pained laugh that escapes as he shakes his head. "It was stupid. But it was better to dream about that than think about Granny being gone."

The aching in his voice when he speaks about his grandmother pulls at me, and I can't do anything but stand from the table, walk to him, and loop my arms around his waist. I feel him tense under my grasp, but he wraps his

arms around me, and holds me to him.

“You’re breaking *your* rule,” he whispers in my ear. “I knew there was a rebel in there somewhere.”

Of course he turns the moment into a joke. Probably because things are getting too serious and emotional, but it doesn’t make it any less irritating.

“You’re right.” I say, my hands pushing him away slightly as I go to step back, but he keeps a tight arm around my lower back, his other hand moves to my face. There’s a second where I think he’s going to lean forward, close the distance between us and kiss me. But he doesn’t. And I know it’s disappointment I feel, but I still say, “We can’t do this.”

But I don’t try any harder to get out of his grip, so I brace myself for some sarcastic remark or joke at my expense. Instead, with his palm against my cheek, he closes his eyes, letting his forehead fall slowly forward to lean against mine as he whispers, “What would it take for you to trust me?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper back. Because I don’t. There’re too many layers of complication, of hurt, of images of how badly it could end—this could never make sense.

He lets out an extended sigh and pulls away but not before he tenderly presses his lips to my forehead. Then he heads into the bathroom and closes the door.

I’ve been lying awake in bed for at least two hours. There’s been no progress made with the case or with us after he came out of the bathroom. Instead, he sat at the table and ate like the intimate conversation never happened. I did ask a few more questions about his past. He answered them, mostly short and to the point. Something is off about the entire case. And not only because of what’s going on, or not going on, with us. Something about the letter doesn’t sit well. You know, other than the death threat.

Sliding out of the bed, I move to the table, using the flashlight from my phone as I pull the copy of the letter from the folder. It looks like a gag. Almost comical with the letters pieced together from different magazines. And probably wouldn’t have been taken seriously had the photographs of him not been included. Most of which had markings and slashes across the face.

“The signature,” I whisper, reaching for the paper. How would they know about that if they didn’t know him in high school? They wouldn’t.

“What about the signature?” Bryce’s voice startles me to the point where I drop my phone, the room going dark as the light stays against the table.

“You scared me.” I pick up my phone then turn on the desk lamp. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Can’t.” He stretches and yawns before pulling on his pajama pants before he moves beside me. “What symbol we are looking at?”

“There’s a diamond and an x over your eyes.” I hold up the picture. “First glance, it just looks like a bunch of scribbling. But really look at them.”

“Okay.”

“You said before that when you tagged things with graffiti your signature was a baseball diamond with an x through it, the cross point of the x is on the pitcher’s mound where you wanted to be and never thought you’d make it.” My explanation fades out because I know it’s a difficult memory and what I’m asking makes it a million times worse. “Who else knows about that?”

He lowly replies, “Just Jasper.” He pushes the paper away. “There’s no way it’s him. It’s not possible. Maybe it’s another asshole from back then. Or a coincidence. But it’s not Jasper.”

I try to approach the topic lightly but there really is no way around it. No matter what I say, he’s not going to like it. “Anything is possible.”

He takes a beat before he says, “I beg to differ.”

Something tells me he’s not talking about the case. “Will you just promise me you’ll keep an open mind until we find out who it is.” He nods. But I don’t think he is truly on board. “Everyone is a suspect.”

“Even you?” he jokes.

“Totally.”

There’s a quietness that falls over the room until it’s interrupted by a piercing siren and a light flashing on the wall. The fire alarm.

Immediately standing, I move to grab my phone and firearm, not two seconds later, there’s a knock on the door.

Hurrying to check the peephole, I spot Shaw on the other side and open the door. “Is it a false alarm?”

He shrugs, glancing up and down the hallway. “No clue. But we need to go in case it’s not.”

“Agreed.” Because ignoring the alarm could have dire consequences. But if it’s a way to flush us out the room, things could still turn deadly. I look

back to Bryce, “Follow behind me. And please, listen to what I tell you. If I say run, run. I say hide, hide. No hesitation. Got it?”

There’s reluctance before he says, “Yes.”

“Bryce, please. We don’t know what we’re going into. And I can’t protect you if you won’t listen to me.”

He moves closer. “Okay. But don’t get yourself hurt because of me.”

“It’s my job.” I regret the words as soon as they’re out because of the distressed expression that rises on his face. Hurt. But there’s no time to discuss it. “We have to go now.”

When we step into the hallway, there’re guests making their way to the stairwell, and I fall in step behind them, Bryce behind me, Shaw behind him.

The emergency lights and shrill alarm make the trip down the staircase even more unsettling. And when we finally reach the first floor, I peek back to see Bryce still behind me. Shaw nods. Letting me know he’s ready to exit the stairwell before we step into the main lobby. There’re tons of people—some heading out the doors, a lot of them just standing around talking about what’s going on.

“Keep moving,” I instruct Bryce as I spot a few Coyote players from the team.

When we’re outside, I really wish the car hadn’t been valeted. Nothing to be done about it now, so I head over to a spot where we have a clear view of the courtyard and a fire truck with lights flashing. I ask Shaw, “Can you find out what’s going? If it’s a false alarm?”

Shaw jogs off, leaving me and Bryce watching the commotion as guests pour out of the hotel. “I don’t like this.”

“Probably just a prank.” Bryce doesn’t sound convinced but keeps talking. “Maybe the Hawks wanted to make sure we didn’t get a good night’s sleep.”

“Sure.” That sounds much better than all the thoughts going through my mind.

It’s about five excruciating minutes later when Shaw returns. “Fire in the employee lounge. Apparently, some idiot microwaved their burrito in a foil-lined wrapper.”

“Okay.” I’m still not completely ready to believe it’s accidental. And I keep my guard up as we wait about five minutes before the fire department clears the building and an announcement is made that guests can return to their rooms.

The elevator is crowded even though we held back for a few additional moments, stopping on nearly every floor for guests to get off. It just didn't seem like a good idea to wait outside either. Damn it. None of this feels right. And when we're finally back on our floor, I ask Shaw to wait with Bryce as I open the door, taking a quick look around the room.

"It's clear." I wave Bryce in while Shaw stands at the doorway.

"I'll see you in the morning." He looks at his watch. "In a few hours."

"Yeah. See you then," I tell him, then close the door.

When I turn to Bryce, I see him staring, his face looks like he's seen a ghost. But he's not looking at me. And I rapidly scan to see what's behind me. My eyes land on exactly what he's staring at. There's a note attached to the back of the door.

Next time, you'll burn.

My hand grips my firearm while my eyes never leave the message. "We have to go. Now."

BRYCE

“This doesn’t feel right,” I tell Daphne as we board the plane. We’re the last ones to step onto the aircraft with only Shaw behind us, though he passes the row we step into and takes a seat four rows back.

Daphne carefully latches her lap belt, not acknowledging me. It’s the first few seconds I’ve seen her slow down since we found the letter on the back of the door. Because after that, it was nothing but a chaotic dash to leave the hotel. And instead of going to another, Daphne insisted on leaving town. Captain Arnold agreed. And only he and the three of us know the travel plans because they opted to tell Van Herten and everyone else with the team that we’d miss the game and take a flight in the afternoon. But here we are on the first flight out.

Even though it’s not my turn on the mound, I’m supposed to be in the dugout to support my teammates, not running in the opposite direction. “I should be at the game.” We only have a few remaining before postseason begins. This last stretch of games will decide where we go in, but we will be in the playoffs either way. And I don’t want to miss those for sure. “What happens in two days? Am I missing all the games?”

“Let’s just get back to Canaan Falls, then we’ll figure out what’s next.”

I don’t want to make her job harder. And I especially don’t want to make it riskier for her. But I can’t run and hide. Even at the hotel when the fire alarm was blaring and she told me to run if she said run, I knew I wouldn’t be able to if it meant leaving her behind to deal with something dangerous. “I lied.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “About what?”

“If you would’ve told me to run, I wouldn’t have. I’m not going to haul

ass and leave you to deal with my mess.” I lean back in the seat and brace for her to yell at me.

But she’s very calm and controlled as she asks, “Do you realize that you not doing as I instruct puts me in more danger? Because I’ll be so focused on you not being safe, that I’ll be distracted and won’t be able to protect myself.”

The image of her being in a dangerous situation, injured, or worse because of me flashes through my mind. Rotating, I face her as much as the strap across my lap will allow. “Then maybe you shouldn’t be the one protecting me.”

“Yeah. I’ve said that all along.” Her arms fold over her chest as she crosses one leg over her other. “But guess what? I’m not going anywhere.”

I face forward, breaking from her stubborn stare. Because I know one way or another, this won’t end well. She won’t be by my side forever. There’s no happily ever after in sight. I just pray it’s not because someone hurts her while trying to get to me.

“Bryce.” Her tone is gentle, and her expression matches that softness as she says, “It’s okay to be afraid. The note freaked me out too ... the fact that someone was in the room ... I’m scared too.”

It did freak me out a bit. But not as much as the idea of losing her. But I keep that thought to myself because my focus shifts, putting me on edge. The plane’s engines ignite for takeoff, and I keep my head pressed against the headrest, my eyes closed. But when I feel her hand, her fingers interlacing with mine, I look to her and hold on tight.

The plane finally levels out in the air. Daphne appears like she’s about to fall asleep, but I can tell she’s fighting it. “Take a nap. We’re not going anywhere.”

“No, I’m good.”

“Liar. And I’m guessing fatigue will affect your judgment, so why not take a nap? Shaw has a watch over the plane. And I promise to wake you if anything seems sketchy.”

“Don’t you want to get some rest?”

“I’m never able to sleep on planes—I can’t relax enough. So, one of us should take advantage, and since it’s impossible for me, you’re up.”

She finally caves. “Please wake me if anything happens.”

“Cross my heart.” I make an X motion over my chest as she shifts in her seat, getting comfortable. I notice it takes several minutes before she appears

to drift off, her head slightly leaning my way before she falls into a deeper sleep.

And maybe I intentionally lean towards her until her head is resting against my shoulder. The longer she sleeps, the more she relaxes against me. So, I stay as still as I can and watch the landscape change out of the window.

It's about twenty minutes later when I see someone walk in my peripheral, and I turn to see Shaw in the aisle. His full attention is on her, but he's not saying anything, just staring at her.

Shh. I hold a finger to my lips before I whisper, "She's exhausted."

He speaks bluntly at his regular level. "Yeah. I'm sure she is."

Daphne stirs, her hands pressing against me as she lifts her head. Her eyes meet mine before she glances around then stops on Shaw. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I tell her quickly because I see her muscles tensing, sense her panic rising already.

"Captain Arnold wants us at the station when we land. Check your phone." Shaw walks away tersely before he's even finished with his last statement.

She hurriedly pulls her cell from her pocket and clicks on what appears to be a group message. "He said the footage seems to be tampered with, like it was looped or something. But he wants you to watch it to see if anyone stands out."

"Sounds like fun," I reply, and though I settle back into my seat and hope she gets comfortable against me again, she never does.

DAPHNE

I slide another cup of coffee over to Bryce as I sit beside Captain Arnold's desk. My boss insisted on us using his office so we'd be out of view from the general area of the station.

"Thanks." Bryce takes a sip. "I change my mind. This is not fun at all. It's boring as hell and the coffee is horrible." He takes another swig.

"Then stop drinking it."

"Eh. I'm used to bad coffee."

"Then stop complaining." I watch the footage and pay closer attention when I spot us coming out of the stairwell. "Anyone look familiar or stick out to you?"

"Nope. Just us and your partner."

I hate the way he says it, but I ignore him. There're more important things to worry about at the moment. "Can you pay attention please?"

"I'm watching it. Where is Shane anyway?"

I almost say something out of frustration but choose to take in a breath and calmly reply, "He went home. Freeman is going to meet up with us at your place in a few hours."

"Yay."

More sarcasm. But I ignore it too as we continue scouring the recording, mostly because I don't want to discuss Shaw or the fact that I asked him to check into the whereabouts of Jasper over the last few days.

Once we've watched everything a few times over and nothing sticks out, I pass Bryce the Coyotes hat that I had in my car. He takes a peek over it before placing it on his head, his smile in place as he tells me, "I'm not sure a Coyotes baseball hat is the best disguise."

Shaking my head, I step past him. “It’s not a disguise. Thanks to your performance, everyone is aware of our connection.”

He bends down, his mouth near my ear as he passes me. “Everyone except for you.”

I stop, waiting until he finally turns back to look at me. “You’re getting on my nerves. Like for real.”

His laugh is genuine as he says, “Sorry not sorry. For, like, real.”

He’s impossible. Instead of standing here with him, I start walking. I can’t even remember what it was like to be in my own headspace without him attached to my hip, making me want to pull my hair out. And that’s when it hits me. *Nadine’s hair.* It appeared to be curled with some glitter hair spray in it. But there was a wig found right next to her. Why would she fix her hair just to cover it up with a wig? She wouldn’t. “Wait. We need to go down to the evidence room.”

“Evidence room? That doesn’t sound fun either but lead the way.”

Doubling back, I head down the corridor and find Gomez’s unwavering gape on me as we approach his desk. “I need to look at Nadine’s evidence box again.”

“Hm.” He scans past me and instructs Bryce, “Don’t open or remove items from the protective packaging and use gloves when handling everything.”

“Got it. But I’m not a cop.”

“I know that, Big League. And I know you’re trouble.”

I let out a laugh, unable to contain it even if I wanted to. “You’re my favorite, Gomez.”

He doesn’t respond to my comment. Instead, he grabs the box and sets it on the table, then walks away without another word.

“Very warm and fuzzy. Totally matches the vibe down here.”

“Gomez likes rules. I can relate.”

“Yes. Yes, you can. Rules, procedures, bad coffee.” Bryce takes a seat on the other side of the table. “And no fun.”

I know he’s goading me, so I keep focused and look at the evidence inventory. There weren’t any hair samples taken from the scene and the wig wasn’t kept in evidence. But this has to mean something. “It wasn’t hers.”

“Care to fill me in, Detective? I can see those wheels a’ turning.”

I search through the box, looking with a different perspective. “The wig found next to Nadine’s wasn’t hers. She wouldn’t spend the time fixing her

hair and spraying it with glitter if she was going to cover it up.”

“So where did it come from?” Bryce asks like he actually wants to know the answer as much as I do.

“I’m not sure.” I have one mind-boggling guess. “It could belong to whoever killed her.”

“A disguise or something?” Bryce asks.

“Or a costume.” I consider all the clothing items missing from the box. Most marked as costume and clothing belonging to Nadine. But maybe that was a wrong assumption too.

There has to be a reason those items are gone. And Gomez might be able to help. “Do you still have the records of who checked out the evidence over the years?”

“What date range do you want?”

I hesitate but gradually respond, “All of it.”

“That’ll take me a while with some of the older dates before we logged everything digitally. But I’ll sort through it and get you the information.”

“Thanks so much.”

“No problem. Just don’t forget to return that when you’re done.”

“I won’t,” I tell him.

“Parish,” Gomez calls after we’ve begun to walk away. When he turns back, Gomez flatly instructs him, “Next time trust your gut. You know the right pitch, so get out of your head and just throw the damn ball.”

“Yes sir.” Bryce gives him a friendly wave before we head out. I figure he’s not happy about the last remark, but surprising me, he says, “Gomez is my favorite too. Well, other than you, Dap.”

BRYCE

A day off. At least this one is planned as opposed to the impromptu day yesterday.

When I walk out of the bedroom, I fully expect to see the Newspaper Nabber or some other uniform in my living room. Instead, I spot Daphne sitting at the table. She gives me a quick verbal acknowledgment without taking her eyes off her phone.

After I return the greeting, I grab a mug, fill it with coffee, then join her at the table. “No run this morning?”

“Didn’t really want to.” She shifts uneasily in the chair. “If they got in the hotel room unseen, they might be able to do the same here.”

“Gotcha.” The only good thing about that is she’s not going to leave my side. “So, what’s on the agenda today other than staying alive?”

She finally looks up to me with aggravation. “That’s it.”

“Really? No plans on your day off? I mean, I know it’s not technically your day off because you still have to babysit me. But hypothetically, if you were off duty today, what would you be doing?”

She shifts awkwardly in her chair then stands and walks over to the sink. “Hypothetical situations don’t matter.”

I make my way into the kitchen, watching as she rinses out her cup and avoids looking back to me. “No, but avoiding a simple hypothetical question means there’s some real feelings about it.”

“Yes, Bryce. You figured it out. I’m boring and have no life.”

“But is that by choice or is it involuntary?” When she gives me an expression that reads *I’ve had enough of your shit*, I add, “Hypothetically.”

“Fine. Baseball. That was my hobby, my passion. Then I was exiled,

forced to avoid the one place I loved being. And if I wasn't there, I was hanging out with my dad, doing whatever we could to keep ourselves busy until the next time we could get back to the field. Not anymore. Those days are long gone. And *hypothetically*, I should be at my parents' house today for my brother's birthday dinner ... but even if I were, there'd still be a big-ass wedge between my father and me. Now, can we stop saying *hypothetically* and drop it?"

"What time are we heading over for the birthday dinner?"

Shock crosses her face as she quickly shakes her head. "We're not."

"You're going to miss your brother's birthday because of a beef with your dad?"

"No. I'm missing because I'm assigned to keep you alive right now."

"That's not a very good excuse to miss your brother's party."

"It's not an excuse. It's a valid reason. And it's not a party, it's a family dinner with cake after. And Oliver will understand."

She shakes her head and takes a step, but I move in front of her. "For someone so brave who runs toward danger for a living, you sure run away from yourself a lot."

Damn. If looks could kill, mission Keep Bryce Parish Alive would be over.

She surges forward, stopping when her face is in mine. "For someone so good at reading signs, you really do ignore my cues and stick your nose where it doesn't belong. Constantly."

Shoving past me, she's out of the kitchen and across the room. I know I should drop it, but I can't. "I think it pisses you off that I can read cues really well." When she stops and swings back to face me, I don't stop until her face is inches from mine. "Because you can't hide from me. I see *you*."

She turns away from me as she says, "Don't."

"What? Read you? Because I know for a damn fact you want to be with your family today celebrating your brother's birthday." I take a breath before I ask, "Why let that bastard keep controlling your life?"

"It's not about Rex."

"Are you sure? Because all your other choices are based around the dipshit."

"Bryce, do you really think it's a good idea to go to my house with my father, your coach, and have a family meal?"

"Actually, he was a tad bit nicer to me the other day when I was having a

rough start. Maybe I'm wearing him down." I laugh, hoping to break the tension ... and hoping it's true.

"Totally. But let's not forget the other issue—someone is trying to kill you."

"Yeah. That only puts a kink in our plan if they carry theirs out. But I don't think anyone is checking your parents' house for me. My apartment, yes. So, the Dundee residence would probably be the safer option."

"Great logic." When she gradually moves to sit on the sofa, I grab the remote and flip on the TV, sitting beside her.

"I thought so. Want to watch a movie? Since it'll just be us all day and night?"

I see the struggle she's having, staying here alone ... the potential for me to drive her crazy or go to her parents' and face that encounter. "Fine. We'll go."

"Awesome." Apparently, I'm the worse option, and I'm not sure how I feel about that yet.

"But please just behave and don't do anything crazy. Putting my parents and brother in danger is *not* part of the plan."

"Agreed." But neither is putting her in danger, and that's literally why she's here. To put herself between me and the threat.

I listen as she makes several calls, starting with her mom. She asks if anyone else knows about the dinner plans and if Oliver is bringing anyone. The more she worries, the more I wonder if I made the wrong choice in urging her to go. But I can't imagine a night with her family would be a bad thing for her.

Too dressy. I toss the tie on the bed. She said casual, and I'm over here putting on one of my suits.

I drop on the side of the bed, rolling up the sleeves of my button-down. A T-shirt and jeans aren't an option, so I take off the suit pants and pull on a pair of khakis. In my mind, they're dressed up without being too dressy and don't look like I'm trying too hard. But I am.

"I'm screwed," I mutter, untucking the shirt I'd just tucked in. When I

step out into the living room, I spot her standing near the sliding glass door overlooking Canaan Falls. I don't say anything right away and just watch her. But she's aware.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes." *I think.*

When she turns to me, I get a full view of her. She's in a simple V-neck shirt and jeans. Her hair is down and some light-pink lip gloss that I'd like to kiss off her shines in the light. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks," she says quietly as she grabs her pistol and tucks it into the holster at the waistband of her jeans. As she puts a jacket on, she says, "This is a bad idea on so many levels." Her arms drop to her sides. "But let's go."

I reach over, taking her hand in mine. "We're going to have a great night. And I promise to be on my best behavior." Damn it, I'm going to try my hardest to make this night easier for her, but I'm not fully convinced it will go off without a hitch. Just because Coach was nice for once doesn't mean he actually wants me at his dinner table ... but here goes.

Daphne drives a little out of the way before looping back and pulling into the gated community where her parents live. I've been here a few times for some team gatherings and a Christmas party. But none of those times were with her. Not that I'm *with* her, but I sure as hell feel that way even if she doesn't.

When she pulls to a stop in the driveway, she puts the car in park and looks up at the residence. "Rule number five, don't do anything reckless."

Too late. "Just have to break it for a second." Reaching over, I take her hand in mine and give her a reassuring squeeze. "But I'll be good and follow the rules from here on out."

It doesn't escape my notice that a smile peeks at her lips as she bails from the car. "Sure."

I hustle to get around the hood of the car to offer my hand and shut the car door before guiding her up the pathway. When we get to the front door, it swings open. Her mom has a big smile on her face as her eyes drop to where my hand is in Daphne's for a second before Daphne pulls away. She stays in place until her mom goes in for a hug. "I'm so glad you made it."

Kelly takes a lingering look at me. "I didn't know you were joining us. Glad you could make it." She pulls me into a hug, and I return the gesture before she leads us inside to the family room where Coach and Oliver are chatting.

“Parish,” Oliver exclaims. He is definitely the happiest Dundee in my presence.

“How’s the Bel Air coming along?” I ask.

His eyes light up as he gives a detailed explanation about his project car. “It’s awesome. But I really need to find some more time to work on it. I could use some extra help if you’re up for it.” He looks to Daphne. “If that’s good with my sis, anyways.” Oliver gives his sister a cunning grin. “Speaking of, how come you didn’t tell me Parish was your new beau?”

“Because he’s not,” Daphne tells him.

Coach keeps a pointed stare locked on me as Oliver asks, “Do you sing to other girls before a game?”

She’s gonna deck me. So much for being on my best behavior. “Nope. Just my favorite.”

Yep. That glare says there’s a high potential of her at least cussing me out when we leave.

“Supper’s ready!” Kelly calls out as Daphne and Oliver head into the kitchen, leaving just me and Coach in the family room.

I take the time to tell him face-to-face, “I apologize about missing the game. It wasn’t my call. But if it had been, I would’ve been there.”

“Understood.” He says it like he actually understands and isn’t pissed, which shocks me enough that I don’t say anything as he adds, “Let’s get in there,” and walks out of the room.

I stand in the middle of the family room, taking in the warm atmosphere as I try to remind myself this isn’t permanent. But when I make it to the dining room, I see Daphne placing a bowl on the table. So, I move to pull her chair out as she takes a seat and then drop down into the one beside her.

“Such a gentleman. Your momma raised you right,” Kelly quips with a sugary smile, but something about it makes me wonder if that was truly a compliment.

“Granny, actually.” I don’t like correcting Kelly, but I can’t stomach my mom getting any credit for how I turned out. Though, I probably am a better man for not being around her. But Granny deserves much more credit, even if it was only for twelve short years, she instilled some manners in me.

Thankfully, the questions Kelly asks are geared towards my grandmother and the topic of my mom, or any other family, doesn’t come up. Before I know it, dinner is wrapped up and we’re singing “Happy Birthday” to Oliver.

He stands in front of a cake donning candles as his mother tells him to

make a wish, then he blows out the candles with his family standing around. And it makes me miss Granny more than ever. I distract myself with helping to clean up the kitchen even though Kelly insists she can do it. Daphne stays to help also, and before long, it's just the two of us in there.

"I don't think I've ever seen your father this laid back." Which shouldn't be surprising since he's in his element with his family.

"Yeah. He is more tranquil when there isn't a swarm of Coyotes running wild."

"Funny," I tell her, lifting my finger covered with soap suds to tap her nose. She doesn't move and just gives me a side-eye until I reach over to gently wipe it off.

She breaks away quickly as she says, "He is really different. At the field versus at home. I haven't seen him around here much lately." She closes the dishwasher, grabbing a towel to dry her hands as she glances over the clean kitchen. "He was more like himself tonight though."

"The kitchen looks better than new!" Kelly smiles and tells Daphne, "Oliver wanted to discuss something with you before he heads out. He's in the garage with your father now."

Daphne gives me an uneasy glance. "I'm good," I tell her.

Kelly waits until Daphne is out of the room before she moves in front of me. "I know about the stalker. I couldn't figure out why Daphne would be hanging out at the stadium all of a sudden. But then I heard about the singing, I knew something else was up." I'm not sure what to say, but Kelly doesn't stop. "Daphne and her father are just now getting back to being in the same room without arguing or completely ignoring each other. I really don't want anything to come between them."

"I don't either."

And if I had any doubt that she was talking about me, which I don't, she frankly tells me, "Let me make myself clear. I don't want *you* to come between them. Their bond barely survived the last hit. It won't withstand another. So, if you care about my daughter at all, leave her be. For her sake." With that, Kelly steps out of the kitchen and all the air in the room goes with her.

It's not like Daphne and I are on our way to being a couple or anything outside of her keeping me intact. Because she won't allow me a chance, and now I truly see that even if there were a possibility of us, no one wants us together anyway. My name is the only one on that roster at the moment.

BRYCE

Everything feels off. The buzz of the stadium is wrong. The atmosphere is not right. And me. I'm off. It's the final game of the regular season. We're down three runs in the second inning—I gave up a two-run homer and an RBI—all because I can't get my shit together.

Currently, a batter is on second base after hitting a double. So, it's no surprise that Coach Dundee is already walking to the mound. I can tell from his walk alone that he's pulling me before he even makes it over and says, "Murdock will take it from here."

"I got it." I've never refused to come out of a game. But I really don't want to leave this one.

"It wasn't a question, Parish." He looks composed on the exterior, but I hear the edginess in his tone. And there's no doubt that if there wasn't an audience watching on, Coach wouldn't be as restrained.

There's no changing his mind, but this sucks. I pass him the ball as he remains on the mound until my replacement finishes his jog from the bullpen to take over.

The second fucking inning, and I'm on the bench.

Coach enters the dugout and moves beside me. "I can't fix a problem if I don't know what it is. So, what's the issue?"

"Bad pitching."

"No shit. But I want to know why you're struggling more these last few games than when you were flaking out in the past. It never affected your game." When I keep my mouth shut, he trains an unwavering stare on me. "Is it the stalker situation? Or something else with Daphne?"

I shake my head. I can't give him a single concise good reason for my

shortcomings on the mound today.

“Are you flaking because we’ve already secured our playoff spot? If so, there’s no guarantee you’ll be in the lineup.”

“I know. I’m replaceable. That’s not it.” I look down to my feet. “I don’t know what it is. But I’ll fix it.”

Coach frankly tells me, “Getting pulled early might be a good thing for you. Rest your arm and hope whatever it is works itself out.”

There’s no point in responding because he’s already up and back at the rail, watching the game. Thankfully, Murdock gets us out of the jam I created, and no other runs are scored during the inning. It was in vain though because we lose the game. Yeah. We’ve still got our position in the postseason, but this is not how I wanted to wrap up the regular season.

After heading back to the locker room, I go through the motions of showering and dressing before I drop onto the clubhouse sofa, not ready to head out. I’m sure there’re still some reporters lingering, and I’m not ready to face the one person I’ve avoided during my failure on the field.

I hear Rex’s snicker before I see his mocking face. “Figured it would happen.” Ignoring the bastard doesn’t work. He just hammers my last nerve harder as he stands in front of me. “Don’t worry, bro. It happens to the best of us. She’s fucks up everyone’s game. It’s just your turn now.”

There’s no scenario where this doesn’t end with my fist in his mouth. But I try to maintain my composure as I stand, and Rex takes a step back. I don’t even speak before he holds his hands up in defense. “Hey, man, I’m sorry. I know what it feels like when she twists your concentration.”

That’s the moment. The one where I don’t give a fuck about anything but shutting the motherfucker down. I’ve had enough. Of him. Of my past demons. Of current bullshit. Of everything.

Seconds later, my knuckles connect with his jaw. The chump’s not expecting it because he never faces consequences. He just dishes out shit and gets away with it. Not this time. Rearing back, I swing my arm, punching him again. My fist strikes his rib cage, but I don’t have another chance before arms wrap around me and haul me backwards.

The locker room has erupted into chaos with a surge of my teammates shoving me back while I keep fighting to get another hit on the bastard. It wasn’t enough; I need more. He needs to be closed down. His mouth shut. He will pay for the misery he’s caused, for all the times he’s hurt her.

This is miserable as fuck. Even though the locker room has cleared out, I'm still sitting here. Waiting where Coach told me to while everyone else leaves. He's probably over coddling Rex if I had to guess.

Dropping my head back against the chair, I close my eyes until I hear someone approach.

Damn it. I'd rather have the other Dundee's judging stare on me than the one I've got now.

"Are you all right?" Her eyes drop to my right fist. One of the trainers examined it and said I was fine but insisted I ice it. There's no pain in my hand—or maybe I just don't feel it yet. Even if it was sore, I wouldn't take it back. I'd only wish to have hit that jackass harder. He needs to know he doesn't get to hurt and damage people without paying for it. "Bryce, what happened?"

"Got tired of his shit. So, I shut him up."

"Are you insane? Have you lost your mind? Did you really punch him?"

"Yep. I did." There's no point in denying it. Not sure why she's so shocked, I'd bet she probably wanted to do the same thing herself at some point.

"Do you understand what can happen?" she asks, her voice strained and fear in her eyes. What's the fear for her?

"Yes." A fine, benching, injured hand—it could be a lot. But I still don't regret it. "If I'm off the team, then your job is done, right? No need for someone to run my ass over if I'm not a Coyote."

"Don't you dare say that bullshit again. Having some lunatic after you doesn't give you an excuse to act like one too. And the really sad part is you're sabotaging your life just to get a quick hit in on someone who isn't worth it."

"Eh. I'll live. Hopefully." I give her a forced grin that she doesn't find amusing. And with how enraged she is, might as well go all the way. "I will miss getting yelled at by Little Dundee though."

"Please take something seriously for once, Bryce." She lets out a frustrated growl as she backs away and drops into the chair across from me. "But that's right. You can't be bothered by reality. It's just a bullshit game,

right?”

“Pretty much,” I retort flatly.

“So, we covered what scares me. Care to admit what has you terrified, or is this self-destruction episode just for the hell of it?” When I don’t answer she continues. “I understand there’s a lot going on. You’re upset about your father and all the crap with your mom and Wayne adding to it. But this isn’t helping at all.” She lets out a drawn-out exhale. “Come on, Bryce, talk to me.”

It’s not about Rex, or any other the other BS. Why can’t I admit that. At the end of the day, I wanted to hurt Rex because he hurt her. Yeah. Maybe it did help blow off some steam about my past drama, but it’s not about anyone but us. Though in her mind, there is no *us*.

“There’s nothing to talk about. He’s a dick. I punched him. And will again if he doesn’t stay the hell away.”

“Why risk everything you’ve worked so hard for?” Daphne asks with less anger and more concern than I expect.

“Maybe I’m done playing.” It’s the first time I’ve considered it in a long time. Quitting baseball. The last time was when I paid my mom to get out of my life and it felt like none of it was worth it. That time I sucked it up and pushed through. This time, I’m not sure I want to.

“You don’t mean that,” Daphne says lowly. “Don’t destroy the good in your life over your past.”

I should keep my mouth shut, but maybe I want to pick a fight with her too. “Like you’ve moved on from the past?”

When the chuckle leaves my lips, I see her shoulders square, her body tense up. “This is about you, not me.”

“He’s a loser, a piece of shit, and you fell right into his lap. I *don’t* understand it.”

“You don’t have to understand it. It’s none of your fucking business,” Daphne says bluntly before she stands and starts to walk away.

When I rise from the chair, I clasp her wrist in mine. If making the wrong decision is the theme of the day, I’d receive a perfect score. Shit, this isn’t helping either one of us. And she’s right. It really isn’t any of my business. I flat-out can’t stand what he did to her. “Maybe I overstepped.”

“No ‘maybe’ about it. You did. And if you do it again, I will walk away from this assignment, even if it means my career.”

“You’d really destroy everything you’ve worked for in order to get away

from me?”

She bluntly says, “Yes,” then jerks her wrist out of my grip. “You should know the feeling of zero fucks left to give.”

“I won’t apologize for punching that fucker in his mouth. I’m sick of his shit and hate what he did to you. Maybe I feel a little protective over you even though you’re supposed to be the one protecting me.” *Maybe a little possessive too.* Because she should be mine. “But I won’t intervene again unless you ask me to.” Or at least I’ll try my best not to. Because that dipshit doesn’t just overstep, he crushes boundaries continuously. And I can’t simply stand by and watch any longer.

“Rule number six. Don’t play the hero. I don’t want or need one.” She walks out of the locker room, the door slamming behind her. I know I open my mouth when I shouldn’t. Daphne Dundee very well might be my kryptonite.

I follow her out into the corridor, and I shout to her, “Good thing I’m not a hero, then.”

DAPHNE

There's a groggy hello on the other end of the line, giving me a feeling this conversation might not go well. But I really need it to.

"Hi. Is this Ivan?"

"Yes."

"This is Detective Dundee from Canaan Falls PD. I'm looking into the Nadine Baker case and wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Nadine, huh?" I hear shuffling in the background like he's getting out of bed. "What do you want to know?"

Thank God he's willing to talk. Because everyone else I've tried to contact either refused to answer questions, claim they don't know anything, or avoid me altogether. And I get that no one wants to get involved, but I don't get not caring about finding out the truth and getting justice for Nadine.

"According to statements, you were friends with Nadine and attended the Halloween party that night."

"That's correct. What's the question?" Ivan asks impatiently.

I bet he's fun at parties. "Anything about that night stick out?"

"Just Nadine getting killed."

"Do you recall if Nadine was having problems with anyone?"

"Nope. All I remember was her being happy and full of life." He lets out a painful sigh.

"Who was she hanging out with that night?"

"Everyone. Like I said, happy and life of the party. She was on the dance floor most of the night, though."

"What about Clyde? He was hosting. Did he pay special attention to her?"

"Nah. Not more than usual. They'd been friends since grade school."

Clyde was torn up after what happened. Always blamed himself.”

According to the original interviews, Clyde alibied out. But, as discussed with Bryce, alibis can be bought. “Do you believe Clyde would have had any reason to harm Nadine?”

“No way. He was totally in love with her. Everyone knew it. But they were only friends.”

“His choice or hers?”

“Oh, hers for sure. But he would never hurt her. I’d bet my life on it.”

Well, she might have done the same and someone she trusted took it. “Did you see who she left with?”

“No. I was plastered.” He pauses. “But finding her sobered me up.”

“Finding her?” I repeat, looking through my notes. “The report shows that Melissa was the one who discovered her when she was leaving the party and called for help.”

“We both kind of found her. It’s something I’ve wrestled with. I found her and just stood there, staring at her. I don’t know for how long. But it didn’t feel real, and I figured I was tweaking out. Then, with it being Halloween, I thought maybe she was playing a prank or something.” He clears his throat before he continues. “I even laughed when I sat next to her and told her she got me good. Melissa’s scream is what snapped me out of it. Needless to say, some of us had more than alcohol at the party.”

I look over the autopsy report that I’ve viewed a million times already. “Did you witness Nadine drinking or doing any drugs that night?”

“Does it matter?”

From the defensiveness of his tone, I go ahead and explain. “I’m asking to know her state of mind. And we have to consider every angle, even the possibility that she could’ve been meeting with someone to purchase since she had a history of drug use. But regardless of what she participated in that night, she didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“She was sober and hadn’t touched a thing in months. Nadine finally had her life on track and was damn proud. No way she was buying. I’d bet my life on that too.”

That’s what the report shows as well. “Do you remember what she was wearing as far as costume? Like what outfit and if she had a wig on?”

“A nurse. And I don’t know about a wig. Didn’t look like one.”

“Do you recall anyone wearing a blonde wig that night?”

“It was decades ago. Between what happened to Nadine and what I was

on, I don't remember much else."

"I understand. And I really appreciate your time. Just one last thing, do you have any pictures from that night?"

"Nope. The few I had I handed over to the police back then. I didn't want to remember anything about that night."

"Thanks again for your time." We end the call, and I can't get the information out of my head. Some details can get mixed up, but there's no record of Ivan being on scene when police arrived. He was only listed as a person in attendance that night. I don't want to discount him as a suspect fully, but my gut says it wasn't him. Clyde sounds more plausible. Usually motives involve money, jealousy, or revenge. It could've been him. But it looks like he was cleaning up his place with his then-girlfriend Vicky during the time the murder took place.

"Hey." When Bryce says it, I jump a little more than I should since I'm so caught up in my head.

"Hey." Yeah. Brilliant comeback, but that's been about the extent of our conversations since we left the field. Well, other than us bickering because I wanted to come out to the Van Herten vacation house since no one would expect us to be here and we have a five-day break before the first round of playoffs begin. It made more sense—at least it did to me. Bryce, not so much. He wanted to stay in Canaan Falls. After much reasoning and reassurance, he agreed to the hour-long trip since there's a gym here and he can keep up his workout routine, though he'll be resting his arm for a couple of days.

After a few beats of uncomfortable silence, Bryce takes a seat across the oversized dining table from me. "What'd you find out?" I don't realize I'm mindlessly gawking at him until he continues, "You have your thinking face on."

I really hate when he does that. "I just spoke to one of the guys from the party that night. Ivan."

"Ah. And what did Ivan add to the investigation?"

I relay the details as I carefully contemplate them again. Bryce seems focused on Nadine's case still, even if we're not on the same page about anything else. "We need to talk to this Clyde character. Where's he at?"

"Austin, according to the paperwork, but I'll have to ask Shaw to double check. I have his number, but this interview I'd rather do in person to see his reactions and body language."

"When are we heading to Austin?"

“We aren’t.” Though I am itching to sit across from Clyde and ask him about Nadine.

“Austin is only what about a two-hour drive from here. We could be up there and back before it’s too late if we leave now.”

Should I be considering his suggestion? No. Am I? Yes. “What about you? I don’t want to derail your training with the next games coming up.”

“I’m good. Everything on my agenda for today is complete.”

The bad idea suddenly looks extra tempting. If we don’t go to Austin, we’ll be stuck in the house all day. Being stuck in the car isn’t much more appealing, but possibly making headway on the case is so worth it. “Fine. But we’re going there, asking some questions, then straight back. Anything or anyone appears out of place, we’re coming back immediately.”

It did make me a little nervous since Captain Arnold sent us here without backup. But the plan that no one else knows where we are is worth it all being on me. And no one would ever expect us to be in Austin. “Let me ask Shaw to double-check Clyde’s last known address before we drive there. Wouldn’t want to go for nothing.”

I hope this isn’t the wrong move.

BRYCE

“We’re about ten minutes away,” Daphne says as she keeps her eyes on the paperwork in front of her. She’s gone through it for the entirety of the drive and hasn’t said anything that doesn’t involve the case.

“Let’s hope Clyde’s home.”

“And not a baseball fan,” she mutters.

“Or at least not a Coyotes hater,” I joke.

She doesn’t think it’s funny—as usual. “Maybe you should wait in the car. Just in case.”

“It’ll be fine. Even if he recognizes me, we’ll be long gone before word spreads that I’m in Austin.”

“Sure.” She tucks all the papers away and looks over at me. “If for any reason I feel you’re in danger. We’re leaving. The interview can wait.”

“It can. But neither of us want to wait. And I’m sure Nadine’s family would want answers sooner than later.”

“Yeah. They do.” Daphne turns away from me. “Her dad still has hope for answers, but Nadine’s mom has passed. She died without knowing who took her daughter’s life or seeing anyone held accountable for it.”

“That’s terrible.” I don’t know what else to say about it. I can’t imagine the pain she felt. “Hopefully, we’ll find some closure for him soon.”

“Hope so.” She glances at me. “About what happened after the game—”

“It’s in the past. No harm. No foul.” I squeeze my hand on the steering wheel and look directly ahead. Because we both know none of that shit is in the past. “I only have a small fine to pay, no suspension or broken bones.”

“How much is the fine?” she asks.

“Not much.” I’d pay double the amount if I could punch him again. “So,

let's forget any of it ever happened and move on.”

“Yep. It's that easy.” Her sarcasm is evident. And it makes me happy. I don't want her to move on despite my ridiculous way of handling it.

“It should be easy, right?” All of it. Us. Moving past the BS. Accepting that she's not mine. But nothing about this has been easy.

“We're almost there.” Daphne watches out the window as I drive the final distance through the subdivision and park in front of the house. “Here goes,” she declares, but doesn't get out of the rental car.

“This is your element. You'll be fine. Brilliant, actually, if I had to bet money on it.”

She glances over and gives me a nervous half-smile. “Please don't do anything reckless.”

“I promise.” And I will keep my word. This is about the case and getting justice for Nadine. And also about supporting Daphne in her endeavors. She seems content when she's researching and digging into the unknown to solve her mystery.

When we're at the door, Daphne takes a deep breath and rings the doorbell.

A dog starts barking from inside the house before the door opens and a lady greets us. “Can I help you?”

“Is Mr. Vega home?”

“Yes. He's upstairs. May I ask what this is in regard to?”

The lady is standing in the doorway when a man steps behind her and asks, “Who's at the door?”

When he pulls it open completely and steps in the threshold, Daphne responds, “I'm Detective Dundee from Canaan Falls PD. I'm looking into the Nadine Baker case and wanted to ask you a few questions.”

I note she doesn't introduce me. But no one seems to be paying me much mind. Clyde stares at her in stunned silence while the woman gets fidgety and asks Daphne, “It's been so many years. What can we possibly tell you that we haven't already?”

We. Daphne catches it too. “Were you in attendance that night also?”

The lady quickly nods her head. “Yes. We were dating at the time.” She looks back at Clyde.

“Oh. Vicky.” Daphne acknowledges her, then looks to Clyde. “I won't take up much of your time.”

“Sure. Come on in.” He moves to the side, and Vicky shifts behind him as

Daphne and I take a step inside. That's when Clyde takes notice of me.

"Bryce. Just tagging along with Detective Dundee." Clyde shakes my hand then walks away.

Daphne gives me an anxious glance before I place my palm on her lower back as we walk into the living room and have a seat on the couch. Daphne begins with asking general questions, like their memories of the night and if anything seemed odd. Then she transitions into specifics. "Did you see Nadine leave the party?"

Clyde shakes his head, eyes dropping to his hands. "No. But I wish a million times I would've walked her out instead of being shit-faced with my head in the toilet that night."

"I thought you two were cleaning up together when it happened," I say and realize I've said my thought aloud. I get an odd look from Daphne, but it's more of a look that says *That's the same question I have*.

"It was so long ago—" Vicky starts, but Clyde waves her off.

"It feels like a million years ago and just like yesterday. When your best friend is killed, you don't forget."

Daphne shifts forward a bit, her hands folded on her lap as she asks, "You told police you were in the kitchen with Vicky during the time the murder took place."

"No. Vicky said that, and I went along with it. I was in shock and too speechless to think about anything but Nadine being dead." He looks at me with sorrow. "That night still feels surreal, like a nightmare I never woke up from."

"I'm sorry." I don't know if I'm falling for his act or what, but I actually feel sympathy for the guy and hear the pain in his voice. "So, you were in the bathroom at the time"—I look over to Vicky—"and where were you?"

"The kitchen, cleaning." She shies away, her hand trembling as they wipe at her cheek. "I shouldn't have lied. But I was so worried Clyde would get blamed because Nadine was so obsessed with him. You can ask anyone."

"I did," Daphne says matter-of-factly. "And everything I heard contradicts that and says Clyde was the one who had romantic feelings for Nadine."

"No, that's not true—"

Clyde cuts her off again. "That is true. I loved Nadine before I even knew what love was. But we were only friends. And I was content with that."

"How?" I stupidly ask, though it's more for my sake than the

investigation's. Because just being friends is *not* working for me. I don't see any way to be content with it remaining this way long term.

"Because I couldn't live without her. So, I took whatever version of her kept her in my life." He lets out a sullen chuckle. "But I had to let her go anyway." He clears his throat and looks at Daphne. "My goal was to make sure to make her life easier, make sure she was happy. Nadine had a rough time we were teens. She struggled with addiction and always claimed she would hurt me and just wanted to be friends. So that's what we were—best friends."

"I was told that Nadine had been sober at the time of her death."

Clyde gets a proud smile that fades quickly. "She finally had her demons under control. And still lost her life."

"Have you checked into Tony? They were arguing that night."

Daphne looks to Vicky. "About what?"

"I don't know. They were always bickering about something. You should really check into his whereabouts at the time of the murder."

Clyde dismisses Vicky's concerns with a laugh. "He didn't have a crush on Nadine. They were just friends."

"No, that's not true. Tony took Nadine out on a date, and they were planning their next date that evening. I don't know what happened by the end of the night, but he wasn't happy with her, and she was crying."

Clyde shakes his head, looking defeated, but doesn't argue further.

Daphne takes the moment to speak up. "We're checking into everyone at the party. Do you have any photographs from that night?"

"No. I threw all of them out. That was one of the worst nights of my life. And I didn't want to keep pictures to remind me of those horrible memories."

"I understand," Daphne says, but I can tell she's still unhappy with the outcome of the interview. "Is there anything else either of you can tell me about that night? The smallest detail might mean something."

Both shake their heads, but Clyde speaks up. "No. Nothing that comes to mind."

"I'll see the two of you out," Vicky says, standing like it's not an option, indicating the conversation is over.

Daphne and I rise from the couch as she pulls out a business card and passes it to Clyde. "Thanks for your time. If you remember anything else about that night, please give me a call."

When we reach the front of the house and step outside, Daphne extends

her appreciation to Vicky who responds with a quick, strained smile, then closes the door swiftly, leaving us on the porch more than a little puzzled.

“Well, that was odd,” I say under my breath.

“Totally.”

We stop in the driveway, and I watch as Daphne glances back at the Vega residence. So, I ask, “What’re thinking?”

“Nothing we can talk about right here. But something is off with them.”

“Totally,” I repeat her phrase as we turn and walk away.

“Ms. Dundee,” a voice calls out, and I think I misheard until I turn and see Clyde trudging in our direction.

Daphne hesitates for a second before we walk back to meet him halfway down the drive.

When we get close, he discreetly holds up a photograph in his hand. “It really was the worst night of my life. But I couldn’t get rid of everything from the last time I saw Nadine smile.” His eyes glance over the picture. “I kissed her that night.” He never looks up from the picture as he says, “My best friend told me she wanted to be more than friends, and I kissed her. And she kissed me back. But she told me she didn’t want it to happen like that. With me drunk and not in my right mind. I assured her that whether I was sober or drunk, my choice was her. It always was. But she wanted to wait and do it the right way after I talked to Vicky.”

He glances over his shoulder where the curtains clearly move. Vicky is obviously watching us. “I should’ve broken it off with her. I tried once. But she said it didn’t matter what happened. She wanted to be with me.” He glances around awkwardly. “I always thought Vicky figured I took Nadine’s life, so she gave me an alibi. But I swear I’d never hurt her. And if this will help the search in the slightest, then I want you to have it.” Clyde passes Daphne the photograph.

“Thank you.”

“Just please let me have it back when you’re done with it. My wife doesn’t know I have it, and I don’t want her to even now. I don’t want her to destroy it like she did all the others. Erasing the pictures doesn’t change what happened that night.” With that, he turns and heads back to the house, leaving Daphne and me standing there.

“Okay. That was *really* strange. If he did it, why would he be so helpful?” I ask but Daphne has already started walking to the car.

She doesn’t speak until we’re in the car and I’m steering onto the road.

“He didn’t do it. And she didn’t give him an alibi because she thought he was guilty. She is.”

When Daphne passes me the picture, I spot the same thing that brought her to that conclusion. Vicky in a Marilyn Monroe costume. Equipped with a blonde wig. “Vicky murdered Nadine? Didn’t see that coming.”

“Me neither,” Daphne says. “My gut was telling me it was Clyde even as we sat across from him. But it’s not. It was her. That’s why she wanted everything from that night erased.”

“Now what? Can you arrest her?”

“I need more evidence to make sure the arrest sticks and the case is solid. But now that I know exactly who to focus on, I’ll be able to find it.”

Driving back, it takes me a few minutes to comprehend it. When I look over at Daphne, she looks deep in thought. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I just can’t believe it’s Vicky. She must’ve seen them kiss or overheard them talking and killed Nadine out of jealousy, to keep him from leaving her. And this entire time, Clyde’s thought she was protecting him. He’s never recognized the person he married was the one who took the love of his life away.”

“That’s a complicated marriage for sure. And one that never should’ve happened on so many levels.”

“Yes.”

“Neither of them should’ve went forward with it. You know, Vicky for the murder part. And Clyde because he’d already given his heart away. But people in love do crazy things.”

Daphne shakes her head. “That’s not love.”

“Touché.”

DAPHNE

“What’d the original detective on the case have to say?” Bryce asks as he walks outside and takes a seat beside me on the patio.

“He said he didn’t have any reason to suspect her since she had an alibi. Plus, the scene was so brutal it appeared to have been someone with a lot of strength.”

“Well, rage can replace that right? And adrenaline.”

“I guess.” I look over the notes.

“What about DNA?”

“Everything was tested but no matches were found. The murder weapon was never located. Plus, back then DNA wasn’t as advanced. Now, the lab is backed up and it’ll take weeks to process ... and that’s after we get a subpoena for a sample since neither want to provide one voluntarily.”

“Dang it. What’s the next step?”

“Waiting.”

“More waiting?” Bryce asks, almost in a whine. “They solve this stuff so much faster on TV.”

“Yes, Bryce. The fictional detectives wrap up the cases much faster.”

“They’re not all fictional. There’re some reality ones. None of them are my cup of tea, though. I’ll stick with John McClane, because *Die Hard* is much better than reality.”

“Right.”

“So, I wanted to ask you something ...” Bryce’s uncertain tone draws my attention because he’s anything but shy. “I know we’re on house arrest, but there’s a place I want to take you.”

“Where?”

“It’s a surprise.” He is way too giddy for it not to be extravagant.

“No, not a good idea until your case is solved.”

His lips stretch into a smile. “You’ll go on a date with me after this is over?”

“I never said that.”

“Yeah. Ya did.” Oh my gosh, he’s intolerable. “But I think this’ll be a good outing for now. I promise it won’t put either of us in danger.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“Nothing is guaranteed, but I assure you no one knows we’ll be there. It’s not anywhere I’ve been before.” He gives me a pitiful expression that I’m sure gets him his way with the ladies more than not. “It’s even farther away from Canaan Falls and all the dangerous maniacs. Please.”

I’m going to regret this. “If I say we’re leaving, we leave. No matter where we are. No questions asked.”

“Perfect.” He claps his hands together, a triumphant smile on his face.

“And this is *not* a date.”

“You say potato, I say tomato.” He’s out of his chair and heading inside.

“That’s not how that saying goes,” I shout to him.

Yelling over his shoulder with a smirk on his face, he replies, “I know. I just love when you laugh.”

Tomato. Potato. Whatever. This is *not* a date. And I remind myself of that every second of the entire ride to his mystery destination until he stops in front of a brick building. I know he’s lost it when I read the glowing sign across the front of the place.

“There’s a madman trying to kill you and your bright idea is to trap us in an escape room? Seriously, Bryce?”

“Yep. You like puzzles, mysteries, deciphering stuff. So, here’s one to solve quickly. And the sooner you do, the sooner we can escape. Together.”

“No. No way.”

“Do you really think some crazy person knew we would be here and is waiting inside for us?”

“This can wait. It’s not worth the risk.”

He gets a little too serious for my liking when he tells me, “Yes, it is.” I’m still in disagreement but Bryce is already out of the car and walking around to my door. He pulls it open and when I don’t get out, he reaches out his hand to me. “Please? Promise I’ll protect you.”

But who’s going to protect me from him? Because the way he’s looking

at me, the thought he put into the not-a-date date is making me feel everything I shouldn't. "The first sign that something isn't right—"

"We're out of here," he finishes for me. But it still doesn't calm my nerves. About any of it. Especially when he adds, "Trust me."

BRYCE

“I don’t think I’ve ever had that much fun.” Between spending time with her and watching her flourish. It was perfect.

“It was fun.” She takes a few seconds before she looks over to me. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I steer out of the parking lot and onto the road, not ready for the night to end quite yet. “What are you in the mood for? There’s a great steak house a few miles from here.”

“I don’t think such a public outing is a good idea.”

“Embarrassed to be seen with me?” I tease, and when I look over to her, she’s giving me her shut-up-Bryce look. I know I won’t win this battle, so I cave quickly. “Fine. Takeout it is.”

A short time later, we’re picking up our curbside order and heading back to the house in silence. I already know I shouldn’t push my luck, but what the hell. As soon as we’re walking up to the house I ask her, “So, do I get a second date since the first one seems to be going smoothly?”

“Smoothly, huh? Is that what you call kicking the zombie before your curled up in a ball on the floor?” The smile stretched across her mouth makes me want to kiss her more than ever before. And the feeling was already strong enough.

“In my defense, that thing looked really creepy.”

“It did. But it was fake.”

Her laugh is contagious, but the word *fake* reminds me how this isn’t guaranteed to go anywhere past the time she’s assigned to tag along with me.

I step in front of her, her back against the car as I place a hand on her hip. “But it seemed real.”

She doesn't say a word. And I want to kiss her before the moment passes; before I think about how fake this date might've been. Slowly leaning forward, I expect her to inform me of what a bad idea this is, but as soon as my lips are near hers, her eyes close. Mine instinctively do the same, savoring in her. Last time, it was rushed, unplanned, and happened so fast at the game. Fake for sure. Even if I didn't want it to be. But this one is slow, patient, and real.

Her fingers grip my shoulders as she moves slightly back, barely breaking the kiss. "Bryce, I—"

"Tell me no, and I'll stop. But don't push me away because you're scared."

"With the case and everything ..."

"Excuses." I feather a kiss over her lips. "You don't have to say anything tonight. But I'll make you a deal. After the case is over, and we're free to go our separate ways, I'll ask you on a date. And I want a real answer, not a scared one. Real."

She remains quiet for a minute before she breathes, "Deal."

I'm definitely happy that she agrees to give us a chance but also hope she will keep her word. When all is said and done and this is over, I want nothing more than for her to give us a real shot, not with all the other BS factored in.

"You know what happens if you break our deal, right?" I ask, rubbing my finger along her jawline.

My gaze falls to her neck as I notice she leans into my touch as she asks, "What's that?"

"You'll owe me a song." I smile, thinking about it. "Sung loudly, in front of the entire stadium."

"That is not going to happen." Her annoyance is obvious as she pulls out of my hold. "And I still can't believe you did that. Even if it shouldn't surprise me."

Shifting back in front of her, I make sure she understands that was never a joke or a bogus performance to me. "I had to get your attention somehow. Even if the cover story was fake, the intention was very real." I lean forward, my palm against her cheek as I stop just before my mouth is on hers. "Can I kiss you?"

"Yes." The word she whispers along my lips is the one I crave more than the oxygen that fills my lungs. Because when all this is over and nothing remains but the two of us, I pray she'll say it again.

Eliminating the space between us, I give her a tender, unhurried kiss but don't linger, because I don't want to push my luck. She's giving me hope. And for now. That's enough.

DAPHNE

After shoving the last bit of clothes into my bag, I'm ready to head back to Canaan Falls. At least, I'm ready as far as packing goes, though I'm definitely not ready to leave the comforts of the Van Hertens' getaway.

Heading out of the bedroom, I eventually find Bryce standing on the back porch, his cell to this ear. I stay in the kitchen and finish putting away the last few dishes from breakfast. He's off the phone and walking inside about two minutes later. From the tension in his posture, I'm guessing it wasn't a fun phone call.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes." His flat tone contradicts his response, but I listen as he explains, "Jasper was just checking in."

I know the guy is his best friend, but something doesn't sit well with me about the dude. "You didn't tell him where you are, right?"

"No, I didn't tell him. Though, we should be heading out soon just in case he tracked my phone. That way he won't have time to carry out his assassination plot." He says it jokingly, but I can hear the underlying irritation. And I know it's because I still suspect someone so close to him of the unthinkable. But I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Thankfully, my cell rings and interrupts the conversation. Unfortunately, it's Captain Arnold calling. This can't be good. And as soon as I say hello and hear his voice. My stomach twists in a knot.

"Daphne, I have Austin PD on the line, requesting to speak with you."

A wave of panic flows over me. "Why? What's happened?"

"Officer Nguyen said there's a hostage situation at the Vega residence and they need you on scene immediately."

“I’m two hours away.” But I’m already halfway to the door when I tell Bryce, “We have to go to Austin. Now.” He surely has questions, but I focus back on the phone. “Did they tell you anything? Is anyone hurt?”

“The only thing I know is there’s a hostage and the individual holding him will only speak to you.”

“I’m on my way.” As soon as I hang up, we’re on the road, and I give the little information I know to Bryce. “I really need you to be careful. This could be a trap for you.”

It’s far-fetched. But there’re so many scenarios playing out in my head, and I don’t know which one to latch on to. Nothing about Vicky or Clyde’s behavior led me to believe they’d resort to this. But a pending murder charge will make anyone irrational.

The ride seems to take four hours instead of two as we finally pull up to the residence. The Vega house has a barrier of squad cars surrounding it. When I make my way to the barricade, I hold up my badge and tell the officer my name. She directs me to Officer Nguyen, who leads me behind a patrol van and out of the line of sight from Clyde and Vicky’s home.

“We received a call from a distressed female who stated she had her husband at gunpoint and wouldn’t speak to anyone but you. Your captain mentioned you’re investigating a cold case involving them.”

“Yes. Vicky is our prime suspect, but I had no indication she would turn violent towards Clyde.” Killing Nadine was to make sure she could be with him. “I’ll talk to her.”

“She said to send you inside when you got here. Or she would kill Clyde and herself.”

“I’ll go.”

“Daphne—” Bryce starts.

“I have to.” I might not have made her snap, but I did stir whatever desperation she felt inside that made her think violence was her best option. And I can’t leave Clyde in there to face her alone. Nguyen asks me for my weapon as I pass it to him. He hands me a bulletproof vest which I quickly pull on.

“Is this your only weapon?”

“No. I have a backup piece in my ankle holster.”

“It’s a gamble keeping it on but your call.”

“Yeah. I’ll take the gamble.” She won’t find it unless she does a full pat down. And my instinct says she won’t do that. But there’s also something

else I'm still worried about. "I need you to keep an eye on him. I'm on protective detail and need him safe." Trusting an officer who I just met with Bryce's well-being is a gamble, too, but I'd rather Nguyen be aware that there's a threat on Bryce's life just in case something else is in the works here.

"I'm going with you," Bryce declares.

This is not up for debate. "No, absolutely not," I say.

"You can't go in alone." The worry on his face makes me more nervous.

"This is my job, Bryce. What I'm trained to do. I can't have you in there with me. I'd be distracted."

"I'm—" Bryce begins to argue but I stop him.

"No. There's nothing to debate. I'm going in alone. You're staying by Nguyen's side. And the longer we argue about it, the higher the chance Clyde and Vicky won't come out alive."

That seems to get through to him, but he doesn't look happy. He steps forward, tugging me into a quick hug, his mouth next to my ear as he whispers, "Please come back to me." Then he gives me a tender kiss before reluctantly releasing me.

"I will." I have to. Everyone has to come out of this alive.

Nguyen passes me an earpiece. I situate it and start to cautiously make my way up the driveway. When I get to the porch, I lift my hands in the air. "Vicky, it's Daphne." I slowly turn the knob and push the front door open. The first thing I see is Clyde on the floor, a cut on his temple has a trail of dried blood smeared on his face.

"Come inside. Shut the door," Vicky screams, her hand shaking as she points the handgun at me.

I do as she instructs, then raise my hands in the air. "Just put the gun down. We can talk, and you can tell me why you wanted me here."

She squirms, her hand adjusting on the gun as she sobs, "It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I didn't do anything. I didn't kill Nadine."

"Just give her the weapon, sweetheart. We can figure this out," Clyde says softly.

Vicky instantly grows more agitated as she points the weapon at him as she screams, "Tell her the truth. Now."

He mumbles pleas as he cries and shields his face. "Please don't kill me."

"I won't if you tell her the truth."

With her frantic movements, I'm worried she's going to fall over the edge

at any second. She's unstable, but her fury is definitely directed at Clyde, not me. So I take a small step forward. "You tell me, Vicky. Tell me the truth about everything. And I swear to you I will listen to every word and hear you out."

"No." She erratically shakes her head. "You won't believe me."

"Yes, I will. Because what I want to find more than anything is the truth."

"He did it." Her arm steadies a bit as she keeps aim on him. "And the son of a bitch made sure he could frame me. I thought maybe it was him who killed Nadine. But I didn't want to believe it."

"How do you know that he killed her?" I try to distract her as Clyde wails incoherently; he's making her more antsy, so I tell him, "Shut up. I want to hear what Vicky has to say."

She seems to concentrate on me as Clyde finally quiets. I calmly try my best to reassure her. "I'm listening. I want to know what really happened that night. Please explain it to me." I have no clue if she's telling the truth or lying to get away with murder, but she has the gun, so it's her that I will side with until this is deescalated.

"He gave you a picture of that night, right? It took me a little while to figure out why. I never knew what happened to my wig. So, imagine my surprise that it's in the crime scene photograph of Nadine that I found taped under his toolbox in the garage." She moves the gun back to Clyde. "Why would you want to look at that horrific image unless you did it and enjoyed it." He opens his mouth to say something, but Vicky's screams cut him off. "He set me up. I don't know if he wanted me to take the fall that night or if it was just his backup plan in case he was suspected. But the latter is what worked out perfectly. He framed me. And I'll go to prison for murdering his bitch."

"Did you overhear them talking or see them together that night?" I try to word it carefully to not set her off, but she seems content that I'm asking questions and listening to her.

"No, she barely spoke to either of us that night. She was too busy dancing and chatting with Tony to pay him any attention. I swear they were dating." She lifts the gun back to Clyde. "Is that why you did it? You were jealous?"

Clyde's eyes widen as he looks from Vicky to me. I nod back to Vicky. "She has the gun. I'd answer her question. Truthfully."

But he remains silent, Vicky strides forward, just out of reach, the barrel of the gun between his eyes as she tells him, "You can die here or in prison."

Your choice. But I will not go down for your crime. Not after dealing with your stupid, pompous ass all these years.” She half screams, half sobs, “Tell her.”

He gets a smug expression on his face, no sign of fear when he was just crying seconds ago as he watches Vicky.

The sound of the gun firing rings through my ears, I fear it’s over and she’s shot her husband, but the bullet hits the wall inches from Clyde’s head. I hear shouts about breaching the house coming from my earpiece before I scream, “No, wait! That hit the wall,” and hope Officer Nguyen heard and understands my words. Looking directly in Vicky’s eyes, I say, “You don’t want to hurt anyone, Vicky. You haven’t yet. Just put the gun down.” In my ear, I hear Nguyen tell his men to stand down. So, I focus back on Clyde. “Did you kill Nadine?”

He avoids my stare for a beat before he seethes, “I did it.”

Vicky lets out a painful sob. “How could you do that? I hated the woman, but I’d never kill her. She was your best friend.” Clyde nervously glances to me and back to his wife, but he doesn’t say anything. Vicky keeps the weapon pointed at his head. “All these years together. And you still want me to take the fall. You kept that damn picture just to frame me. But you will not get away with it.” Her hand adjusts on the grip of the gun. “Give her something, some evidence or anything to prove it was you. Tell her a detail that only the sickening murderer would know, or I will kill you. I don’t have anything else to lose.”

“That’s not true, Vicky.” I attempt to calm her, but she’s got her full attention on Clyde.

The man is letting some of his arrogance show because he’s looking up at her, waiting for her to make a move before he tells her, “You always were overly dramatic.”

I see her hand tense as she lowers her arm, her finger pulling the trigger as the gun discharges, shooting Clyde in the knee. He hunches over, grabbing his leg, hollering in pain.

Vicky swings around, pointing the weapon on me. I’d been reaching for my backup piece but quickly stop. My hands back high in the air. “His knee. You shot him in the leg.” I ramble to inform Nguyen of what’s going on as he asks if I’m good. “I’m good. You’re good, Vicky.”

That’s when Nguyen informs me, “You have less than a minute before we have to come in there, Dundee.”

“Just give me a little more time. Okay, Vicky? So, I can understand everything.”

“We’ll wait as long as we can, but she’s escalating. And there won’t be any loss of life on my watch.”

“Ditto,” I mutter to Nguyen.

When I go to reach for Clyde, Vicky shouts, “Don’t touch him.”

“We have to stop the bleeding. You don’t want a murder on your conscience. Don’t punish yourself out of spite. Then he’ll win. But I need you to give me the gun and walk out of here with me.”

“Let him bleed to death and suffer like the evil bastard he is.” She doesn’t waver and lifts the handgun back to point at Clyde. “The next bullet will go between your eyes unless you give her some evidence to put your rotten ass in prison forever.”

When she takes a step closer to him, I move forward and ask him. “The murder weapon, what did you do with it?”

He squeaks, his hands clutching his knee as he lets out an agonizing groan. “I don’t know.”

Vicky tilts her head the slightest to the side, looking over him. “You’re lying. Your narcissistic ass would never get rid of that trophy. Last chance—what did you do with it?” she shrieks.

He only falters for about two seconds, but it feels like an eternity as I hold my breath, anticipating Vicky completely losing her mind and pulling the trigger. But thankfully, Clyde responds to her demand. “Behind the Manchester cottage.”

At least, *I* thought it was a good thing, Vicky not so much.

“You conniving motherfucker.” She looks over to me. “That’s where I was living back then. It’s off County Road 144, across from the old rice factory.”

He really did plan for her to take the fall. “Come on, Vicky. It’s over.”

“No, not until it’s dug up when I know this isn’t another one of his tricks. We’re not leaving this house before then.” I consider reasoning with her but know it won’t get me anywhere. And right now, finding it will be the quickest way out of this. “Okay. Let me make a call.” I slowly lower my hand. “I’m going to grab my phone out of my pocket. I’m going to call my partner who’s back in Canaan Falls.” And pray he answers.

When she gives me a quick nod, I grab my phone and dial Shaw. There’s a great sense of relief that floods me when he answers. “I need a favor. It’s

urgent.”

“I thought you had a situation in Austin. Captain Arnold wouldn’t give me any details.”

“I do. And I’m still in the middle of it right now. Clyde said he buried the murder weapon behind the Manchester place off CR 144 across from the old Star Tex Rice plant. I need you to go find it. Vicky won’t surrender until we have it in hand as proof that Clyde attempted to frame her after he murdered Nadine.”

There’s a few seconds pause as he puts the rest together. “You’re inside the house with her?”

“Yes. And I need you to hurry please.”

“I’m five minutes away,” Shaw utters, his voice shaky and rushed.

I relay the precise location where Clyde states he buried the knife.

“Daphne, please be safe,” Shaw tells me before we end the call. I plan to, but it’s easier said than done. What’s really worrying me is Clyde. I pray for his sake that Shaw is able to locate the knife. Because I fear if he is lying or trying to trick Vicky, it will send her over the edge.

It’s been the longest fifteen of my life. I finally convinced Vicky to let me tie a towel around Clyde’s knee, because he can’t be held accountable if he’s dead.

One of the only times she speaks, she somberly asks Clyde, “Why?”

He grunts out, “She was with that lowlife Tony. I found them screwing in *my* bed. But *I* was never good enough for her.”

“So, you killed her?” Vicky asks breathlessly, like she still can’t believe what she’s hearing even though she knows it to be true.

Clyde doesn’t respond, just sulks and ignores his wife as we sit in the grim stillness until my phone rings a few minutes later, and it’s Shaw thankfully. Hopefully, he found it. And before I can even finish saying hello, he says, “We got it. The knife was buried exactly where he said it was.”

We’ll have to test it and validate its authenticity, but I keep that part to myself. Because I’d bet my life (which I’m kind of doing) on it being the murder weapon.

“They found it,” I relay to Vicky, but I can still see the doubt in her eyes. So, I put Shaw on speaker. “Send me some pictures for proof, please.”

Less than a minute later, my message alert goes off. I glance over the picture, one a close-up of the knife. Another a little farther back where you can see the rear of the cottage and several deep holes beside it. A plastic, dirt covered bag in it.

I hold the phone up to Vicky as she takes it from me, looking over the pictures. She collapses to the floor like her legs have given out from under her. As I attempt to catch her, the firearm falls from her grip.

I quickly release her and grab the weapon, sliding it away as I shout, “All clear. We need a medic ASAP.” Clyde is looking pretty woozy as he lies on the floor.

Seconds later, the room is filled with chaos. Medics go straight to Clyde while an officer pulls Vicky up from the floor then handcuffs her. She looks like she’s in a daze, completely sad and in shock. And I have to tell her. “Everything will be okay.”

She meets my eyes. A peek of a smile on her lips as she tells me, “Thank you for believing me.”

There will be some consequence for shooting the bastard in the knee and all the pandemonium of today, but at least it’s not a murder charge like Clyde is facing.

I follow the officer who escorts Vicky out of the house, and as soon as I step on the porch, I see Bryce running in my direction. He crashes into me as his arms wrap so tightly around me, I can barely breathe. But I hang on to him, too, and try to comprehend everything that’s happened.

DAPHNE

Bryce places the refilled cup of coffee in front of me and drops into the chair beside me. “This place is about as exciting as your station.”

“This is the old part of the station. I figured it’d be a safer option given your predicament,” Nguyen explains before he flips through his notes. “I think that’s about everything I need, but let me double check before y’all head out.”

I nod as Nguyen gets up and leaves. Only Bryce and I remain in the interrogation room that is way too quiet for my screaming thoughts. I still can’t fully grasp it. “Clyde did it.”

“You said your gut was telling you he did. Should’ve listened to it,” Bryce says confidently, but I feel like that has more underlying meaning. Or maybe it’s just me. Because I haven’t trusted my gut in forever. My gut led me to my disastrous ex, and we know how that went.

“Do you think Vicky will end up in jail?” Bryce asks.

“She did shoot Clyde. There’s no way she’ll walk away without consequences.”

“I don’t blame her,” Bryce declares matter-of-factly before I turn to look at him as he adds, “The bastard deserved it.”

“Bryce—”

“The jackass murdered his best friend then tried to pin it all on his girlfriend-turned-wife. That man can’t have a decent bone in his body.”

“I can agree to that.” How he slaughtered Nadine tells me all I need to know about him.

Nguyen peeks his head in room. “You have a visitor.”

When Shaw steps in, I stand, accepting his bear hug as I tell him, “Thank

you so much.”

“Anything for my partner.” Shaw squeezes me tighter before releasing me.

Bryce stands from the table. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” I ask.

He points to his paper cup. “Going to get a refill.”

I know it’s a lie because he hasn’t even taken the first sip from it. “You’re still not in the clear.”

“I’ll go with him. Another dose of caffeine sounds good.” Nguyen follows Bryce out.

I turn my focus back to Shaw. Why does it feel awkward to be alone with him? “You didn’t have to drive all the way up here.”

He clasps my hand in his. “I had to see you with my own eyes to make sure you were okay. That was a reckless move, going into the house, much less without backup.”

“I had to.” I release his hand and sit at the table. “Vicky would only speak with me. My interview the other day set this whole thing in motion, and she was desperate.”

“It’s not your fault, Daphne.”

“No. But I should’ve been more careful with who I took at their word. He handed me the stupid picture, and I bought it before I even had concrete evidence.” I tap my finger against the photograph in question. “He left the wig at the scene to implicate Vicky.”

“So, it was unquestionably premeditated. He planned to kill Nadine when he followed her outside and had a person to place the blame on.” He leans towards me and rubs his palm up my arm. “But the important thing is now Nadine’s killer will be brought to justice.”

“Yeah.” The road ahead will be long with a gruesome and exhausting trial. But there will be some resolution for her dad and loved ones. Though the aftershocks are just beginning.

Shaw shifts closer, his palm moves to my face. My first thought is how unnatural it feels compared to when Bryce touches me. My comfort level with Shaw is usually top-notch. We know each other so well, spend countless hours together, and trust the other with our life. We’re friends. But that’s it. And this feels different. His fingertip rubs along my skin as he says, “I’m just glad you’re all right.”

I turn my head away, removing his touch. “Me too.”

His tone changes a bit as he says, “Just don’t do anything crazy like that again. You’ve been making a lot of rash decisions lately.”

My guard is securely up now. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Forget I said it.” He places his palms on the tabletop and pushes up from the chair.

I follow behind him. “Not likely. If you have something to say, just say it. We don’t keep secrets from each other. And when we have an issue with each other, we’re up-front. That’s why we’ve made it as partners.”

He slowly turns to face me. “You’ve been cavalier and preoccupied since your latest assignment came into the picture.”

“Bryce? This has nothing to do with him. And neither did my decision to enter the Vega residence today.”

He clasps my elbow doesn’t move or say anything. Just stands there, his eyes looking behind me for a few seconds before he says, “I was scared, Daphne. I thought I was going to lose you.” He tugs me closer as he steps in front of me. “And I’m scared I’m going to lose you to him.”

“What—?” Before I can get the question out, Shaw’s lips are on mine. The immediate sensation shocks me into immobility before I put my arms between us, thrusting my hands forward against his chest as I shove away.

He quickly backs away, panic and frustration on his face. “I’m already too late.”

“What the hell are you talking about? We’re work partners. That’s it.” Fucking Bryce. His mocking face in my mind tells me *I told you so*.

But I don’t have to imagine his face because when I see Shaw glance behind me again, I turn to spot Bryce at the door. There’s nothing mocking or humorous about his stare.

“Of course. Mr. Baseball Circus, perfect timing as usual.” Shaw shoves past me. “You had to know how I felt. I just didn’t want to make it weird at work. But he won, for a change, at least off the field.”

Bryce doesn’t say a word, but from the glower masking his face and the harshness of his stance, I know I don’t want him to get any closer to Shaw.

I stay between them and guide Shaw back a few steps. “Make it weird? Won? You’re delusional. First off, he hasn’t won. We’re not together. And it’s not a fucking competition anyway. I’m trying to keep him from getting killed. And as far as not making it weird, that’s blown to smithereens.” The regret on Shaw’s face lessens my anger a bit. But just a smidgen as I take a deep breath to simmer down a little more. What the hell is wrong with all

these guys? I swear someone is running around beating them with a stupid stick. “We’ve worked together for two years. This is not you.”

“You’re right. Let’s just pretend it never happened.” He takes a step towards the door. “I’m glad you’re safe. Bryce”—he turns in his direction —“my apologies.” Then he walks out.

I wait a minute before turning back to see Bryce. He’s simply watching me. No emotion on his face. But I know I’ll hear it. “Yeah. I know what you’re going to say. So don’t.”

Moving to the table, I grab my phone as he bluntly tells me. “You don’t have a clue what I want to say.” Then he takes his turn to trudge out of the room.

I follow him down the corridor, practically jogging to catch up to him but don’t until we’re at the car. When he reaches for the door, I stand behind him. So many times, he puts me in situations I don’t want to discuss. But now he wants to give me the silent treatment?

“Just say it. Obviously, you want to. You told me so.”

He rotates to face me but stays in place. “Yeah. I did. But that’s not what I’d say. Not that anything I say will ever make a difference. You’ll never give me half the chance that you give the bastards who keep you in the dark, lie to you, use you. Shaw will easily weasel his way in and get another chance to play innocent work buddy and good guy. If McGraw doesn’t beat him to it. But it doesn’t matter. I was on your shit list before you knew me. And now that you do, still won’t give me two seconds of your time.”

“Two seconds? My entire life is revolving around you! What more do you want?”

He eliminates the distance between us, standing inches away. His unwavering eyes locked with mine. “You’re being paid to be here. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be standing with me. All I wanted was for you to give me the same chance you gave that bastard and put a sliver of trust in me.”

“I can’t.” The words leave my lips before I think twice. I feel so off-kilter with what happened today.

He shocks me when he laughs. “Of course. We’re back there again. That’s what I thought.”

“No, no. You don’t get it.” I shift between him and the door. “I didn’t only lose the four years I invested in the relationship. I lost everything. The bond I thought was unbreakable with my father, my safe haven that I could

always return to, and the future that I thought I wanted with someone who was actually playing me. And my dad chose *him*. Nothing has been the same since then between us. So don't lecture me about what a stupid decision he was. I already know that. And I can't handle losing what I have left."

There's hurt covering his face as he tells me, "You're right. This isn't worth losing what you have left for nothing more than a meaningless mistake with me."

"I never said that."

He utters, "You just did. And you made it clear to your buddy that we're not together and there's nothing between us."

BRYCE

Even from the bullpen, I can see that the stadium is packed. And I can't wait to step on the mound, more so than ever before. Don't really care why or where the urge is stemming from, I'm just ready to focus on pitching and help bring a win for game one of this playoff stretch. Best of out of five games will move on to the next round, and I need this game to count in our favor.

"Another one, Parish," Coach calls out as he stands at my side, speaking with Daphne. There hasn't been much conversation between us since we left Austin yesterday. It's not like we've entirely shut off, but I followed her first rule and keep every exchange between us professional.

"I heard there was some problem in Austin yesterday," Coach mentions to Daphne.

Casually, she replies, "It was nothing."

Like us. The thought still stings, but I can't help but laugh. And evidently do it loudly enough to draw the attention of both Dundees.

"Something funny?" Coach asks.

I shake my head. "Nah. Nothing at all."

I see the younger Dundee's glare become infuriated, but I find it absurd that she's downplaying the craziness that went down yesterday and lying to her dad about it. Evidently, she doesn't want him to worry. But to say being held at gunpoint between a desperate woman and her murderer husband is nothing is true madness.

Coach and Daphne exchange a little more small talk before he asks me, "Are you ready?"

"Yes sir."

His judgmental gape gives me the impression he doesn't agree. But I don't try and convince him. My performance will speak for itself either way. And I feel more than ready.

Moments later, we head out of the bullpen, across the field, and into the dugout. Daphne takes a seat nearby, and I join my teammates. From that moment until I get on the mound, my vision is tunneled to focus solely on winning the game.

Once my foot hits the rubber, my arm cooperates. The first batter goes down in four pitches. Two strikes, a foul, and a final strike, and he's parking his ass back on the visitor's bench.

As soon as the second batter steps up to the plate. I get set and throw a fastball. He surprisingly swings at the first pitch, which is very uncommon for him, but this is a postseason game. We know what's on the line—everything. Luckily, his gamble results in a pop fly that is caught out in right field.

Third batter sticks to his typical routine. Doesn't swing at initial pitch, which puts the first strike on the board. When I throw a splitter next, he swings and misses. Strike two. The sensation of doing my job and doing it damn well feels exhilarating. I have this. I am in control on field. If nowhere else is.

And control is mine when I send the fastball to the outside corner with the batter chasing it. Third strike. Final out. As I'm walking off the field, I already can't wait to step back on the mound in the second inning.

As I lean on the railing of the dugout, Coach Dundee moves beside me. "Anything you need to tell me?"

When I slowly look over at him, I'm met with his agitated mug. "I'll never be good enough," I mutter.

He frankly responds, "Being good enough has never been the issue for you." Dundee remains beside me while I consider his words but do my best to keep my mind in the game.

When I step back on the mound, I'm in the zone immediately and get the results I crave. Finally. Because when I step off in the seventh, I figure it'll be my last inning, but I'm good with that since our opponents are scoreless. Coyotes only have one run, but that's all we need.

We capture the final out in the top of the ninth and celebrate a win for game one. Now, I just have to figure out how to patiently wait my turn to take the mound again. Because if we don't win this series, today is my last

day pitching for the season. And even though I'm ending this game on a high, I need more. I want the Coyotes to be the last team standing. That'll be my version of happily ever after—the best I can hope for is achieving that on the field, because Daphne Dundee has ruined me. I know if it's not with her, I'll never be able to capture it off the field.

DAPHNE

The drive to Bryce's high-rise apartment feels endless in the unnerving quiet. "Good game," I say to fill the silence.

"Thanks." He continues staring out the passenger window.

"That splitter in the third was perfection."

"I try." He looks straight ahead and doesn't speak another word as we arrive in the parking garage and get out of my car.

I can't take it any longer. "Really? You're still mad at me?"

"Not at all," he retorts casually.

"So, the cold shoulder is just for kicks then?"

"Just doing as you wish. Following the rules."

The way he's not reacting is pissing me off. Yeah, I should've handled yesterday so much differently. But this feels like one big fit on his part. And what is really ticking me off is I don't like him being closed off from me. "Bullshit, Parish."

I'm caught off guard by his change in stance, his rigid frame in front of me, my back suddenly to the elevator wall. "Make up your mind, Dundee. You can't have it both ways."

"Both ways? I'm trying to get through this without pulling my hair out. And as far as making up my mind, we had a deal. You'd ask me after this assignment was over. Not immediately after a frantic woman held a gun to my face and a person I trusted more than anyone else while on the clock kissed me. Not when the guy I thought would understand what a grim, nerve-racking day it was shut down on me. So, give me a fucking break. Yesterday was not my finest. Everything that transpired was wrong." I take in a gulp as I finish, already hating that I let my emotions get the best of me.

Bryce closes the distance between us, his palm on my cheek as I close my eyes, both from the reassuring sensation on my skin and the embarrassment I feel from breaking down in front of him. “You did everything right,” he softly says. “Because you walked out of that house alive yesterday. I should care that everyone did, but I’m selfish. You’re the only one I needed to see walk out of that door.” He watches me, his face tense as he states, “When I saw him kiss you ... I’ve never felt jealously like that before. And you’re not even mine.”

The intense moment between us is interrupted by my phone ringing. When I grab it out of my pocket, I see Freeman’s contact flashing across the screen. He’s the officer on duty downstairs, so there’s no way I can ignore it. “I have to take this.”

I hold the phone to my ear as I take a step to the side, because I can’t concentrate with him so close. As soon as I answer the call, I hear a woman shouting in the background before Freeman says, “There’s a commotion in the lobby.”

“Commotion my ass,” the female shouts.

“She’s insisting on going to Parish’s floor and said she’s on the approved guest list.”

A pang of something that feels a lot like jealousy flows through me as I ask, “What’s her name?”

“Eliza. She wouldn’t give me a surname.”

I repeat her first name, recalling that she’s Jasper’s sister. Still not one hundred percent safe person with my suspicion still on Jasper. But Bryce’s attention is on me asking, “What’s wrong?”

“Eliza is down in the lobby, insisting on speaking with you.”

He pushes the lobby button swiftly and we’re descending as I let Freeman know we’re heading his way (even if I don’t think it’s the correct choice). “Please be careful, Bryce.”

“Yeah. Sure. If she tries to kill me, I’ll take cover.”

“Great,” I mutter and move in front of him so I’m off the elevator first. As soon as the doors open, Eliza’s whereabouts are clear from her yells.

When we get within a few feet of her, I’m about to do my best to simmer her down a bit, but Bryce beats me to it as he tells her, “Calm your damn nerves, and stop yelling at them, Eliza.”

“That’s right. You’re the bastard who deserves my wrath.” She surges forwards, her hands thrusting against his chest.

I go to grab her, but Bryce stops me, “She’s fine. No need for a second sibling takedown.”

Eliza turns a harsh stare to me. “So, this is the new whore Jasper told me about.” She leans towards me, as she assesses me with a bitchy smirk, “I was his toy once, too, until he got bored of me.”

“Enough,” Bryce shouts. Eliza’s attention shifts to him as he firmly instructs her, “You’re pissed at me. Dish it out in my direction, not hers. Because if you speak to her like that again, this conversation will be over before it even begins.”

She takes a step back, disbelief on her face. “Wow, protective much?”

“Cut the shit, Eliza. Now.”

All she does is laugh as she agrees, “Fine. But I’m not leaving until you tell me why the fuck you’re meddling in my business but want me far away from yours.”

Bryce’s stance tenses, his jaw tightens. I see he’s biting back his words. This is clearly a discussion that I don’t want or need to take part in. “I’ll wait over here.” I point to where Freeman is still standing nearby and motion him to follow me a few feet away to the concierge desk, leaving Bryce and Eliza near the seating area. But I can’t help but look over and find her snide grin still on me.

BRYCE

“You really are pussy whipped. Jasper said you were, but I didn’t believe it.” Eliza finally looks back to me. “You haven’t given anyone the time of day since you broke my heart.”

Yeah. That’s not what happened all those years ago, but there’s no convincing her. And I sure as hell won’t admit that I haven’t even touched Daphne like that. Because despite that fact, I am a goner. “Get to your point. You must have one with the spectacle you’re causing.”

She places a hand on her hip, her pissy gape on me. “You set Luka up.”

Shit. That is what Jasper and I agreed we’d tell her. But I never made the phone call to do so because all hell broke loose—albeit only in my head—after I ended that call with my best friend.

“You know I have a phone, right?” I try to delay because I know she’s about to go into another shrieking fit.

“Yeah. I know. But I can’t yell at you through the phone because you’ll just hang up on me.”

“Nah. I’d listen for a few minutes.” I brace for her reaction as I say, “Yes. It was me.”

Her hand comes up, her palm slapping across my cheek. “You bastard. You’ll do anything to make sure I’m miserable.”

I hold up a hand to stop Daphne because I already see she’s on edge and stepping in my direction. But this has nothing to do with why she is here. When I focus back to Eliza, I try to remember the girl I knew all those years ago. But I can’t find her in the woman before me. “You make yourself miserable. And so does that son of a bitch who sells you in order to make a quick buck to get his next fix. So, yeah. I turned his ass in. You need to get

far away from him. If that is your definition of miserable, then you need more help than you'll ever get."

"He never—" She goes to defend the piece of shit and it makes me barely able to contain my anger. But it's all at him and myself for getting her involved with him to begin with.

"Stop protecting him," I yell louder than I should, "and trying to convince me you enjoy having sex with random people." I see the shame on her face before she turns away as I quickly remind her, "You have nothing to be ashamed of. That bastard does. And if you stay with him, he'll keep using you and hurting you."

"It's *my* choice." The agony in her tone hurts my heart.

"Yes, it is. And I'm begging you to make the choice to save yourself."

She looks more agitated than distraught. "Stay out of my life. Or I'll never speak to you or Jasper again. I know it's his doing too." She glances to Daphne before returning her bitterness to me. "You're too busy living your glammers life to worry about anyone but yourself."

When she goes to step away, I shout after her, "Keep lying to yourself. Makes everything easier, right, Lizzy?"

As soon as her childhood nickname is off my lips, she pivots back in my direction. "Don't you dare act like you give a shit about any of us that you left behind. Your mom is great, by the way. Her and Wayne look happier than ever." I grit my teeth together to keep from saying something I'll regret. And she apparently sees that she's hits a nerve because she keeps going. "She really is happy. Even if they don't have your fortune, they're content with each other."

I'd like to think she's lying, but I know Eliza well enough to know she will do anything to hurt me. And she knows my mom is a major spot that is available for her to take a jab at. It just disgusts me that someone I cared about so much and still do, would stoop so low to get back at me. "Keep going down that path; it won't end well. My mother only uses people to get what she wants. You should recognize that behavior—you've been sucking Luka's dick since before we split up, right?"

"At least he doesn't bail on people."

"No, he doesn't. He latches onto them so he can drag them to hell alongside himself." I step past her and don't turn back when I hear her call me a few colorful words.

Daphne follows me onto the elevator as Eliza screams at her across the

lobby, “He’s going to bail on you, too, bitch.”

The doors shut, muffling her vitriol for the most part, but I feel pity for Officer Freeman and the concierge on duty right now.

Daphne folds her arms over her chest. “Charming.”

I don’t owe her an explanation, but I feel a great urge to give her one. “We dated in high school. But I broke it off when I caught her cheating with Luka.” Admitting the next fact makes me feel the urge to vomit as I admit, “I introduced them. He was my dealer back then.”

“Bryce, you don’t—”

“I know. But I want you to understand what you witnessed. You already think the worst of me. And I have some rough shit in my past. But I didn’t screw her over. I still care about her. She’s my best friend’s little sister. But that’s all she is to me now.”

Daphne nods just before we step off the elevator as she follows to the door. We make our way into my apartment, and I’m at my bedroom door when she says, “I never believed her when she said you bailed. My gut said you wouldn’t do that to her.” Then she steps inside the guest room as she tells me goodnight.

Good thing I’m not pitching tomorrow. I doubt I’ll be sleeping much tonight.

Two hours after I got in the bed, I’m still tossing and turning to find a comfortable position so I can drift off to sleep.

When I hear the bedroom door open, I look up to see Daphne in the doorway. A distraught expression on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“It was just a nightmare, but ...”

I go to get out of bed, but she walks beside the mattress, then shocks the hell out of me when she climbs over me. Her knees straddling me as she cups my face. Her eyes locked with mine before she closes them, and her lips press against mine.

It takes my brain a second to catch up with my tongue, to register that it’s tasting hers. My hands are ready too, my fingers moving up her bare thighs, gripping tightly before sliding over her ass then moving under her nightshirt.

When her hips rock against me, it’s clear every part of my body is ready for her. Shifting, I roll over until she’s pinned under me. I prop on my elbows, not putting all my weight against her. The thin fabric of my boxer briefs combined with the barely there material of her panties allows the warmth between her thighs to transfer to me. It’s not only her body I want,

though. And she's upset. Her shaky words moments ago are still clear in my head. This can't be a weak moment of her trying to grasp onto reality. Because it is my reality.

Painstakingly, I shift back, breaking away from her lips. Her eyes lock with mine as I say, "We should probably get some sleep."

The confusion is obvious on her face, and so is the hurt when she jerks away from me, shifting her bodyweight to push me away instead of pulling me close like she had been. "I'm sorry. I just—"

"Please stay."

"I should go back to my room." She starts squirming under me, so I shift off her as she slides from the bed. "You're right. I'm giving you mixed signals. Just forget this happened." Then she's out of the room as fast as she appeared. I almost question if I'm dreaming. But she felt too real.

I debate going after her, but something tells me to give her some space. Because there's more going on in her head than just us.

DAPHNE

I sluggishly pull on a sports bra and running shorts. It's 5 a.m., so Freeman is still on duty. I send him a quick text that I need him upstairs while I go on a quick run. I didn't want to come back to the apartment, but now I'm thankful for the backup to get a moment to myself.

Only, when I step out of the bedroom, I spot Bryce sitting on the couch in T-shirt and sweatpants. He glances over my workout clothes and smiles, "Figured you'd want to go for a run this morning."

"Yeah. I do. Alone." Like I was last night after he rejected me. I shouldn't have gone in his room from the start. Watching him die in my dream left me reeling more than it should have. I wasn't surprised to relieve the horrifying experience in the Vega home, but having such vivid nightmares again makes me reconsider Captain Arnold's suggestion to pay a visit to the mental health division. "Freeman will be up here in a few."

"Well, he'll be sitting by himself, because I was planning to go for a jog this morning."

"I'm not in the mood for this. If you want to go run, fine. We can. But don't do it just to irritate me." I'm peeved enough with myself for acting desperate last night. Though I never would have guessed he'd turn me down after he's been pursuing me for so long. It definitely stung a bit too much.

There's a knock on the door. And as I tell him to let me get it, he looks through the peephole then opens it. Freeman tries to step inside but Bryce stops him, "Your services are not needed after all. We're both going on a run this morning." He gives him a little wave then says, "But thanks, buddy."

Freeman is already walking away as Bryce closes the door. "Want any water or anything before we head out?"

“No,” I reply bluntly then pull on my sneakers.

I’m actively thinking maybe we can get through the outing without a hitch, but Bryce never lets anything rest. “Do you want to talk about your nightmare?” he prods.

“No.” Not at all.

I head out of the apartment as Bryce follows, we’re waiting for the elevator as he asks, “Are you sure? It really seemed to have upset you last night.”

Thankfully, the elevator doors open as we step on it. I push the button for the lobby and plan to ask Freeman to join us. For Bryce’s safety and my sanity, because Bryce sounds determined to make me relive my terror that partly led to my humiliation last night.

“I don’t remember. It was just a bad dream.” My eyes blink rapidly, trying to dismiss the horrifying images from my psyche as I turn my head away from him.

He moves in front of me, his finger under my chin as he gently turns my face back to his. “What happened?”

It pains me to admit it. But I do. “You died.” I take in a gulp of air as I recall the scene in my mind again. “You were in the Vega house with me, and Vicky shot you.” I swallow because it felt way too real. Still does.

“It was only a dream.” He swipes his thumb along my cheek. “But at least I know you’d miss me if I were dead.”

I turn away from him and move out of his hold. “It’s not funny, Bryce.”

“You should’ve stayed my room last night.”

“No, I shouldn’t have ever even been in your room last night. It was stupid. Now, stop talking.” I attempt to get closer to the sliding doors, the elevator feeling smaller and smaller as he shifts in front of me.

“The only mistake you made last night was leaving my bed.”

There’s no point in arguing; I can’t feel like a bigger fool at this point. “Why did you stop?”

“Ah. That’s why you’re salty.” Slowly his hand raises to my hip and grips as he shifts against me. “I couldn’t when you were vulnerable. And once I have you, I’m not letting you go.” His voice has turned throaty by the time he finishes. “I don’t even know how I’m going to do it when this is over.”

The doors open up onto the lobby floor, a resident waits on us to exit the elevator. Bryce has no intention of stepping off, he remains resolute with me pinned in place. “We’re going back up.”

When I catch a glimpse of the guy as he steps into the space with us, he looks as confused as I feel. But I don't move, and stay in front of Bryce, my back to the wall as the guy exits on the ninth floor. Just as the doors close, I feel the tension peak as Bryce leans forward, his lips on mine at the same time his hands grip my thighs, his mouth devouring mine as he pins me against the wall. His tongue trails to my neck as I hold onto him, his words vibrating against my skin as he says, "This will be more exhilarating than your morning run. Promise."

"Bryce." I moan out his name, trying to concentrate on getting back to the safety of his apartment, but he's making it challenging.

"If you want to stop, you'd better tell me now."

"I don't," I breathe, "but I need to get you back to the apartment in one piece." Riding the elevator up with a presumed resident was risky enough. I can only imagine explaining to my captain that I missed the threat because my mouth was glued to the protectee.

He only releases me to stand, his tongue still teasing my skin. "You do your job. I'll work that tension out of your body."

"You're not helping to ease my tension right now."

His laugh sails alongside my nerves as I attempt to stay aware of our surroundings until the door closes behind us. The apartment can't be one hundred percent secured, but it's the only place I can let my guard down a little. And I do, focusing my full attention on kissing him back as he pins me against the door. He only shifts away to lift my T-shirt off. My fingers grip the hem of his and I lift it over his head. My fingers automatically fall to push down his pants.

He steps out of them along with his boxer briefs and stands fully naked in front of me. Damn, he looks even more delicious than I imagined. And he apparently can read my mind because a sly smile rises on his lips as he reaches up, his fingers gripping my sports bra as I help him tug it off. When my hands drop to the waistband of my running shorts, he stops me from shoving them down. One of his hands grips my wrists, pinning both arms above my head as he shifts forward and presses me harder against the door. "I want to handle this part."

His fingers trail over my breast, gliding across my stomach before he pushes my shorts down and I slowly step out of them. His blazing eyes take in my exposed body that he has complete view and utter control over. And fuck, I can't wait for him to take advantage.

He reaches his free hand up and moves it between my thighs to stroke a finger across my clit. A gasp escapes my lips as a sultry laugh leaves his before his mouth is on mine. “God, that sound, Daphne. I need to hear it again.” He trails his mouth along my collarbone. “And again.” His kisses my chest, suckling my nipple in his mouth as he hums, “And again.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem.” I’m barely able to get the words out without melting to the floor as his fingers slide inside me.

There’s a thrilled look on his face as he strokes me, his hand squeezes tighter then releases as he drops to his knees, his mouth trailing lower over my stomach.

Gripping his shoulder, I steady myself as he lifts my leg and hooks my thigh over his shoulder. When he moves his mouth between my thighs, my head drops back against the door. My eyes close as I relish in the sensation. His tongue on me. His fingers inside me. And it’s utterly magnificent when I finally fall over the ledge, an orgasm flowing through me that feels like it’s been building since the moment he appeared in my life. And it doesn’t seem like he’s done yet.

His mouth kisses up my body, and when his lips reach mine, he grips my thighs, lifting me, and I wrap my legs around him.

His hands move to my ass, gripping as he holds me to him while walking to his bedroom. “You’re going to have to hit the brakes this time, because I’m not.”

Please don’t.

He crawls onto the bed with me still clinging to him. My back hits the mattress as his eyes lock with mine. “What’s your choice?”

There’s no option. I fought the attraction, the pull to him, but I want him. God, I pray I don’t regret this. “You.”

A sincere smile stretches across his lips as they meet mine, his kiss starts out tender and patient before it becomes ravenous and greedy.

Entangling his fingers in my hair, he keeps a steady hold as he consumes me. But I need more of him. I reach between us, gripping him in my hand as his body tenses.

Placing him at my entrance, I think he’s going to back out for a split second as I see unease on his face, but his eyes close, his mouth drops to my shoulder as he deliberately pushes inside me, filling me. My fingers clutch his back, clinging to him as he slowly slides almost all the way out, then rocks forward again. The two of us find a steady rhythm as he thrusts inside

me, my hips rising to meet him. His movements become hasty and erratic, then he reaches between us. "Let me hear that sound one more time."

And I follow his command quickly, another wave of pleasure releasing through me, he moves inside me again before going rigid. His satisfied groan leaves no doubt that he's reached his climax too.

He remains inside me for a few seconds before pulling out. After he heads to the bathroom to clean up, I go to the other and do the same. I stay at the sink for a few seconds, processing what just happened. I don't regret it, but I did cross a professional line that I never should've, and I don't even want to think about the repercussions. It doesn't matter, right? We're both consenting adults. The season will be over soon. The case will hopefully be wrapped up before that.

Damn it. I just want to enjoy this before either of our demons appear.

When I open the bathroom door and step inside the bedroom, I'm surprised for a second by Bryce sitting fully nude on the edge of the bed. A little too solemn for my liking. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

I worry he's regretting it as he asks, "Everything all right with us?"

I move between his legs, my hands on his shoulders. "You were right. That was way better than a morning run."

A smile stretches across his face as he pulls me to straddle his lap, and kisses me, his hand gripping my hair, "Get used to it, Dap. You're mine now."

Why does that thrill and frighten me at the same time?

BRYCE

I half expect her to run screaming away from me, or the very least avoid me awkwardly. But she's present and serene as we head to the stadium. She's definitely more relaxed than me for sure—when did I become so dependent? Having her around has made it easy. And I know I'll never get enough, but I'm going to take whatever morsels of happiness she'll give me. I'll deal with the consequence afterwards.

“My plan was better. We can still turn around.”

“Yeah,” she laughs as she steers into the stadium parking. “Not showing for work would be a great way to not draw attention to ourselves.”

I like how she says that. “Think Coach'll mind if I call him Dad?”

“Bryce.” A bit of frustration and some panic slips over her face.

“I'm joking. Tell him when you're ready.”

Though in my gut I believe her mom will be the more challenging Dundee to win over since she gave me the whole, stay-away-from-my-daughter talk. And maybe it would've been wiser to heed her advice. But I hope I can prove her wrong.

I have no intention of hurting Daphne. If anything, I want her to be happy and plan to figure out some way to repair the bridge that's damaged between them by that bastard McGraw. I have a feeling that's when Daphne will truly take a genuine gamble on me. When she knows she can be with me and not lose herself.

After we walk into the ballpark, my phone rings. Jasper. I'm sure his sister told him all about her visit last night, but it'll be some warped version of reality. He usually knows to disregard half of what she claims, but at the end of the day, it's his sister, and we've gotten into more than a few

arguments about her.

I answer and tell him to give me a second since we're at the locker room door and I don't want to go in. Daphne gives me a warm smile and says, "Text me when you're heading out to the field."

I stand there like a fool and don't say anything as she heads down the corridor, most likely to her dad's office. Focusing back to my best friend, I place the phone next to my ear as I turn to push through the locker room door. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to say thanks for taking the heat for me."

"No problem."

"Did you really tell her you'd banish her from Canaan Falls if she looked at Daphne the wrong way?"

"What do you think?"

He lets out a chuckle. "I think Eliza probably said something out of sorts to you before you reached that point and said something less dramatic."

"Pretty much. She was ranting and screaming in the lobby of my building." I explain the rest of what occurred until I get to something that really threw me off. "Did you know she's in touch with my mom and Wayne?"

"I did," Jasper says lowly. "I tried to tell her to stay away from them, but you know how she gets. I wasn't even sure if you knew Wayne was back around."

"Yeah. I found out all right. From Daphne's research, not my best friend."

"You never wanted to hear anything about them, so I kept it to myself. If you want tabs, I'm more than happy to keep you updated."

"No. you're right. I didn't want to know. I just hate that it bugs me. And that my father's dead. But hey, he has some other kids out there too." At Jasper's silence, it dawns on me. "You knew that too."

"Mom mentioned it. You know they were close when they were in high school. I told her the world was better off without him. She didn't say anything about him having other kids though."

"Doesn't matter."

"Are you sure?"

No. "Yes." I drop into the chair in front of my locker. "I have to get to practice, but I'll give you a shout later."

"Okay," he says reluctantly before adding, "Bryce, you're my best friend."

I did what I thought was best for you.”

“I know. Just a lot going on, and I have to get to the field.”

We end the call, but I remain in the chair for a good while. Because I’m not ready to face what’s on the other side.

DAPHNE

The door to Dad's office is propped open, and he's surprisingly seated behind his desk. I knock my knuckles against the metal door as he glances up from his laptop.

"Have a second?" He nods as I step inside and take a seat in the chair. "Bryce is in the locker room. So, I should get back over there soon."

"Agreed. But first, I need you to tell me how being held at gunpoint is 'nothing.'"

Damn it. "Who told you?"

"Your mother. And it's less like she 'told' me and more like she yelled at me when one of her friends asked her about it."

Terrific. She's going yell at me too. But oddly enough, Mom hasn't called me yet. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to worry either of you. It was a cold case I'd been working. And it all happened so fast."

"I get it. But she'll be harder to convince."

"Agreed." My eyes drop to floor as I try to decide how I'm going to explain it to her.

Dad interrupts my thoughts to asks, "And how's the case with Bryce?"

"Good," I say way too quickly.

He stands from his desk. "Yeah. I'm sure it is." He grabs his phone and tucks it into his pocket. "At least his concentration is solid. Hopefully, it'll stay that way."

Dad goes to walk out, but I stop him. He turns back to me, and I chicken out. "Good luck today."

"Thanks," he replies unenthusiastically before leaving me sitting in his office.

All I wanted to tell him was when I said there wasn't anything between us, I'd meant it. But things are different now, and today is a big day for the Coyotes and Dad. I'll tell him after the dust settles. At least that's the BS justification I give myself before I go back to wait in front of the locker room entrance.

Soon enough, Bryce exits the door. I tell him, "You didn't text me."

"Well, you're here, so no need." Bryce continues his walk towards the field, and he's way too quiet.

Perhaps I'm paranoid that word has gotten around or that it's written all over my face that Bryce's was between my thighs hours ago. But he also got a phone call on the way in. Maybe that's what's bothering him. Of course, I'm overthinking, and there's plenty to contemplate. "Did something happen?"

Bryce stops, avoiding looking at me as he answers, "Jasper knew some info about my parents, and he didn't tell me. I understand why he didn't, but it feels like a betrayal. Guess I'm tired of people keeping secrets."

The wary look he gives me is disturbing. "He only wanted to protect you."

He lets out a chuckle as he continues walking, "Are you certain of his motives? Because yesterday you were convinced he was trying to slaughter me."

"Bryce, stop." There's an unease in his posture that I don't like. "Tell me what's wrong."

When he finally halts, he keeps his back to me. "It made me question him. He's my best friend. And for a second, I wondered if there is something deeper going on."

How do I say this? Because I'm not certain that Jasper isn't the guilty party, but I don't like seeing the torment he's experiencing. "You keep telling me to trust my gut. So, you do the same. I want you to be careful, but you know him better than I do."

"I don't know what to think." Bryce continues walking. We're on the field as he starts stretching then falls immediately into his regular routine. His pitching looks solid, his focus seems good, but there's still an edginess about him that bothers me. Please don't let it be Jasper. I fear that pain would be worse than any physical wound anyone else on the planet could inflict on him.

BRYCE

I stand at the guest bedroom threshold with a bowl of popcorn and full of hope as I knock against the door.

When she opens up, she's wearing pajamas and drying her hair with a towel.

"Gorgeous," I tell her as I lean against the doorframe.

She gives me an expression that says, *Seriously?* as she twists her hair up and eyes the bowl of popcorn. "Are you not exhausted? I figured you were going to bed."

"Nope." That hot shower gave me a second wind for sure. And I don't want to seem as eager as I am and scare her off, so I hold up the bowl of popcorn which is my plan to slow my roll. "Want to watch a movie? Your pick."

"Hm." Daphne walks over to the entertainment center, grabs the Rolodex and gives it a good spin. When it lands on one, she reads the title. "No. Too scary." She flips through a few more. "I don't know. You pick something." There's a grin on her face as she says, "Just don't add the soundtrack to your pregame routine."

"Damn. Way to kill my real proposal plan."

"Not funny." She rolls her eyes as I grab her hand and pull her to me.

"Then I guess it's back to the drawing board. Though Gunner will be disappointed. He really wanted to do the *Dirty Dancing* lift even if it was the wrong song. But we nixed it because I figured Coach would be pissed if we dropped him and broke something." I chuckle at the recall of Gunner trying to convince Murdock to lift him after I refused.

"Yeah. That was a good judgment call."

“It’s a classic movie and one of my faves too.”

Her question is full of amusement as she asks, “How many *faves* do you have?”

“A lot. But they’re all meaningful to me for a different reason. Like *Dirty Dancing*, Patrick Swayze is from Houston too. *Back to the Future* for the ‘what ifs.’ *Grease* because, I mean, that soundtrack. *Sidekicks* because they filmed in Houston and seeing the filming locations in person was so cool. Plus, the dude in the movie is an underdog, fights his way to the top, and gets the girl. And Chuck Norris.”

She squints her eyebrow a little as she asks, “Who?”

“No,” I gasp. “There’s no way you don’t know who he is.”

“Yes, I know who he is. But don’t recall that movie.”

“We have a winner.” I grab out the VHS and pop it into the player, then I take a seat on the couch beside Daphne.

The movie plays and when a familiar landmark comes up during the training sequence, I point out the scene to Daphne, “That Waterwall—that’s one of the locations.”

I rub my hand up her leg, squeezing her thigh. “I’ll take you to see it whenever we make it out to Houston. And that park there. But you know, I’ve been wanting to visit the resort where they filmed *Dirty Dancing*. And the town where they filmed *Footloose*.” When I look over at her, I find an amused grin pointed at me that makes me ask, “What?”

Daphne doesn’t say anything as she turns to face me, and I take the opportunity to guide her a little further over, more like all the way over until she’s straddling me. I ask her again, “What’s that look about?”

“I just find it fascinating that Mr. Baseball Star gets excited over visiting random film locations when you could go see anything in the world.”

“I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

“No.” She drapes her arms over my shoulders. “I want to see the Waterwall and the *Dirty Dancing* resort. And every other place where they filmed.”

I take a few seconds, my eyes dropping to her neck as I twist a lock of her hair. I consider why those places have always interested me. “I told you about Granny and I with our movie nights. Well, when I saw those places around my hometown in real life, it meant the others I saw on screen were real too. It made the movies feel like at least something from them was genuine, like something remarkable and magical could happen in real life. Because there

wasn't much hope anywhere else when I looked around me."

Slowly, she leans forward, tenderly kissing me. "I can't wait to visit all of them and show you that remarkable things exist in reality. But we really do have to wait until everything wraps up."

Until I find out who wants me dead. "I need it to end. I need to know my best friend doesn't want me dead. But the thought of not doing this every night terrifies me even more."

I see the uncertainty in her face, but don't wait on a response before I lean forward and kiss her, savoring the moment. Because everything can change in a heartbeat.

DAPHNE

“Remind me whose idea this was again?” I pout as I spot my parent’s home come into view.

Yeah. I shouldn’t be such a brat about it, but I’m just not in the mood to deal with this right now. Not because I’m in a crappy mood—I’m really not—it’s because everything has been so nice and mellow the past two weeks. Yeah, it’s been a bit stressful not knowing who’s after Bryce. But everything between us has been smooth and easy. The last week proved to be great for the team too as the Coyotes sailed through the league title and secured their place in the final championship series. But since we have the day off before that stretch begins, we’re having lunch at my parents’ house.

“It’ll be fun,” Bryce says cheerfully as I pull the car to a stop.

“That’s right—it was your idea. So, if it ends in disaster, it’s your fault.” I joke, but I’m a tad bit worried.

Things have been really good. Too good. I’m not ready to label us and announce it to the world. But I feel silly sneaking around. And it’s not like we’re good at that part. A perfect example is Bryce leaning over the console, his hand on my neck as he gives me a soft, lingering kiss.

“Nothing we can’t deal with together.” His teasing returns as he shifts back and throws open the car door. “So, suck it up, Dundee, and get out of the car.”

“You’re such a pain in the behind.”

“I try.” He walks over to meet me at the driver’s side door, grasps my hand like it’s the most natural thing in the world, and walks me up to the house.

Once we reach the door, I release his hand and punch in the code, then

push it open. I shout hello and it echoes through the foyer. There's a little panic that goes through me when there's no initial response and the house seems quiet, but as soon as we get to the kitchen, and I spot my parents out on the patio, I breathe a sigh of relief and head to the back door.

They're obviously in some sort of intense discussion. And even more clear that they don't want us to know or hear whatever it involves as they both suddenly stop talking as soon as they notice us.

"You're early," Mom says as she gives me a quick kiss on my cheek. "Glad you're here, sweetie." She then turns to Bryce, giving him an assessing look. "You too, even if you didn't take my suggestion into consideration."

"What suggestion?" I ask but neither of them answer me.

Bryce humbly tells my mom, "My apologies, ma'am. I like to prove people wrong."

"Yeah." Mom seems less than pleased as she tells him, "Well, I like people who keep their word." She heads inside, leaving us standing next to Dad at the grill.

He is focused on flipping the steaks with an unnatural intensity. "Medium rare, right, Parish?"

Bryce appears slightly confused as he replies, "Yes sir."

Dad closes the grill and looks at me. "Don't mind your mom. She's upset with me because I went back on my word."

I shouldn't ask but I do anyway. "About what?"

Dad gets a little tense as he drops into the chair. Bryce reaches over, grasping my hand and squeezing it softly as he says, "I'm gonna step inside and grab something to drink. Want anything?"

"I'll take sweet tea," I tell him just as he nods and goes to lean in to kiss me but stops halfway, awkwardly halting. "Be right back."

Dad shakes his head, taking a drink of his beer.

As I move over to sit in the chair beside him, he tells me, "Retirement. I thought I'd be ready after this season but I'm not. Your mom isn't happy about it because I signed on for another year. And I can't even guarantee that it'll be the last one." He glances around the yard, "I'm not ready to give it up." He lets out a chuckle as he holds up the beer, "She's already making me eat more salads and less beer. Baseball is the only thing she can't force me to cut back on."

"I understand."

"But I am going to surprise her with a trip to Hawaii. I'd like you and

your brother to come along too. Because your mom says she misses us going on family vacations. So, I think it'll be good for all of us."

"Yeah, let me know the dates so I can make plans."

He nods. "I'll give you and Parish the dates as soon as I get them booked."

"Bryce?"

"Yeah. I assumed he'd be tagging along. You might be putting on some fake show for the crowd, but I know that's not the truth."

Having Bryce tag along on a family vacation seems a little sudden to me. But also ... I realize that I want him to be there. Shit. This is not how I wanted to bring it up with my father. "When I originally told you that there wasn't anything going on, there truly wasn't. It just happened."

"I could see as much. Anyone with eyes in their head can." He pauses before he tells me, "Just be careful this time."

"I didn't mean to cause a mess before, and I didn't want to fall for someone on the team again."

Dad slowly looks over to me. "The reason I tolerate that bastard McGraw is because the jackass reported me to the organization saying that I was retaliating against him based on personal feelings in light of what happened between the two of you. It was solely his shitty pitching that got him on the bench. But I made it a point to play him, coach him, and give him extra attention so that when he failed this season, every member in the Coyotes organization could see it had nothing to do with me thinking the guy's a prick."

"He filed a complaint on you?" That's news to me.

"Yeah. Maybe some of my personal feelings did surface when I had to deal with the asshole, but I never benched him because of it. His inconsistently and piss-poor pitching got his ass parked. Thankfully, he won't be my issue next season. Upper management has already made it clear they don't want to offer him an extension." Dad turns his unyielding expression to me. "And that's between us."

"Yes sir." Gladly. That is the best news ever. The only thing that could make it better is if he gets an offer from a team across the country, far away from Canaan Falls. But I feel bad for the problems this all created. I knew Rex was a jerk, but I had no idea he went to dad's superiors. "I'm sorry."

"Nah. Don't want you to be. It put a little stress on season, but I thought of having to step away from the team really put a damper on my season. I'm

just not prepared to give up that part of my life yet.”

“That I understand too. I wasn’t ready to either.” I take a second before I tell him. “The field was my safe haven. And I missed it. And you. This time is different.” I don’t even know what this is, but I know Bryce and Rex are on two different fields, hell in two different leagues. The scary part is Bryce could easily do more damage than Rex. At least that’s what it feels like. And I don’t understand why or how, but I sense it in my soul.

“I’ve missed you too.” Dad stands from the chair and walks over to the pit, his back to me. “Like I said. Be careful. Can’t say I’m ecstatic about it. Don’t know why you have to pick the biggest pain in the ass on the team. That boy goes out of his way to irk my nerves for kicks. And now he’s gonna be sitting next to me on the damn beach in the offseason,” Dad grumbles, his tone of voice more like when my brother and I would get in mischief and he wanted to laugh but couldn’t because Mom had warned us not to do whatever it was a million times already.

“I know the feeling.” I know full well Bryce has a way of getting a reaction from everyone with his comical ploys.

Moments later, the door swings open and Oliver steps outside. “I knew it.” Dad and I both stare at him as he continues, “Parish. But fair warning, I think he’s slipped Mom something because she’s letting him help her bake.” The three of us look to each other then move to the kitchen window.

Bryce stands at the counter, kneading dough with Mom beside him, pointing at something, like she’s giving him instructions.

“Unbelievable,” Dad mutters.

It really is. Mom usually won’t even let us enter the kitchen when she’s baking her famous dinner rolls because she swears the vibration from us moving around will cause her dough to fall.

When Bryce looks up, he spots the three of us standing there watching him, puzzlement on his face before he winks over at me. Can’t blame him for wondering why we are gawking at him like he’s in a fishbowl. And I can’t blame Mom for trusting him. He has a way of making a gal believe anything is possible.

BRYCE

“Last chance,” I tease her as we arrive at the ballpark.

“No, we’re not skipping the game.”

I’m only half serious but even though I’m not on the mound today, I need to be here. “Guess you’re right. Need to stay in good with Pops.”

“Don’t count on that just yet, and stop calling him that,” she instructs as we head inside. “I still don’t understand how you won over my mom though.”

“I promised we’d name our firstborn after her.”

Daphne halts, panic on her face. “You did not.”

Laughing, I pull her to me. “No, but I promised her that no matter what happens between us, I’ll make sure your relationship with your dad stays in prime condition. Told her I’d quit the team before I caused a rift between you two. Even offered to put it in writing.”

“So, she made you promise her your career and livelihood?” Daphne laughs as she glances around us. She’s watching around the corridor for someone that will see us for more than one reason. Thankfully, we don’t have to hide or pretend though.

Leaning down, I pull her a little closer. “But I told her she doesn’t have to worry. I love her daughter too much to ever hurt her.”

I feel her body tense, see the hesitancy on her face. “Bryce—”

“I know. It’s too much. I’m still going to honor our deal, but that doesn’t mean I won’t voice where I stand.”

There’s nothing but delight covering her face as she looks up at me. “There’s never been a doubt in my mind where you stand.” Her laugh makes me feel a million times better—well, that and the fact she’s not running away

screaming and instead letting me hold her. The moment couldn't get any better, which is why McGraw has to be the SOB who shows up to ruin it.

He mumbles, "Fucking slut," and thinks he's in the clear because he's a few feet past us.

It's an automatic reaction for me to go after him, but Daphne keeps a solid grip on my biceps. "Don't. He's not worth it. Your career. Dad's sanity. For me, please ignore it."

Taking a long-drawn-out inhale, I wait a few seconds before I agree. "All right."

She's content. I'm still pissed. But she's right. There's so much at stake, and that jackass will cost me everything if I let him get to me. Can't say that I won't deck him after the season is over, though. Especially if he doesn't leave her alone.

After a quick trip to the locker room, we head out to the field. Coach instructs me on the plan, which is me playing in game three of the series. I'm on board.

Once we head out to stretch, I glance over at Daphne as she stands nearby with Johnson, studying the field. My heart drops and I know something bad is impending when I see the sheer terror on her face. Before I can ask her what's wrong, she's in motion, yelling for me to go into the bullpen.

DAPHNE

The first thing I notice is someone walking over the foul line. Van Herten will have anyone's ass who dares to step on the chalk line for fear of bad luck. Everyone knows this. No one steps on it. Not pregame. Not during the game. Not postgame. So, when I spot the guy heading our way, a virtual red flag flies above him as he runs along the chalk. When I zone in on his face, I instantly am in motion when I see his sight line is set on Bryce.

Putting myself between them, I yell for Bryce to get into the bullpen. It'll keep a barrier between him and the guy. I hope. Because as I get closer him, the more I recognize the paper in his hand that he's waving around.

His fixation still on Bryce, he says, "Parish. I need Parish." His focus is solitary; singularly fixed his target. It gives me the upper hand. He's so worried about Bryce, he doesn't see me as I collide with him.

He goes to the ground, gets to his stomach, and tries to crawl away from me, yelling, "I need Parish. I need Parish."

I can't let him get to Bryce. I won't let him hurt Bryce. I can't.

I'm able to get his arm pinned behind him and dig a knee into his back as I struggle to hold him to the ground. Security is beside me quickly, though he's grabbing at the guy's legs. Cahill grabs his other arm and passes me his cuffs. Quickly, I get the cuffs secured around the guy's wrists, his arms behind his back.

Glancing around, I look for someone else. He might not be alone. But I don't see anyone. As I pat down the suspect, I tell Cahill, "Get Parish out of here. Now."

"I'm not—"

Before Bryce can finish, I shout over him. "Go with Cahill. Now."

Looking up, I see the hesitation on his face as Van Herten and Cahill lead him away.

This guy is still muttering, “Parish. I need Parish.” So I need him away. Because I can’t concentrate. It’s not because his life is in my hands, because he’s safe and secure now. I’ve got that part under control. It’s because the thought of losing him scares me to death. And I need to focus and do my job so I can regain my composure.

After I’m certain the guy doesn’t have a weapon, the security guard and I bring him to his feet. When I reach down and grab the paper he had in his hand, he starts thrashing, repeating his favorite phrase, “I need Parish.”

But that doesn’t frighten me as much as when I read the words, the death threat against Bryce with the diamond and x drawn on it. And it takes everything I have not to vomit. He was so close. Seconds later, hell even if he had a weapon, this could’ve ended very differently.

Canaan Falls Police Station is pandemonium as everyone moves around. But there is one person I’m surprised comes up to me as I wait in the observation room. Shaw. We haven’t spoken since his visit to Austin. And this isn’t the time I want to hash that mess out. That’s a clusterfuck for another day.

“I’m glad you’re all right. Bryce too,” Shaw says sheepishly, his eyes search over the suspect in the interrogation room through the one-way glass. “So that’s him?”

“Yes.” It’s been hours since we’ve arrived at the station, but my adrenaline hasn’t calmed, even knowing we have the guy. “Quentin Fosterly. Priors of stalking and vandalism. Mostly athletes, but a musician has a restraining order on him.”

“Any violent behaviors?”

“No,” I reply. Shaw realizes the first thing I noticed too. Quentin has never escalated to violence. “It was always for following them or breaking into their homes. And that time he waited until the victim wasn’t present. He dumped her sleeping pills down the toilet because she was abusing them, he said.”

“There could’ve been a stressor in his life that sent him spiraling, maybe

all that was leading up to this.” Shaw holds up the paper which contains the note. “Can’t get more guilty than bringing him the note.”

“Why would he do that?” I point to the note. “And look. He’s been calling him Parish, but the notes are addressed to Bryce.” Motioning to the bottom of the page, I tap it. “This is a symbol of significance to Bryce’s past. No one would know this unless they knew him back then.”

“It’s a diamond and an x. The baseball field is that shape.” Shaw looks it over, not seeming to be alarmed. And I question if I’m trying to extend all of this. It’s over ... am I looking for a reason to continue guarding Bryce?

There’s a knock as the door opens, and Bryce peeks in then goes to step away, “I can come back.”

“No, man. I was just going over the details here.” Shaw pauses before adding, “And telling her I’m glad both of you are safe.”

“Yep. Thanks to Daphne’s eagle eyes and quick thinking.”

Shaw gives me a look, watching me as I inform him, “He walked on the chalk line. Anyone who should be on the field would know better. Van Herten’s made his son leave before a game because his toddler stepped on the foul line. And he still swears to this day that’s why the Coyotes lost that day and the next ten games following it.”

“Baseball people,” Shaw jokes and, thankfully, they both laugh, even though there’s still an awkwardness. But Shaw soon tells us he’ll see us later, and that’s another reminder that my days are about to change. Drastically.

Bryce stands at the window, looking at Quentin as I ask, “Have you ever seen him?”

He shakes his head. “Not that I recall.” There’s a tightness in the shoulders as he folds his arms over his chest. “Why does he want me dead?”

“We don’t know. He won’t talk, and now he’s lawyered up.” I look over to see a solemn Quentin. “He has a history of stalking. And something may have pushed him over the edge. But either way, it’s more about him than you. You’re just his current fixation.”

“I’m flattered,” Bryce replies flatly. “But at least he allowed me to hang out with the best bodyguard ever.”

I know he’s trying to make light in this shitty situation, but I can’t just yet. It was too close of a call. “Better circumstances would’ve been ideal.”

“Yeah.” Bryce turns to face me. “But you never would’ve given me a chance otherwise. Thank goodness someone wanted to kill me.”

He’s not wrong. I hadn’t wanted anything to do with him. Now, I don’t

want him to leave my sight. “I’m glad you’re safe.” That’s all I can think. That’s all I care about. He’s who I care about, but I still can’t say it’s love yet. Falling hard and on my way there? For sure.

He deliberately reaches forward. Placing a hand on each of my hips. His careful consideration unlocks something in me. I can’t contain my urgency to reach him and surge forward, hooking my arms tightly around his neck, holding on for dear life.

We stay like that for a few minutes, his hand stroking up and down my back. Reluctantly, I release him as Captain Arnold walks in and gives me a congrats before he tells Bryce, “Cahill will get you to the stadium. You’re free now.”

He nods as the captain heads out of the room, then he looks to me. “I need to get back to the field.”

“I can’t leave yet.” There’re reports and processes that I need to make sure go efficiently.

“Maybe I’ll see you after the game?” he asks with uncertainty. And when I hesitate, he says, “But no pressure. I understand if you need a second to breathe.”

Moving closer, I place my arms over his shoulders and move my lips near his. “You can’t get rid of me that easy.” The passionate kiss I lay on him is to reassure him as much as myself that this is real.

Case or no case, we’re together. I’m all in.

DAPHNE

I've never been so eager to leave the station before. But I feel like I'm going stir-crazy at I sit at my desk, filling out the last of the report while I wait. Everything has to be by the book, to the point, to make sure this Quentin character is held for as long as possible. But there's something about him that makes me feel sorry for him.

I glance over the letters, each one disturbing and threatening. And left for Bryce to find, except the last one.

Shaw sits in the chair at the end of my desk. "Still here?"

"About to head out in a few."

"Coyotes won, in case you're wondering."

"I know." Because I might've checked the score a few dozen times.

"Daphne," Shaw breaths as he looks to me. "I get it if you want a different partner, but I don't. I swear to keep things on a professional level; coworkers who have each other's back."

"I'll let you know. I'm going to be on leave for a while." Captain Arnold spoke with me about it. Being such an intense period of time, with what happened at the Vegas and now this, and knowing Dad wants to plan a family getaway, I figured it was the best thing to take him up on his offer. It's not like I don't have the vacation time since I never miss work. I love my job. And my partner. Even with his unfortunate judgment call, I trust Shaw with my life. "But we make a good team. Though I want to keep working some cold cases while we try to keep up with our current workload."

"Sounds good to me." He taps on the desk. "Still can't believe Clyde was the murderer."

"Me neither." Though I felt it and still hear Bryce telling me to trust my

gut. And right now, it's telling me that something is not right with Quentin. Shuffling through my notes again, Shaw says, "Okay. Give me the deets."

I stop and find him watching me curiously when I glance up. "What are talking about?"

"You're still investigating and questioning something, so give me the specifics, and we'll go over them."

"Okay." I grab a report back from when Quentin broke into the musician's house. "He was there to fix her leaky shower. He told the police he was worried she'd fall when she got out of the shower. And the athlete in Dallas said he would scare off overzealous fans like he was protecting him. Does that sound like someone who would just flip to murdering his obsessions?"

"It's possible."

"But that's another thing, he's supposedly obsessed with Bryce, but there's been no direct contact like he's had with every other object of his obsession. Today at the field is the first time either of us can recall seeing him. His pattern of behavior wouldn't change so drastically if he was well and truly pursuing Bryce. We would've seen him at some point." Yeah. I was distracted, but I paid attention to our surroundings. And Quentin hadn't been in them.

"What else?" Shaw knows there's more, and I do have something else that doesn't make sense.

"The notes. Why send him threats? Why play games if he really wanted him dead? Or did someone want Bryce to think that someone wanted him dead? Or us to think that? And his most recent address is in Houston, where Bryce grew up."

"What about the stadium? How'd he get in with all the extra security detail?"

"That's what doesn't make sense either. No one can pinpoint where he entered, and we haven't had any luck finding it on any surveillance footage. He moved around like a ghost. And could've easily gotten to Bryce, or at least closer, if he wanted. Instead, he runs across the field, wailing and waving the threatening letter in the air."

That's it. I need to figure this out. I need to trust my gut. And it's telling me something is off. As soon as I stand, Shaw tells me, "This isn't a good idea."

"Agreed." But I head to the interrogation room where Quentin is being

held, his lawyer still at his side.

Shaw whispers, "But if it's not him, who is it?"

"I think it's Bryce's best friend. All the pieces fit with him."

Shifting uncomfortably, Shaw tells me, "You sound more like Quentin's lawyer than a detective trying to charge him."

"I don't care. If Quentin isn't the right guy, then Bryce isn't safe."

BRYCE

The apartment feels too big and vacant. Did I rush to get here? Yes. Even ordered takeout to have it delivered because I was ready to get here. I thought she would either arrive before me or soon after. But still nothing. And every time I think to message her, I talk myself out of it, because I don't want to scare her off or feel like the needy sap I'm being.

Busying myself around the apartment, I grab a crossword puzzle and sit at the table. I can't even concentrate on it, but luckily, there's a knock on the door. I plan to tell Daphne that it seems bizarre for her to start knocking now. But when I open the door, I find Jasper and Eliza standing there instead.

I don't realize I'm gaping at them until Eliza asks, "Are we allowed to come in? Or is your girlfriend here?"

The bitterness is obvious, but I'm more confused by why they're here. Mostly why she's here. "No, she's not. Case closed. Stalker caught."

I look to Jasper. "I meant to call you back. But things got a little chaotic."

"No problem. I lost my damn phone anyway, or I would've called first." Jasper glances around, then motions to his sister. "We were in town and this one insisted on seeing you tonight. Apparently, she feels guilty for how she acted." Jasper gives his sister a pointed look. "Right?"

"Right." She holds up a whiskey bottle. "A peace offering." I go to reach out for it, and she pulls it back. "Am I forgiven?"

"Yes, Eliza. You're forgiven. But are you actually done with Luka?"

Her eyes fall to her feet. "I'm done. He's out of my life."

"Good."

She holds up the bottle. "Let's have a celebratory drink."

"Fine. I could use one after the day I had."

Jasper moves to the couch as I set three tumblers on the table. “So, what was the story with the stalker?”

“Some obsessive dude. That’s about it.”

“And Daphne?”

“Let’s not.” Eliza really makes me wonder how over the past she really is. We haven’t been together in many years, but I can understand not wanting to hear about my current relationship.

The subject is quickly changed as Jasper lifts his glass and toasts me, “Glad you’re in one piece, man. She Who Shall Not Be Named is definitely a keeper.”

“For sure,” I agree and down the whiskey. Jasper refills his glass and mine as we chat about the game today. “Why are y’all in town?” I ask, recalling that Jasper wasn’t supposed to be until here until next week.

“Eliza wanted to come early for a change of scenery. And with everything going on, I agreed.”

When I look over, I see Eliza reclined back, her eyes closed. Jasper notes the same as he says, “You didn’t even drink anything, and you’re falling asleep.”

“Bored.” She glances at her watch.

“Somewhere you need to be?” I ask as she folds her arms over her chest.

“No.”

“We probably should get going. I know you have to be at the game tomorrow. Game two in the bag.” He holds up a hand to high five me. “What game are you pitching in?”

“Game three.” First game that we’ll play out of town. And now I’m wondering if Daphne will come with us.

“Awesome. If you have a spare ticket or know anyone with one let me know, I’d love to be there.”

“I’ll cover it and the plane ticket.”

“Yay. Willy Wonka to the rescue with the golden ticket,” Eliza remarks as Jasper fusses at his sister.

“Leave him alone, Eliza. Or you’ll void the apology.”

“Not really worried,” she mumbles, her entire demeanor shifting as she stands from the couch.

“We should get going.” Jasper stands then leans back, dropping to the couch. He braces himself on the cushion. “Whoa. I’m a little woozy. You’re driving.” He holds out his key fob to his sister.

I rise from the couch, immediately feeling a wave of dizziness. One drink. That's all I had. Jasper had about three. But still, that's not a lot for either of us. Fuck. I don't recognize this feeling. It's not the effect of one shot of whiskey. I examine the bottle as I sit back down. "What's in it?" I look to Jasper but recall the only person here who didn't drink any of it was Eliza.

Once I spot her, I realize she has a sinister look of glee; one that I've only seen once. When she'd wrecked her dad's truck and let Jasper take the fall for it. *Fuck*.

Shoving off the couch, I stumble to the kitchen. I grip the counter to steady myself, seeing my phone and emergency device in front of me. Daphne. On push of the button and she'll know something is wrong. But I don't want her here. I need help, but I don't want to put her here. There's no telling what crazy shit Eliza has planned. She waited until Daphne wasn't around on purpose.

"It was you." Daphne was almost right. Just picked the wrong sibling out of my childhood friend duo.

"About time, Bryce. That bitch had your blinders on. Though it was Luka in the truck who tried to run you over. He hated you before he found out about how you tried to talk me into leaving him, how you took the time out of your busy day to convince me to turn my back on him. I just questioned if he was taking it too far until he got locked up. Then I knew I'd have to finish what he started." She leans across from the other side of the counter and grabs my phone. "If I wanted to get up here, I could've. I just needed her to see that I wasn't a threat. And the bitch fell for it."

When I move over the sink, pushing my fingers down my throat, trying to puke, I can't.

"Nice one," Eliza laughs, "but it's already in your system. Just a few more minutes and you may take an unfortunate stumble off the balcony. Your best friend will eventually off himself out of guilt, so don't worry about him."

"You're going to kill your own brother?" I grunt out as I drop to the floor, my back against the wall with my eyes on Jasper. My fear for my best friend is greater than for myself, because he's completely knocked out and unaware of his psycho sister's vendetta.

"No, Luka will ... and make it look like an accident." Eliza bends down and gets in my face. "Luka is downstairs, waiting for your slutty detective, and will probably finish the bitch off before she's any wiser. He will make sure that stupid bitch doesn't ruin anything. But that stalker should give her

plenty to keep her occupied. He won't talk. He's being paid very well not to. And he knows he'll have an alibi as soon as the real killer"—she motions to Jasper—"is caught."

"She'll never believe it. Daphne is smarter than that."

"Yeah. The dumb whore fell for it already. Oh, I'll get such satisfaction watching her grieve for you, crying over how she couldn't protect you."

The thought of her hurting Daphne sends my nerves into overdrive and so does the fact that I can't even move at this point. "Don't do this."

She towers over me. "You didn't have any mercy on Luka when you sent him to jail and screwed up my life. But now that he's free, you'll be trapped in hell."

"I'm sure I'll see you there," I tell her, trying to grasp what a truly vile human she really is. The person I knew and cared about is nonexistent.

My eyes are heavy, but I try to keep them open. It's a struggle. Everything is getting fuzzier. I hear Eliza cursing, manage to see her yelling into her phone. "Send him upstairs now. I can't toss the lug over by myself."

My eyes won't open now, but I hear someone knock on the door. It's not Daphne. I recall Eliza speaking of Luka downstairs. I get a surge of strength, but I can't push myself up. My arms feel heavy, my body weak. There's nothing I can do.

Screaming. Shouting. Something breaking. Then I feel hands on my face. And hear her voice. Daphne. I didn't push the button. I didn't call for help. She made it up here, and Luka didn't hurt her because she keeps telling me over and over it's going to be okay. And that's when the darkness overcomes me. I can't hold on any longer.

DAPHNE

The steady beep of the machine is comforting even if the cold hospital room isn't. But the noise tells me we got there in time.

Looking at Bryce, I whisper, "I followed my gut."

There's a light tap on the door. Glancing over, I watch Shaw step inside the room as he asks, "How is he?"

"Still not awake." Doctors say everything looks good, but the sedative Eliza spiked the liquor with will take time to wear off.

"I'm sure he will be soon." Shaw shifts back on the heels of his feet. He's got bad news.

"What is it?"

"She's still denying it."

"Doesn't matter. Luka already turned on her." And when I say turned, I mean rolled over her several times and told us everything.

"It'll be her word against his."

"We'll find proof. That's what we do." I glance back to Bryce. She has to pay for what she was planning to do to Bryce and her own brother.

Shaw heads back to the station while I stay behind. There's no way I'm leaving until Bryce and Jasper are both awake.

Walking over to the window, I sit in the chair and think what a difference a few minutes can make. I was supposed to be at Bryce's place right now, relaxing while we watched a movie. But we're here. Thankfully, that can be our reality soon.

"Daphne." I hear his gruff voice behind me as I jump, turning to see Bryce finally awake. "What happened?" He rubs his fingers over his eyes like he's trying to wake up. "Where's Jasper?" He looks agitated and tries to get

out of the bed.

“No, don’t. Jasper is all right. He’s across the hall. He’ll be awake soon. He’s okay.” I step next to the bed. “You’re okay.” I can’t hold it in any longer, the tears stream down my cheek as I close my eyes. “I shouldn’t have left you alone. I should’ve gone to the game.” I try to say all the other things I should’ve done but stop because my voice breaks as I fight the urge to full-on cry.

“This isn’t your fault. I don’t remember exactly what happened ...” His voice trails off as he says, “I didn’t push the button. I remember trying to get to my phone and the device beginning next to it, but I didn’t push it or call for help. Eliza said Luka was downstairs,” he mutters. His eyes roll up to the ceiling, squinting slightly, like he’s trying to search his recall.

“He was. He’s at the station now.” He’d tried to deter me. But I’d recognized him from his mugshot. I’d investigated Jasper and in turn, Eliza and Luka. Plus, I had backup. Shaw was ready to jump in as soon as he realized there was a threat. “I followed my gut like some wise man always tells me. Though I thought it was Jasper. But I knew you were in trouble because the details with Quentin didn’t fit.”

He lifts a hand, rubbing my tear-stained cheek. “My mystery solver. Thank you for saving my life.”

I try to keep my emotions at bay as I tell him, “You should’ve pushed the damn button.”

“Fuss at me all you want, but I wasn’t letting you risk your life for me. I don’t care what your job is. You’re too important to me.” He pulls me closer as I climb onto the bed with him, his arms wrap around me, holding me as I take in the fact that he’s alive and safe. Then he has to be himself and remind me why he drives me insane. “But can we both agree that I win the crazy ex contest?”

“That’s not funny.”

I press my face harder against his chest as he says, “Not even a little?”

“No,” I reply quickly.

“There goes my second career as a comedian,” he huffs. “Guess I’ll have to hope the baseball thing works out for a while longer. I do have an in with the coach’s daughter now.”

What am I going to do with this man?

BRYCE

I'm in the bullpen. Getting ready to step onto the field. We're in game six of the final championship. The final stretch that decides the best of the best. This win will end the series. A loss will tie us, bringing us to the final game. I shouldn't be pitching today. I should've been in game three. But Eliza put a damper on that.

"Is Daphne here yet?" I ask Coach.

"I don't know. You know more about her whereabouts than I do," he retorts. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Yes sir." I can't miss the game. Can I say I'm one hundred percent? No. But I feel like I can do this. I feel like this is where I should be. The only thing missing is her. Jasper finally responded to my messages, but he's still avoiding me, mostly because he feels bad about everything that went down. But if anyone knows that you can't control what your family does, it's me.

"Parish." Coach breaks me from my thoughts as I turn back to look at him. He gives me an impatient, grumpy look. "If she said she'd be here, she'll be here. Now get your head in the damn game and off my daughter, please," he grumbles.

Just before he goes to step out, I temp my faith, because what I'm really worried about is if he'll ever truly accept the two of us. "Hey, Coach." When he turns back to me, I swallow my nerves and go for it. Kind of. "Hypothetically, if I were to ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage one day, would I have your blessing?"

He abruptly replies, "You did when you were singing."

"Good point. But if I were to ask her someday again?"

"I'd say come to me whenever it's not hypothetical, and I'll let you

know.”

“It’s not really hypothetical. It’s inevitable. I just don’t want to push her too soon. But I know I want to spend the rest of my life with her, because without her, it doesn’t make sense.”

He gives me a once-over, then says, “Win me a title today, and I’ll say yes.”

“No pressure,” I joke as I walk past him. But it’s a hell of a task.

“Hey, Parish,” Coach calls out as he strolls up behind me. “If you don’t win, you still have my blessing.”

“Thanks, Coach.” I go in for a hug that he actually returns with a quick thump on the back. “Or should I call you Dad now?”

“No. You shouldn’t.” He continues walking, but something tells me he isn’t as opposed to me as he lets on. I sure hope that’s the case because I’m making a helluva plan for someone who may still be questioning if she’s gonna go off and hide away from me or not.

Yeah, the last couple of days has been a whirlwind with everything going on. She’s not pushed me away, but we still need to find our new normal. Only I don’t want a new one, I liked having her around all the time. But I get that she has a career. And that’s why she said she might not make it to the game today. Some reports or something that she had to finish up before she could take her official leave.

But as I walk over to the dugout, I see the most magnificent sight ever. Daphne. She’s standing on the steps, talking with Gunner until she sees me heading over.

As soon as I’m within reach, I pull her into my arms. Without hesitating, I give her a long, passionate kiss that she doesn’t pull away from. Even as we hear Gunner singsong, “Parish is smooching on Coach’s daughter.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I tell her before giving her another quick smooch. Then I notice the jersey she’s wearing. “This jersey looks perfect on you.”

“I’m here to support my man. I wanted to wish you good luck and tell you about the good luck charm I brought along.”

Pulling her to me, I tell her, “You’re all the luck I need.”

“Maybe. But I brought backup.” She points over to the stands, and when I see my best friend wave back at me, I have to contain my emotions as she explains. “Sorry I lied to you. I had to make a quick trip to Houston to convince Jasper that he was needed and wanted here.”

Pulling her to me, I hold her for a few seconds as I swallow the lump in my throat. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” She leans back and looks at me. “And I really wanted to apologize to him for suspecting him of the worst, but he said it’s all past us because I was just doing everything I thought was best to keep you safe.” Daphne gives me a warm embrace as the announcer’s voice rings out. “I’m gonna head out to my seat. Today I’m a spectator, just watching and cheering on the man I love.”

“And it means everything to him.” Because it does. She’s here because she wants to be. Not because she has to be or because she’s being paid. Or because some crazy person is trying to murder me. That’s why I was so worried she wouldn’t show. It’s her choice, and I was scared she wouldn’t pick me. But she did. And that’s all the confirmation I need. I hate letting her go even long enough to play, but I do.

Soon enough, I’m stepping onto the field as the starting pitcher in the most important game in my career. And I’m focused and ready. It shows when the first batter goes down on strikes. The second batter is retired with a pop fly to second base. Batter three goes down on strikes.

Every time I step onto the mound, I feel it. We’re going to win this game today. Each inning we get closer and closer to the final out. When Coach lets me know that the seventh was my last inning, it bothers me not to head back out when it’s the top of the eighth. But I don’t argue with him. I stand by and support my teammates until Lynch scores the walk-off run in the bottom of the ninth.

The dugout clears, the team celebrating on the field as the stadium erupts. We did it. Canaan Falls Coyotes are the last team standing. Ranked the best in the league for the season.

I celebrate with my team, but it doesn’t feel complete until I have her in my arms because I know I never have to let go.

EPILOGUE 1

Daphne

Two Months Later

“Please don’t call him that,” I tell Bryce after he yells “Hey, Daddy O” across the airport.

“Well, Dad is off-limits, so it was that or Big Daddy.”

“Oh my gosh.” I shake my head, knowing that Bryce is just trying to irk him, but I don’t know who he enjoys pestering more, me or Daddy O.

The plane ride home was entertaining to say the very least. Even when Bryce is nervous about flying, he still makes a point to ask Dad who’s across the aisle from him, if he’s ready for spring training.

When we’re finally back at my parents’ house, Dad walks up and gives me a warm hug. Bryce heads over to where Mom is standing with Oliver.

Dad turns to look as Mom and Oliver laugh with Bryce, then Mom starts fussing at the two of them. “I had the best time.”

“Me too,” Dad admits. “Even when Bryce talked me into going snorkeling like I didn’t want to do. Won’t forget that one.”

“Ditto.” I laugh as I look over to my father. “I really did have the best time. We should do this family vacation thing more often.”

“Already planning it. Your mom wants to visit Paris next.”

“Count us in.” I give Dad another hug. “We’ll see you when we get back.”

Bryce walks back over, giving Dad a pat on the shoulder. “That really was the best vacay ever, Pappy.”

Dad mumbles something under his breath as he gives Bryce a pat on the

shoulder but doesn't correct his nickname. I think he gave up somewhere between Daddy O and The Big D.

"Be careful, and I'll see you two soon," Dad tells me before Mom pulls me in for a tight hug and Oliver says his goodbyes.

"They act like we're not going to see them in a few days."

"We're not," I laugh, watching as Bryce warily eyes me. "We have a few stops to make before we head home. Our taxi should be here any minute."

"Hm." Bryce gives me a side-eye. "Do I need to be worried?"

"Rule number ten, don't worry."

"What were rules eight and nine?"

I get a smirk as I repeat them. "No leaving your wet towels on the floor. And clothes in bed are totally optional."

"Oh, yeah. Number nine is my favorite addition."

I have a feeling there will be many more to come. And he asks me a million other questions in the next few minutes before our ride arrives.

"There he is." I motion to the RV and Jasper waving at us through the oversized windshield.

"So, that's a big taxi just to make a few stops."

We head over as I tell him, "Maybe more than a few." I pull out a list on my phone with notations. "Journey Through the Movies is what I call it."

"And I call it Road Trip VHS Guide," Jasper says.

Bryce looks over the stops, most from his favorites movies that he's mentioned to me and a few that I added. "We can add more stops if you want. But I thought this was a good starting point," I say.

He looks between Jasper and I in utter shock. "This trip is going to take weeks."

"Two, maybe three with this timeline." I tap on the phone then hold it up. "But we're all set. I packed up some winter clothes before we left so they should be in the RV." I look over and get a nod from Jasper. "Everything else we can get on the way."

"Yeah. This thing has everything." Jasper moves up the steps as we follow him inside, and he excitedly shows us the features. "Washer, dryer, full-sized fridge, walk-in shower. I think I'm just going to drop y'all off in a few weeks and keep traveling. Great thing about a remote job."

"Yeah, yeah. I have six more weeks before I'm due back. So, that's when I'll have to bail on the adventure, but I'm game until then." Bryce stands looking around the rig in silence. His posture stiff and tense. And suddenly

I'm worried this was too much of a plan without talking to him first. Maybe surprise road trip wasn't the route to take. "We don't have to go if you don't want to."

Before I can ramble on some more, Bryce pulls me to him, his mouth covering mine.

Jasper clears his throat followed by, "Don't think he wants to cancel."

Me neither. But Bryce remains quiet as he pulls back slightly, his forehead on mine. "Don't take this the wrong way, because I totally enjoyed the Dundee family trip, but this is just perfection. Traveling with my family, the two who mean the most to me, it doesn't get any better than this."

"Aw," Jasper hums. "Love you, too, man. But I'm out for the sappy shit. Daphne already made me happy cry over this trip enough. Hanging out with my brother is long overdue." With that, Jasper steps off and returns with our suitcases. "Y'all might want these too." Then he drops into the driver's seat.

Bryce doesn't release me. "Really Daphne, this is the most thoughtful surprise ever. And to experience it with the two of you is everything."

When he kisses me again, it's interrupted by Jasper hollering, "Y'all might want to hold on. The takeoff is a little bumpy."

The RV lurches forward as he pumps the gas pedal, and we steady ourselves. Bryce tells him, "That's not the RV, man. Let me drive."

"No. I'm driving first, so just hold onto something. The takeoff at the beginning is a little rough."

"But so worth it," Bryce tells me before giving me a quick kiss. He leads me to sit in the passenger seat then drops down on the sofa behind Jasper. The two of them already bickering about getting lost before we even get out of my parents' gated community.

And all I can think is the start of us was bumpy, but I wouldn't change it or him for anything in the world.

EPILOGUE 2

Bryce

Ten months later

“Jasper said the movers should arrive on Friday, but they’ll be here Wednesday.” Daphne clicks on the screen of her phone and laughs.

“What else did he say?” I love how she talks to my best friend more than I do. Which is a good thing they get along since he’s moving to Canaan Falls. Though I think the woman he met while visiting us over the summer has more to do with it. But I’ll take any reason to have Jasper only a few miles from us.

“That you’d better not leave a trap at the house before he gets here.”

“Already did.” As soon as Daphne suggested Jasper should move into her house since it’s been all but vacant for the last year while she stays at my place, I had it taken care of.

She tucks her phone away, glancing out the window. “Where are we going?”

“Told you. It’s a surprise.” And damn it, I’m nervous. Because this date night has been planned down to every detail.

“I don’t like surprises,” she protests.

“You didn’t complain when I surprised you this morning at the station with a coffee. Or last night with a third O.”

“Touché.”

We travel a few more miles down the two-lane highway until I pull off the road. She notices the sign. “The drive-in? We’ve been talking about coming here forever.” Pretty much since the moment we found out it’s just a

thirty-minute drive outside of Canaan Falls. “Hm. It looks closed.”

“Great.” It’s my turn to complain as I drive past the ticket booth.

“Bryce, we’re going to get in trouble. They’re not even open.” She motions to the screen that’s dark as I stop in front of it.

I glance over at it. “They said it would be open tonight.”

Getting out of my truck, I hear Daphne fussing the entire time. “Bryce, we can’t get arrested. I can’t explain away trespassing charges to my captain.”

“Okay.” I walk over to her and take her hand in mine. “Sorry that the surprise isn’t going as planned.”

“Does it ever?” She laughs and tries to pull me to the truck. “Bryce, let’s go. Please.”

“We will. But do you remember what today is?”

When sorrow covers her face, I know she does before she even says, “The day you almost died.”

I place a finger under her chin, lifting her face to mine. “It’s the day you saved my life. And you’ve done it every day since then. Your family is mine. My best friend loves you as much as I do. But what’s really wonderful, is I finally believe in happily ever after.”

When the light flickers and the movie screen illuminates Daphne jumps a bit. Her eyes dart around, and I see her panic growing until the sound of the movie playing catches her attention. “It’s *Mannequin*.”

“Our first movie night.” I tuck the hair behind her ear, trailing my fingers over her skin as I recall that memories. “When we first danced, and I wanted to kiss you but was scared you’d deck me.” I smile, remembering how annoyed she was with me and how she laughed at my singing, and still does. “But thankfully you broke rule number one just for me.”

“Like I had a choice,” she teases.

“You did. Thank you for choosing me and showing me that happily ever after exists outside of the films.” Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the ring as I drop down to my knee.

Her hands clasps over her mouth as she gasps, her eyes on the diamond ring. The song playing perfectly timed in the background. The one that was singing to when I fake proposed to her. There’s nothing fake about this moment.

“Daphne Abigail Dundee, will you marry me?”

She doesn’t speak, though tears trail down her cheeks. Everything tells

me they're happy tears, but not hearing that one word I crave after asking her to be wife makes me a little nervous until a breathy yes leaves her lips.

I stand as she jumps forward into my arms, my face tucked against her neck as I tell her, "I love you so much."

"I can't believe you did this."

"Figured you wouldn't mind my singing if it was just us." I lean back, as I hum a line from the song playing before I admit, "And maybe I wanted to be selfish and have you to myself." I slide the ring on her finger as she glances at it then wraps her arms around my neck again. "Let's go grab some movie snacks."

I point to the concession stand that is now lit up. An employee standing at the window. We order a few things then head back to the truck. I toss a few blankets in the bed of it then help her up and climb in beside her as we get comfortable.

She looks around at the gravel parking lot before she glances over her shoulder. "Thank you. This is perfect."

I lean down, kissing her. "You're welcome, Dap."

She laughs at her nickname. I've called her it so many times, but soon she'll officially be Daphne Abigail Parish, and I can't wait until that day. When he holds up her hand and looks at her ring. "I can't believe how much has changed in a year."

"I knew it would. That's why I asked for permission back then."

That gets her attention as she darts to sit upright and rotates to look at me. "What?"

"Yeah. I was ready. But I wanted to wait until you were, because I didn't want to risk terrifying you. You weren't always convinced about us."

She tilts her head and eyes me. "When did you ask him?"

"Before our final game last season."

Her eyes widen as she asked, "And he said yes?"

"Yep. But even if he hadn't, I knew I'd have to defy him eventually. I just figured it'd be easier to piss him off than to live without you," I tease. "But under all that grumpy exterior, he's a big softy."

"That and he knows you well enough to know you're stubborn enough to not listen anyway."

"Yeah. But that's what you love about me."

She maneuvers to where she's seated on my lap, her hands on my shoulders. "I love everything about you. The way you are thoughtful and

kindhearted. The way you love me. And the way you saved me from almost missing out on the best man I've ever known because I was scared. Maybe because I knew once I let you in. I'd never be able to live without you."

"And you won't." I lean down and seal the promise with a kiss. Because with every breath I have until my dying day, my heart will belong to her.

I carefully climb out of the truck, then turn back and offer her my hand. "May I have this dance?"

She moves to the edge, taking my hand as I help her down then wrap her in my embrace. We sway as the melody plays through the speakers. And it's more exhilarating than when we did it with a stadium full of screaming fans. Because this time it's real. It's forever. And it's happily ever after.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea is a native Louisianan from the mouth of the mighty Mississippi currently living out her happily-ever-after in Texas with her husband and two children.

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