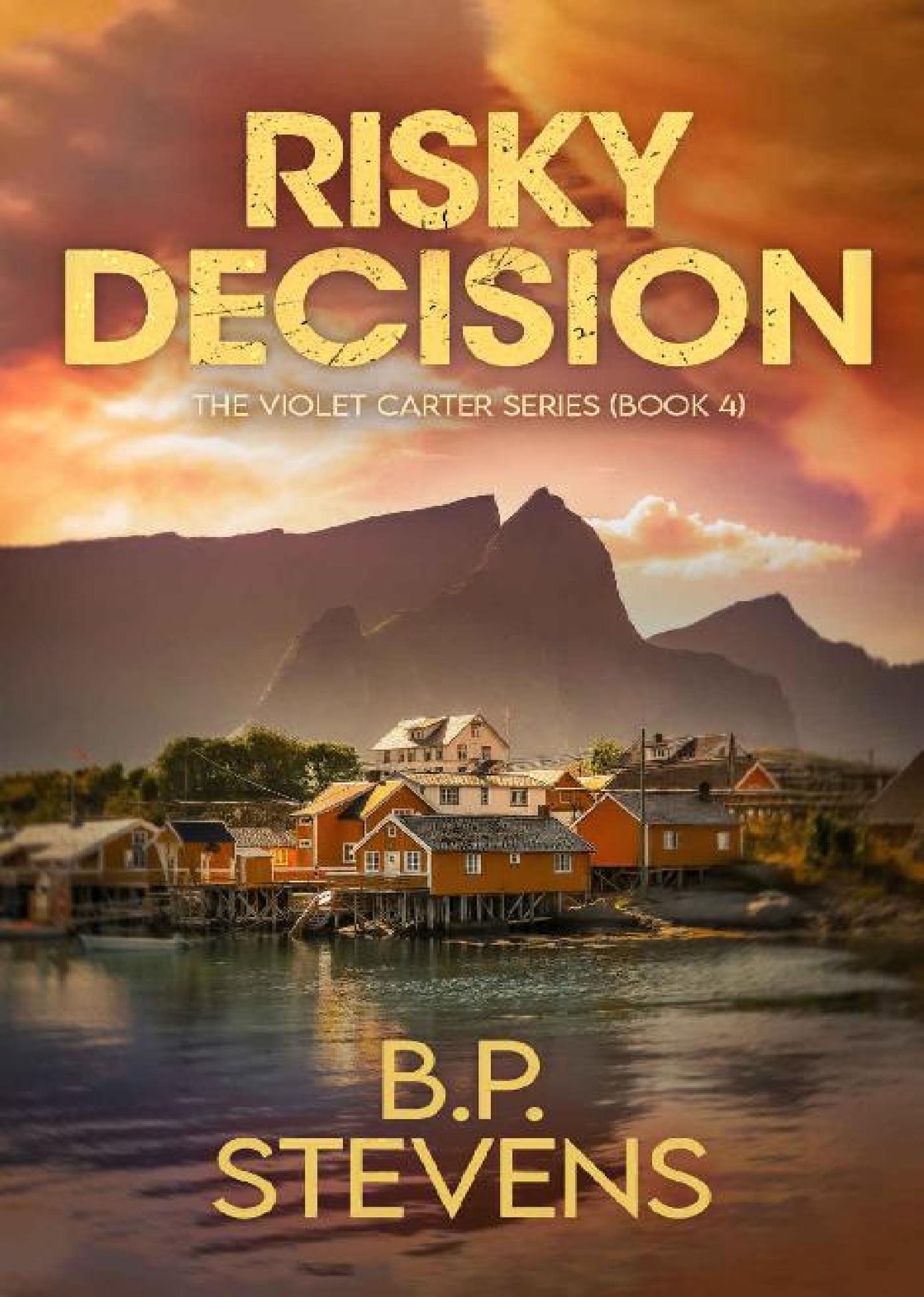


RISKY DECISION

THE VIOLET CARTER SERIES (BOOK 4)



B.P.
STEVENS

Risky Decision

Violet Carter Series book#4

BY: B.P Stevens

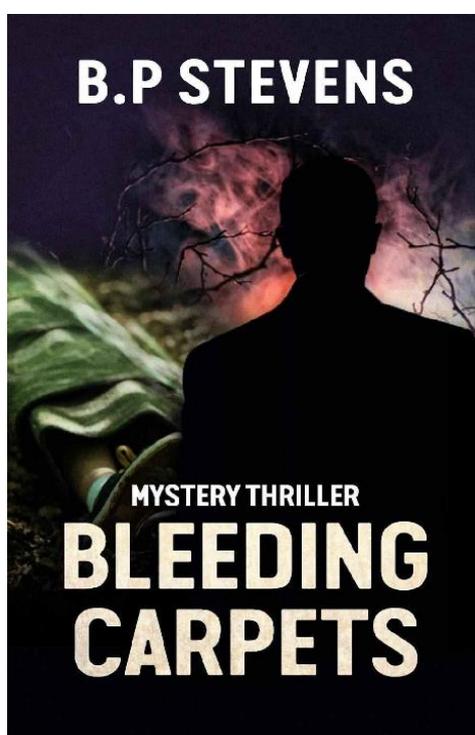
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Description

Mason Carter and his family are finally reunited.

In the fourth installment of this suspense series, the Carters finally face the consequences of their choices as they're forced to uproot their lives to save them. Meanwhile, Mason is back on track with his quest for justice. He is sure of his sister's killer and plans to put them behind bars. Much to his surprise, his journey takes a small but helpful diversion that leads him to find a long-kept secret that changes the entire dynamic of his family.

With the Beauford family waiting to trap him at every turn, Mason must cautiously navigate his newly uncovered secret and emotions.

As he approaches the solution, he realizes he may have to call for reinforcement. The only problem is that he could expose every crime in his family's past.

Will Mason decide his sister's justice is worth more than his family's future? Find out in this small-town thriller.

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Incapable Of Catching A Break

Mason

It couldn't be, right? I push the thought off again. That would add a new element to everything going on. If Lydia is really my father's child, it will bring into question when she ... happened.

I have always had a feeling my father was into shady business, so I could see that coming. My father cheating on my mother is something I could never picture. The two had been inseparable for as long as I could remember.

Lydia is staring at my puzzled expression.

"Lydia," I start with hesitation. "Uh, how old are you?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you it's not polite to ask a woman's age?" she retorts. It's a little odd to me, seeing that she looks around my age, not nearly old enough for the question to be offensive.

I fold my arms. "I get the feeling that you're very secretive."

"I get the feeling that you're very nosy." Her comeback is quick and sharp. I've begun to expect as much. From what I can tell, her personality is slightly reserved but still fierce.

"I'm Inquisitive."

She rolls her eyes at me. "However you want to dress it up." She thinks about something for a brief moment. Her eyes dart to the floor and back up. "I'm twenty-five." Only then does the weight of her experiences show in her eyes. It's only a flash. "Why does it matter anyway?" she asks.

“Just trying to calculate something,” I answer vaguely. Lydia looks at me, waiting for more, but I don’t say anything. She is about to lie back on her makeshift hospital bed when the barn doors swing open again to reveal my father. He looks between us, his gaze lingering on me momentarily before speaking.

“You’re finally up.” His voice is directed at Lydia. She shrugs and half smiles, a stark contrast to the sassiness I had been receiving a few minutes ago. My father steps to the side, and his friend emerges next to him. “We’ll skip the pleasantries for now.”

The two men walk into the room and grab their own stocks of bound-up hay to sit on. “As one can imagine, I have my eyes around,” my father’s friend says. He sits. “So far, what I’ve been hearing is nothing good.”

I suppress the sigh I feel coming. “We’re incapable of catching a break.”

“I’m not saying I’m an expert at these kinds of things, but anytime you get into fights with a gang and their leader, it’s usually not quiet afterward.” Lydia cracks her knuckles and stretches her neck.

“She’s right,” my father adds. “Especially if you killed their leader.”

“About that.” His friend continues his train of thought. “Arthur isn’t dead.”

“This guy is like a roach,” I mutter out loud. Lydia snickers but quickly returns to being solemn. I can feel my shoulders tightening again. If I wasn’t on his immediate target list before, I definitely am now.

“Arthur is a lot of things. Unfortunately, being resilient is one of them. Petty beyond reason is another thing.”

“Now that he’s alive, I can only imagine the sort of revenge he’ll seek.” My father speaks. “Nobody does brutal like him.”

His friend turns to him.

“My sources tell me he’s already back out and looking for you and Mason. He also got the local police involved.”

“If he gets us in a cell ...” My father trails off. I finish his sentence in my head. *We’ll be done for.* Horror spreads across my face as another thought occurs to me.

“Mom.”

My father’s face darkens, and he turns toward his friend. “I need to contact her and tell her to be aware—no, to get away from the house. She can’t stay there. Knowing Arthur, he’d try to use her to draw me out. It’d work too.” He tells his friend before standing from his seat. Determination creases his brows. “I need to borrow your phone.”

His friend disappears from the room and comes back within an instant. He hands the phone to my father, who is as stiff as a corpse. He dials a number and walks off from the rest of us. Seconds later, he speaks so loudly that I wonder why he bothered to walk off. “Hello, Anya; listen to me carefully.” I listen as he gives her instructions to follow and how to get to the area where he will meet her. About a minute later, everyone’s head spins in his direction because he starts yelling into the phone. “ANYA!”

“Dad, what happened?” I stand, panic starting to gnaw at me.

“Arthur may already be there.” He growls at me.

“You’re thinking about going there,” I say. He roughly rubs his hand through his hair, threatening to rip some of it out.

“Of course I am.” He lets out the slightest breath. “It wouldn’t make any sense. By the time I got there, I wouldn’t be of any help.” He’s pacing the floor in circles. “It’s hours out. I’ll have to trust that she can make it.” His voice slides up like it’s about to crack. It’s a foreign sound to me. Something about it urges me to walk closer to him and put my hand on his shoulder.

“Hey. Mom’s resilient. She made it with you for decades.” I try to sound reassuring. He pats my back. “You’re right. She’s the bravest woman I know.” He stares at the barn door.

These past few weeks have been turning our lives upside down. My mother is probably fighting for her life, my father is a wreck, I am comforting him, and now there’s a stranger

mixed into all this. I look back at Lydia, who is scanning the area. It seems like our family is a giant tornado of trouble, sucking in everything it comes into contact with.

My father moves suddenly, startling me. He begins walking briskly to the exit. I rush beside him, trying to keep up. “Where are you going?”

“The place I said I’d meet your mother. It’s about a mile out. I can’t send her here and risk putting my friend in danger. It’s safer to meet her somewhere and go from there.”

“But—”

“We’ll figure things out once we’re all together. You stay here with her. There’s no telling if Anya will make a clean escape or if they’ll follow her. If they do, then we’ll have to fight.” He turns to me with a dead expression. “Mason, I haven’t really been the best role model to follow, but listen to me. If I don’t return by nightfall, take the woman and run. Escape this lifestyle. For me, for Violet.” He takes the blood-stained bag I brought along. “This is my burden.”

He starts walking away and turns around one last time. “I love you.”

With that, he walks away and enters the stolen car that brought us here. I watch him drive away until the vehicle is a blur in the distance. It feels like I am losing another part of my family. I hate it.

I take a deep breath and try to compose myself. I know I must keep going, no matter how much it hurts. I shake my arms a little and hope the stress of my life will fall off with the motion. When I return, Lydia and my father’s friend are conversing. I can gather that they are talking about how far away the next town is from where we are now. A few moments later, she realizes I’m in the room and meets me halfway across it.

“I think I can help,” she says.

“With?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Well, we can’t go back to Bridgewood when we leave from here. We’d be caught, obviously. So we’ll need to

move.”

“We?”

“I’ve already been affiliated with your family. I’m not taking any chances. I’m coming too.”

“Fair point. But what can you do to help?”

She looks at me as if I should know better. “I have connections of my own. First, we’ll need new identities. Arthur probably made sure the police put out an APB for us, so using your real names is a great way to end up in prison.”

I stare at Lydia. It seems like she has a lot of knowledge about these kinds of situations. “So, fake ID.”

“Correct.”

“I don’t want to ask how you know that.”

“You’re right.”

“Right about what?” I question her, growing more confused the longer we speak.

“You’re right not to ask,” she replies.

“Is this your trademark?” I purse my lips. “This sarcasm.” A smile plays on her lips. She shrugs.

“Do you want to come up with a plan or what?”

“Right, the plan.”

“Okay, so once we’re ready, I have someone who can get us all legit fake IDs. We’ll need to lay low for a while, like I’m talking weeks. Let some of Arthur’s initial steam blow off.”

“I’m not exactly sure that’s how it works,” I add.

Lydia shushes me. “I’m the expert here. I’ve studied these types of people. From cold and calculated to unhinged and wild. Arthur’s very calculated but impatient.”

“Play the waiting game.”

“Exactly, but we can’t get lazy. We still have to keep everything about us airtight. Try not to go out together. It would draw more attention to us.”

“What do we do about food and money?” My brows scrunch.

“Get a job. I also have friends for that. They’ll hire people under the table, no questions asked.”

“Doesn’t seem good for business. What if they hire a crook?”

Lydia looks at me with raised eyebrows. “You won’t crook them if you know what’s good for you. They’re friendly people. They just don’t tolerate thieves and liars.”

“But murderers?”

“Not if they don’t know.” I think about her words as she stands up on her feet. I watch as she bends her knees as if she’s testing them out for the first time. She clutches her stomach for a second and releases her arm. I can tell she’s determined to get through whatever this is. I stand up as well, preparing to catch her if she tumbles over.

“I got it. Just haven’t walked in a while.” She starts a slow walk to the barn door. I follow her until we reach the small bench under the large tree in the yard. She sits down and takes a deep breath, her exhaustion evident in her posture. I sit beside her, uncertain of what to say.

“I’m not as bad as I thought for someone who was shot.”

“Not at all.” I agree with her. Her stomach growls like a thunderstorm, and I remember how hungry I was when I first woke up.

“Do you want me to get you some food?”

“From where?”

“The house?”

She looks around the yard until her eyes are set on the building behind the barn. “You mean to tell me there was a house with beds this whole time, and I’ve been laying on hay?” She starts to get riled up but cuts her words sharply. “Your father’s friend did save my life. I guess sleeping on hay is a small price to pay.” She speaks aloud, but her words aren’t directed at me.

“You’re like a box full of thoughts.”

“What do you mean?”

“It always looks like you’re thinking, but you only let out the least important thoughts.” I chuckle. “You can keep a secret; I’ll give you that.” Her stomach rumbles again, only louder this time. I get up, laughing louder.

“Okay, food. Got it.”

Time to Shine

Anya

The sound of my gloves raking against the plate I'm washing is irritating. I glance at the house phone. I don't know why I'm still hoping. I have been waiting to receive a call from my husband for days. The last time we spoke, he told me vaguely that he was out of town for a business trip. I believed it at first, but as time passed without communication, it worried me. To add salt to my wound, my son is also missing in action.

I snap out of my thoughts at the feeling of water sloshing inside my gloves. I turn the faucet off and tear the gloves away from my hands. The sudden coldness from the air causes me to shiver. It mixes in with a jolt of excitement when my cell phone rings. I run to it, not caring that my hands are wet. It's him, my husband. I glance at the caller ID and answer right away. My heart skips a beat. Before he can say a word, I ask him where he's been. My worry only grows at his tone when he finally speaks.

"Hello Anya, listen to me carefully," He all but whimpers into the phone. It cuts off anything I am about to ask. I'm unfamiliar with this tone of voice, which scares me.

"What happened?"

"I can't explain fully, but you need to get out of the house. Mason and I got into some deep trouble, and you could be involved. Pack a small bag and meet me on the highway. About four hours out. I'll be on the side of the road waiting." His voice whips through the words quickly.

"Don, what did you do?"

"JUST LISTEN TO ME!" He snaps, and I flinch at his sudden outburst. His usual calm and connectedness are gone, replaced with fierce urgency. I take a deep breath and try to remain composed. There will be time to ask questions later. If

my husband is terrified of something, it must be really bad. I gather my thoughts and start to rush around the house. I grab whatever I can fit in a small bag. All the while, I'm still trying to focus on my husband's words.

"Inside my office, there is a small safe. The combination is 77980. I have weapons in there. Grab something." I take mental notes. His words are coming faster and faster. I'm prepared to do whatever he says, but I'm still in shock and feel like I can collapse at any moment. I'm going to have to fight on my own. Don has always been here to protect me.

Once my bag is packed, I dash into his office wildly and open his closet. At the same time, there is a loud crash followed by the sound of glass shattering. The phone falls from my hands, and the screen goes black.

I stiffen and immediately stop what I'm doing. I can hear footsteps walking around the house softly but quickly. I force myself to get up and shut the closet door. Adrenaline washes over me as I struggle to keep silent. I place my hand on the safe's knob.

I twist slowly. Each time it clicks it sounds like a bomb exploding, and I'm sure whoever is inside can hear me.

Click

Nine

Click

Eight

I'm about to put in the last digit when the office door suddenly cracks open.

"No one's in here." A male's voice shoots toward someone in the hall. Seconds later, there is a reply.

"Check everywhere. She's here." The voice retorts. I hear the man in the room walking around, rummaging through things before he speaks again.

"There's nowhere else to check. Just an office."

Soon, the sound of their footsteps fade away, and I let out a breath I've been holding for what feels like forever. I'm so used to Don's office that I need to remember that his closet

isn't regular. To anyone else, it looks like an ordinary wall, but I know differently. It's hidden in plain sight and is a secret safe haven of weapons and supplies.

I put the last digit in the safe. It clicks open, revealing a vast array of weapons, supplies, and documents. I grab a few items and load them up. I pack extra ammo in my bag and wait. I can still hear people running around the house. I wait until it gets eerily quiet. I grab my bag and quietly pry the closet door open. I creep down the hall, my stomach doing somersaults.

Periodically, the sound of someone scavenging through the rooms shocks me, but never enough to make a sound. Hope starts to prick at me the second the staircase is in sight. So close. I slowly put one foot in front of the other, praying that the wooden floorboards don't decide to creak. My heart is pulsating in my chest so hard it hurts to breathe. It's difficult to tell if I'm shaking from fear, excitement, or anticipation. It is most likely the last of the group. I expect someone to be there waiting at the stairs, gun in hand.

I have defied death long enough. This would be a befitting end, but I can't afford it. With a deep breath, I embrace whatever awaits me and walk to the staircase. As I am nearing, a pair of footsteps ascending the stairs meets my ears.

I can feel the man getting closer, but my feet are cemented to the ground. Although I know that only a few seconds pass, standing there feels stretched out. I start to calculate my chances of making it away without being seen. Trembling, the weapon in my hand jostles. It becomes clear what I need to do. *This wouldn't be the first time I've used a gun.*

I raise it and aim at the staircase. The second a silhouette becomes visible, I pull the trigger, and the room erupts in an explosion of sound. The figure falls to the ground, and I don't stop to check if they're alive; I just turn and run. My body hurls over the body sprawled across the staircase and lands with a heavy thud. My feet barely touch the ground as I move. By the time I make it down, I can hear footsteps slamming around upstairs and the sound of bullets being

fired. I scramble out of the house using my bag as cover from the bullets blowing through the windows.

“Don’t let her get away!” an angry voice is yelling.

It causes me to speed up my small intermission between exiting and going to the car. I needed to find my keys. The sweat pools on my forehead as I violently pull apart my bag, occasionally stopping to shoot. I couldn’t let them get near the front door or get a clean shot at me. “Come on, come on.” I grow annoyed at myself for not doing this earlier.

When my hand finally lands on the keys, I bolt to my car. I’m so adrenaline-filled that I don’t even use the key to unlock it. I grab a rock, slam it against the glass, and open the door.

“Wait,” I can hear a voice inside calling out. I stop only for a second to shoot blindly in their direction. Everything goes silent for a split second, which I use to my advantage. “We can make a deal.” I drown out the voice with bullets and duck into the car.

“You and your son will be safe if you tell us where Don is.”

Like I’d give my husband up to be killed. I push the start button, and the car revs without fail. I throw it into reverse so roughly that my body sways to the left and drags against the broken window, slicing up my arm in the process. I can hear the sound of shots fired behind me, but the highway soon drowns it out. When the large wooden sign painted “Bridgewood” flashed past my eyes, I let out a sigh. I can’t believe it. I really made it out. *On my own*.

The words resonate within me, making me fill with pride. Although I’m out of range, I still speed ahead in case they get the idea to follow behind me, which is highly likely. It’s also possible whoever it was could have eyes on me outside of town. My guess is that my husband has gotten into trouble with Arthur. Only he’s this persistent and reckless.

The longer I drive, my arm starts to grow colder. After ignoring it for about half an hour, I look down to see that my arm is soaked in blood. I need to wrap something around it to slow down the bleeding. I search around the car for anything

I can use when I see it—an old shirt in the backseat. Partially turning from the wheel, I grab it and wrap it around my arm. I feel a sharp pain rush through my body as I fumble to tie the fabric and drive. When I'm an hour out with no hiccups, my guard starts to falter. The only thing that preoccupies my mind is my husband's instructions. I keep looking at the landmarks. I pass Rose Hills, the old mill, and make it out into the middle of nowhere.

Keep your eyes on the left. There's an old dirt road that goes off the highway. I'll be waiting there.

I replay my husband's words in my mind as I scour the left side of the road. The trees seem to blur past me when suddenly I see it—an old, faded road where the trees are beginning to form an arch over the road. There's an old car in the distance pulled to the side. I can see the silhouette of a man sitting behind the wheel, and I know it's him. I pull up beside the car, and he steps out, eyes wide. He's shaken, almost like he can't believe this is real. I reach out my hand to him and let him take it. We don't have to say anything at that moment. We just embrace each other. I'm so wrapped up now that I've forgotten about my numb, bleeding arm. He runs his hand across it, and it throbs. I pull away quickly.

“What happened?”

“Broken glass window.”

His face contorts into a smile, but his eyebrows are scrunched together. “Sounds like you made quite the getaway to be banged up like this.”

“You should see the other guy.”

We share a small and brief laugh before his face straightens. “We better get back to my friend's place. Don't want to be seen on the road like this.” He gets back into the shot-up car that he was sitting in before. I'm about to get in too, when I remember that I have my own vehicle to drive. I look back at him and get into my car.

I follow him down a long, winding dirt road before a large barn comes into view. There are two other people outside in

the yard. I squint, trying to make them out from a distance until one of them comes rushing forward.

“MOM!”

The word alone causes me to stop immediately.

“Mason.” The word comes out slow and heavy. I hop out of my car and run over to him. He’s waiting with his arms outstretched.

“Mason, where have you been?” The tears are streaming out of my eyes. “You went missing, Don went missing. What was I supposed to think? I thought I’d lost everyone.” I’m sobbing uncontrollably, but I don’t care. I’m relieved to have him back and be with my family again. He shakes his head and hugs me as if he’s trying to protect me from the world. Eventually, we pull away, and I look up at him. He is scratched up, has fading wounds, and has a slightly swollen lip.

“What happened to you?” I ask, reaching up to examine all of his injuries.

“Long story short—The Beauford family.”

“I knew it!” I pull back from him. “Of course it was. But why are they so adamant now? We’ve coexisted for years.”

“Well, I kind of owe Arthur something really expensive.” Don chimes in.

“I also went poking around their family. I needed to know which one of them killed my sister.” Mason steps forward, most likely not wanting his father to take all of the blame.

My insides twist. “Mason.” I look at him without another word.

“I think I found out.” He goes on, ignoring my obvious distress. His face is serious. “All signs point to Damien Beauford.”

“Mason, what reason did he have to hurt Violet?”

“Trust me. I’ve seen him in action, and he doesn’t need a reason. The man is completely unhinged. It’s scary.” Mason sighs.

“When have you seen him in action?” My motherly instincts kick in without warning. I’m terrified of the answer. I can see the hesitation in Mason’s eyes, but he goes on.

“Well, I watched him shoot a man for interrupting him. Then he kidnapped me for a few days—most of which he spent beating another man and me.” He sighs out loud. I want to interject but allow him to finish his thought. “The other guy didn’t last very long. Woke up one day, and he was gone. Dead, most likely.”

I sit there in shock. I had no idea Mason had been through so much or how close he came to death. It shakes me to my core.

Reunited

Mason

My mother's mouth hangs open in shock, her eyes wide with disbelief. I have been recounting the events of the last few weeks, and only now am I beginning to realize the full extent of what I have been through. I had grown so accustomed to suppressing my emotions that I wasn't registering them.

Even my father is looking at me with a look of pity. The only face that seems indifferent is Lydia's, and I don't think it is by choice. Since she woke up from her 'coma,' she has had the same resting face.

My mother's voice brought me back to reality. "I'm more concerned with you," she says, her eyes scanning my appearance again. "How did you get out?"

"That's the only thing that has me confused. Another Beauford helped me escape. A woman." I rack my brain, trying to remember her name. My mother notices my furrowed eyebrows and speaks up.

"You mean Sophie."

I want to ask her how she knows, but then I remember that she and my father have been dealing with this family for years. It's me who's new to all of this history. I'm just trying to catch up. "Yes, that's her."

"Figures." My mother looks off a bit. "I don't trust any of the Beaufords, but if I had to pick one, it'd be Sophie."

"Why her?"

"She's never been one to mix with her family's affairs. She keeps out. A little reserved." She walks over to the bench. My father, Lydia, and I follow. "You can never be too careful, though." she continues.

“You can say that again. The last time I trusted one of them, I ended up shackled to a wall. No, thank you.” I add, and her mouth makes a straight line. Her face goes blank for a second, and I wonder what is running through her head.

“Regardless of everything, she helped you, and I’m thankful for that.” My mother leans back onto the bench and crosses her arms.

“Now that everyone is caught up, what now?” Lydia finally speaks, and my mother whips around to face her. There is a skeptical look on her face. Her eyes widen, and she glances at my father and me temporarily. Her reaction is similar to ours the first time we saw Lydia. The only difference is my mother is better at hiding her shock. She is frozen only for a few moments.

“Yes, it’s me. The woman you bit.” Lydia goes off with a sharp tone. She is taking my mother’s shocked expression as guilt for past actions. It might have something to do with it, but I’m sure the main reason for my mother’s expression is surprise. Surprise at her close resemblance to my late sister. It’s something that I still struggle with every now and then when I’m around Lydia.

“You bit her?” My father breaks the silence. His face is contorted.

“Like a wild animal.” Lydia’s voice comes like a whip. After she says it, her expression softens just the slightest bit. “Guess it had something to do with everyone just abandoning her.” Without a hint of compunction, she expresses her thoughts. My father’s reaction is one of guilt, but only for a second. When he begins to speak, my jaw drops in disbelief.

“Well, I wouldn’t have left so rashly if Mason didn’t leave. I was trying to be a good father.” He passes the blame to me like a hot potato. His sudden accusation catches me off guard, and I’m not sure what to say, so I just stand there with a shocked look on my face. Lydia snickers, and I shoot her a dirty look.

“We all know why I left, but it seems no one ever cares to talk about it.”

“You’re right. Do you think about the stress that causes us all?” She snaps, and it’s familiar. I’m used to this version of my mother. It’s when she calms herself instantly that’s foreign to me. “Enough of this. We have enough people trying to kill us as it is. Let’s focus on what’s important, like what’s our next move?”

Lydia breaks the silence. “Collectively, we’re gonna need more people if we’re going to take on the Beaufords. We can’t do it alone.”

“Before we get to your idea, who are you? For real this time.” My mother cuts Lydia off. Her gaze is filled with suspicion.

Lydia rolls her eyes as if she can’t believe she is explaining herself. “My name is Lydia, and I’ve been helping Mason with his search, not because I particularly care about your family, but because I was interested. I got sucked into this—SHOT—and now I’m here.”

“I’m not even going to try to understand everything. I’ll just assume you’re with us since Don and Mason seem to trust you enough to keep you around.” *And it better not be a mistake either*; her glare to my father speaks for itself.

“I don’t take a bullet for just anyone,” Lydia retorts sarcastically, pointing to her bandaged abdomen.

“You’re not some hero. Just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” I remind her. She smiles. It’s genuine.

“I guess that’s true.” She looks up at the sky and takes a deep breath. “So, you guys ready to hear our plan?”

“Our?”

“Me and Mason. Keep up.”

My mother kisses her teeth. “I’ve had enough of your sour attitude.”

“I’m not sour. I might have a brain infection from that nasty bite you gave me.” I chuckle but turn solemn when my mother glances in my direction. Having these two together will be an interesting dynamic.

“It’s Mason and me, by the way,” my mother corrects. She can’t let anyone have the last say. This time Lydia let her have it.

“So the plan. Whenever we decide to get away from here, we will have to keep lowkey. I suggest getting new IDs and laying low a few towns away.”

“How will we get these IDs?” My father asked. “I can’t exactly show up to any of my clients right now. They’re all pretty shady. If the price is right, they’d probably sell me out to Beauford.”

“I know. Which is why I have people in place. I’ve already contacted them and let them know I’ll need fake IDs for four people. They can get us some under-the-table jobs for money.” Lydia responds.

“How long are we going to be in hiding?” my father asks.

“At least a month. Let the trail die down a bit.”

“It sounds good and all, but why should we trust you with all this? We don’t even know you.” My mother eyes her suspiciously. “You could just be another enemy in disguise.”

Lydia doesn’t even flinch. “I don’t blame you for being skeptical. I can’t really say anything that will make you feel better. You’ll just have to trust me.”

My mother glares at her before sighing. “What choice do we have?”

“None.” Lydia’s answer is quick.

“It was a rhetorical question.” My mother huffs.

Lydia grins. “We should probably stay here one more night. I need some sleep.” She glances over all of us. “We all look like we could use some sleep.”

Ch-Check!

“You won’t be getting any today.” My father’s friend is approaching us, holding a gun. “Somehow, Arthur has found out you are staying out here. If you want to live through the night, I’d suggest you start going now.”

“And what about you? I can’t just leave you here alone. What if he kills you to send a message?”

“He won’t do anything to me. Besides, I don’t have much to protect.” He looks my father in the eyes. It seems as though the two speak a silent language all their own. “Don’t you worry. Keep your family safe.” He turns and leaves. We all stand in silence for a few moments. My father is the first to move. We all follow, my mother at his side, with Lydia and I lagging behind. We pack up the little belongings we have, along with some medicine that my father’s friend sends with us. The entire time we’re moving around, Lydia traverses behind me with her face contorted. It almost seems as though she wants to say something to me but can’t decide whether or not to spit it out. Finally, when we get to the car, I ask what’s bothering her.

“Nothing.”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

“It really is nothing—well, nothing that could bother me anyway.” She opens the car door and hops in the backseat. I get in next to her.

“It’s about me?” I sigh. I’m not sure if I even want to know. “Just tell me.”

Lydia glances in the front at my parents before she lowers her voice to me. “It is about you. I think that you should know that your father has other children.”

My breath catches in my throat. For a while, I can only stare at Lydia. I want to ask her questions, but my parents are right there, and I don’t want to talk about it in front of them. I bite them back and sit in silence while we drive away, my mind spinning with what Lydia has told me. How many more secrets are there to uncover?

New Town

Lydia

Why'd I tell him? I look over to Mason and see that his face is still frozen. I give him a few minutes to register what I've just said. When the time passes, and he's not out of his trance, I put my arm on his shoulder and shake him. He snaps up suddenly, as if he is just coming to life. Still, he doesn't say a word for the next few minutes. In fact, no one speaks, and there isn't so much as the radio playing while we drive to the next town. The car is deafeningly quiet.

I spend my time staring out the window, watching my surroundings as I pass them. Gradually, outside shifts from a vast forest into a cityscape again, but it's not our stop. We pass two more towns before we get to our destination. We arrive at nightfall, which is more than ideal considering the circumstances. The first place we're going to visit is a small cafe where my friend told me he'd be waiting.

The little building is off the main street and tucked away in a corner. It's the perfect place for us to meet. I take on the role of director and lead Don through the roads. Within a few minutes, we pull into the small parking lot. It's dimly lit by a few streetlights, but it's enough for me to see. I recognize my friend instantly. He's standing at the entrance of the café, holding an apron over his arm. When he locks eyes with me, he begins signaling for us to come over. Don pulls the car into the first spot, and we all hop out and walk over to the building. My friend greets us with a smile.

“Good evening. My name is Leo. It's nice to meet you all. It could be better circumstances, though.” He speaks casually while leading us inside the building. He doesn't ask anyone their names since I've already explained the situation. The less he knows, the better for him and us, in case anything goes left.

When we get inside, it looks a bit different from what I remember. The walls are now a deep blue, with a few stars painted here and there. It adds a certain charm. There are also more tables, and it looks like it's been expanded. Overall, it's still quaint and cozy, but I can tell it's been remodeled. There is even a wall dedicated to frequent customers. "I see you finally changed up the place." I tease him.

"It looks a lot better now, right?" He admires his work, the new paint job, and the shiny new tables. When he's had enough, he ushers us to a table in the corner. It's tucked away from the main walkway but still open to the windows. It's one of the larger tables.

I sit beside Leo and across from Mason, Anya, and Don. Anya is glaring across the table, clearly not happy that she has to put all of her trust in me. I revel in this moment of power a little bit before speaking.

"Okay, Leo, did you manage to get the IDs?" I rub my hands together.

He hands me four national insurance cards with new names on them. "Do I ever disappoint?" He smiles. I scan over the cards before passing them out to the rest of the group. Mason stares at his, his mind elsewhere. I can guess what he's thinking about, but leave it unsaid. Anya looks over her ID and rolls her eyes. I ignore her and turn back to Leo.

"These are great. What about the setup for the others?"

"It's in the back. I got everything together while—"

"What others?" Anya interrupts.

"Those," Leo points down at the cards with a flimsy finger. "Are just to get you by. Tonight we are taking some photos and getting you passports and driver's licenses."

Anya scoffs across the table. "Do you realize the consequences if these IDs don't look legitimate?"

Leo's face twists in offense, but Anya keeps going on her rant. "This may be just a small project to you, but it's my family's life on the line. We will be in unimaginable trouble if these IDs don't pass inspection."

She rises to her feet, but her husband places a hand on her shoulder, which keeps her in place. Anya looks at him with a mix of gratitude and annoyance before continuing. “You don’t understand what this means to us. We’ve been through too much to let a bad ID be our demise.”

Leo looks up and down at Anya but smiles. “Clearly, you haven’t caught them up on me.” he replies, but it’s directed at me.

“I might’ve just given them a brief. Didn’t have time to go over the details.” I answer him and then face Mason and his family. “Leo is the best in the city—no, the country. If anyone can get us legit fake IDs, it’s him.”

“I guess we’ll have to trust your word again, right?” Anya scoffs.

“No, but you can trust my track record. I’ve gotten IDs for some of the biggest criminals in the world. You remember the hatchet killer?”

“You helped that maniac?” Mason finally breaks his silence. His look is judgmental.

“Well, I didn’t know at the time. I don’t ask questions. I provide a service.” Leo shrugs. “Just like I’m providing that service for you. You all could be murderers too.” He adds with raised eyebrows. Mason closes his mouth and saves whatever he is about to say next. Don simply observes everything without saying a word. I’ve learned over the last few days he’s not much of a talker. It’s why he and Anya work. She’s the mouthpiece, and he’s the brains. Not to say Anya isn’t intelligent too.

Leo slowly stands from the table, and all eyes flicker to him again. We watch as he walks into the kitchen, followed by the sound of shuffling. When he returns, he is holding a small white box. He rests it down on the table and opens it up.

Inside the box are four brand-new cell phones. They are all the same make and model; only the colors are different. He hands one to each of us. I flip mine over to see that there is a

small piece of paper taped to the back of the phone with a number.

“Your number is on the back of your phone. These are special phones that can’t be traced.”

“How is that possible? They look like smartphones.” Anya questions, looking at hers skeptically. Leo shakes his head and chuckles a bit before responding.

“It’s provided by a third party that guarantees it can’t be. It’s been tested too.”

I get the feeling he’s adjusting to Anya’s annoying habit of questioning everything. He is handling it a lot more gracefully than I would.

“Thank you,” Mason says, and Leo nods his head in response. The next thing we all do is add each other’s numbers to our phones. Leo waits patiently, busying himself with his own phone. Once we’re finished, he speaks.

“So, are you guys ready to take those pictures now?”

“Let’s get this done.” As expected, Anya is the first to answer. She stands from the table and shoves her cell phone into her pocket.

“You need to get cleaned up first. I have some clothes for all of you in the bathroom.”

“You have a shower in your bathroom?” Mason answers in a surprised tone before Anya can speak.

“Yea. This place used to be an apartment building.” Leo replies. “I did all the work to turn it into my little dream cafe.” He smiles. Mason looks around the place with newfound respect.

Anya is the first to use the bathroom. She comes out a few minutes later, looking refreshed. I’m next, followed by Mason. Don is the last. When he finishes, he takes his cell phone and begins to walk outside. This little action doesn’t go unnoticed by Anya. She stares at Don with a strange look before trailing behind him. When he turns to look at her, his expression is blank.

“I have a phone call to make. You get started without me. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He turns Anya away, and I pretend not to notice when she looks back over to the rest of us, clearly a little embarrassed.

I turn to Leo, who seems either oblivious or not caring about the awkwardness in the room. When our eyes lock, he shoots me a look, and we communicate with unspoken words. Even Mason, who has been spaced out since I told him about his siblings, seems to catch on. His brows turn downward slightly, and he looks at me with skeptical eyes.

At that point, I’m sure we’re all wondering the same thing. *Who is he going to call that his wife couldn’t be around to hear?*

I'm Not Asking You To Bond

Lydia

Leo takes Anya into the backroom, leaving Mason and me alone. He finally sits up a little, looking me dead in the eye.

“What do you think that was all about?”

“What?” I say, not trying to gain clarity before I assume what he’s talking about.

“My dad.”

“Yeah, I caught that.”

“Who do you think he’s calling?”

“I’m not sure. There’s only one way to be sure, but it’s not ethical.”

“You mean spy on him, don’t you?”

I shrug. “Spy is a strong word. I prefer to call it gathering intel.”

“Let’s do it.” Mason agrees. His sudden willingness takes me by surprise, and I can’t help the expression that comes over my face.

“Are you sure? What if you don’t like what you hear?” For a split second, his face shifts into annoyance, as if what I’m saying is inconsequential. I can’t believe I’m the one questioning eavesdropping. *How the tides change.*

I don’t waste any more time questioning him because he gets up suddenly from the table and begins creeping toward the door. I follow behind him quietly and stop where he does. The cafe door is slightly ajar, leaving enough room for us to see and hear him clearly. From the sound of it, he has the phone on speaker.

Mason and I listen as it rings a few times. His father taps his feet nervously against the patio, waiting for the receiver to answer. A few moments go by with repeated ringing. When

the other line finally goes to voicemail, Don kisses his teeth in frustration and abruptly turns in our direction. I jump a little in surprise, but Mason stays as stiff as a corpse. His father is still, deliberating something in his mind. I take it as a queue to go back to our booth. At the same time, Anya is returning from her makeshift photoshoot. She eyes me wearily, then Mason. Both of us are standing awkwardly near the table. Her lips purse as if she has something to say, but she flops down at the table instead.

“Lydia, I believe it’s your turn,” she says with a little too much enthusiasm. I bet money that the minute I’m out of the room, she’s going to talk about me. As I’m leaving, Don walks in, and the tension in the room grows.

When I get around to the back, where Leo is situated, he gives me a confused look.

“What are you doing here?” he asks. We both know he already has my photo to create my ID.

“I thought their family needed some time alone.”

“They couldn’t be more obvious. Their family seems like it’s hanging on by threads.”

Threats, actually, I think to myself. They’re bonded together by trauma.

“I’m not particularly fond of the mother.”

“I know. She can be difficult to deal with, but she’s been through a lot. I try to remember that, but sometimes I like making her annoyed.” I smirk, and Leo laughs. “Anyway, I better go back out before she thinks I’m conspiring against her family.” I shake my head a little at the silly notion and walk back into the cafe. As I’m approaching the table, I can tell they are in the middle of some type of heated conversation. Whatever it is, it has Mason whisper-yelling at his mother.

When he realizes I’m back, he hushes his tone and offers a strained smile. I return it, and he leaves to take his own set of pictures. I sit at the table awkwardly as Anya and Don look in separate directions. Having had enough of their awkwardness, I excuse myself from the table and walk over to the kitchen,

where I pour myself some of the leftover coffee. It goes down lukewarm, and I shudder at the unpleasantness of the experience. Still, it helps the time pass by a little quicker.

About ten minutes later, everyone is finished with their pictures, and we head to the motel rooms that I had Leo arrange for us. They are in the same vicinity as the cafe and nicely hidden from prying eyes. Before Anya has time to ask anything, I beat her to it, explaining the setup.

“There are three rooms for us.” I direct my words to Anya. “I figured you and your husband would want to share a room. The other two are me and Mason’s— Mason and I’s rooms.” I gesture to the doors with a smile threatening to grace my lips. Anya looks at me smugly, and a small smile creeps onto her face.

“Okay” is the only word Anya says before she walks into the first room. I make my way into the second room and leave the third for Mason. Inside the room, I take a moment to look around. It’s not anything special, just a simple room with a bed, desk, and TV. I’m just grateful I can sleep on something that isn’t as itchy as hay.

I take a deep breath and collapse onto the bed. Even though I’m exhausted, I can’t help but feel an uneasy energy in the air starting to seep in. Ever since I told Mason about his family, I’ve had a growing urge to find out more about my own. I’ve been in foster care for as long as I can remember. I know if I wanted to, I could probably trace back to who my parents were, but that would bring in a lot of questions. Questions I promised I wouldn’t ask, questions I’m probably not ready for.

Still, my mind won’t stop reeling. Why was I abandoned? Who are my real parents? Why didn’t they ever reach out? Do they regret giving me up?

This yearning for answers keeps me up for hours. The longer I think about it, the more my mind becomes unhinged until I finally decide to give in. I sit up and swing my legs over the bed, mentally preparing myself for what I’m about to find. Doing research on a phone and not my laptop will be annoying, but it isn’t impossible.

I start with the name I was given. I open a search engine and type it.

Lydia Faye Robinson

It feels odd seeing it on the screen plainly. I've been going by nicknames for so long. It's like I'm seeing a stranger's name. I click search on my phone and watch as a few different results pop up. I scroll through a few before I decide on the first one. It looks like it's from a few years ago.

I'm about to click on it when I'm suddenly interrupted by a knock on my door. Startled, I nearly drop my phone but quickly recover and stand up. I'm not expecting any visitors this late in the night. I make my way over to the door and peer through the peephole. The light from the streetlights creates a muddy silhouette of the figure. There's another knock, and I stand there waiting for whoever it is to step back a little so I can catch a good look at their face. When the figure finally raises its face to the door, I roll my eyes.

"Mason?" My voice is flat.

"Who else would it be?" He answers just as sarcastically as I do.

The door is barely open before Mason shows himself in. He sits at the small table in the room with a distant look in his eyes, as if he's looking for something that's not there. After a few moments, his gaze shifts to me, and he smiles. "Do you mind if I stay for a bit?"

I want to make a smart remark, but I can't bring myself to say anything except

"Sure." I lock the door again and sit on my bed. When the glare from my cell phone screen catches my eye, I shove it under my pillow and forget about what I planned to do. I'm happy for the small interruption Mason has brought and take it as a sign not to go down a rabbit hole from my childhood. I try to put it out of my mind and start a conversation.

"So, what brings you by so late?"

"I can't stop thinking about what you said earlier. About my father having other kids."

“Yeah.” I lean onto my bed’s headboard. “I was shocked when I found out too.”

“How long have you known?”

“A while.”

“Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

“You were already so busy with solving Violet’s case that I didn’t think you needed another distraction.”

“So why’d you tell me now, then?”

“I figure it’s not my decision to say what you do and don’t need. Deep down, I know you’d want to know.”

“Does my father know about these children?” His fingers start twirling.

“It’s hard to say. I haven’t met any of them. I don’t know if he visits any of them.” I ponder my sentence before continuing. “I’m not sure I would know. Don is really good at keeping things hidden.”

Mason stares off for a moment, his eyes blank. I can read him well enough to know that he’s thinking. He always is. “How many of them are there?” he asks finally.

“Just two.” That I know of, anyway.

“Huh. Imagine that.” He shifts in his seat. “Boys or ... girls?” He hesitates before the last part. When he looks at me, there is a hint of hope in his eyes. I’m not sure what it’s about. “Both are boys. In fact,” I sit back up. “One of them lives in another country. The other doesn’t live too far from this area.”

His bushy brows flick up with interest. “I’m sure that’s a coincidence.”

“Oh, please. I don’t believe in coincidences. I plan and think everything out.” I look over at him biting his nails and cringe a little. I never noticed how strange it looked.

“I just wanted to give you the option in case you wanted to go visit them. You deserve to know your family.” I hadn’t realized I’d been projecting my emotions onto him until my voice quivered halfway through my sentence. I quickly

compose myself, feeling a little embarrassed. It must not have been quick enough because Mason is already standing from the table, making his way over to me with a soft face. I groan internally.

“I don’t want to impose, but I can tell you’ve got a lot of pent-up energy inside. Is this topic making you emotional?” He asks the question with such sincerity that it pricks my insides. His choice of words still causes me to wince.

“I’m not emotional. Why would I be?” I question him. I can tell I’m being defensive, but I can’t help it. It seems like a default anytime I have to talk about myself.

“You just seem a little guarded, and you never talk about your family. There has to be more to it than just remaining mysterious.”

“Look, whatever problems I have, I can deal with them alone. I’m not asking you to bond with me.” My voice is high-pitched and a bit shrill as I speak. Hopefully, it expressed the turmoil I am feeling on the inside. When I look at Mason again, my words seem to have the opposite effect of what I expected. Instead of scaring him off a little, he comes closer, cornering me with a sympathetic look. He reaches out to place a hand on my shoulder, but I shrug back roughly, forcing my gaze to the ground.

“Stop it!” I shriek. The second the word leaves my lips, my eyes widen as if I can’t believe the sound came from me. It causes Mason to jolt a little, but in no time, he’s back to his soft gaze.

“Stop what?” He answers.

“That patronizing look. I don’t want your pity.”

“No one is pitying you. I just want to understand you.”

“Why?”

“You said it yourself. You’re in too deep with my family. Now that’s how I see you. Like family.”

His words shut me down instantly, like a sledgehammer to the face. I can feel my chest tighten up, and my breathing becomes constricted. I’m confused by the sudden change of

emotion, unsure of how to react. I look up at Mason, trying to keep my face emotionless, but I can feel my eyes welling up with tears.

“Family?” I whisper and shut out whatever he says next. The thought of anyone thinking of me as family shatters my core. It’s unfamiliar and scary. I’ve been alone for so long that I don’t think I know what that really means anymore. I’m not sure if I’m even capable of being in a family.

I have heard about “found family” but never really thought it could exist for me. I gasp when I feel myself being wrapped in a tight hug. It takes me a few seconds to realize I’m sobbing. Involuntarily, I feel my arms go around Mason’s torso. Out of all places to fit somewhere, I fit in with a family of murderers. I couldn’t have been more caught by surprise.

“So, do I call Anya ‘Mom’ now or not?” I joke around, knowing she’d probably have an aneurysm if I did that.

“Let’s stick to Anya for now.” He pulls away with a chuckle. “Don’t worry about her, by the way. She likes you too; she’s just too stubborn to admit it.”

I wipe the wet liquid from my face with a sniffle. “Really? I wouldn’t have guessed it by the way she speaks to me.”

“She’s like that with everyone. Between you and me, I think she’s just a little bit salty that you were in on a few secrets before her.” He shrugs.

“That, and she’s as suspicious as they come.” I veer to the side a bit. “It’s not a bad thing, considering the kind of lives they have. Just a little ...” I trail off my words, not wanting to ruin the moment by offending him.

“Annoying, agitating, aggravating ...” Mason laughs out loud this time. I join in.

“Exactly.” I take a seat at the little table where Mason first sat. “Back to you and your secret family. Do you think you want to see them, or is it too much right now?”

I hear him exhale. “Might as well get it all out in the open, huh?” He laughs uneasily.

“If you don’t want to, it’s okay. It’s understandable,” I assure him.

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” He rubs the back of his neck. “What if they hate me?”

“They don’t even know you. How could they?”

“They could think my father abandoned them and chose me instead. I’ve had more than a good life with nice things. More than most people could hope for. Who knows how they live? I wouldn’t blame them if they resented me.” He gives a nervous laugh.

I take in a deep breath and release a sharp exhale. “You’ll never know what could happen if you don’t try. Maybe they don’t hate you. Maybe they have no idea you exist.”

He puffs out air and straightens up his chest. “You’re right. I want to meet them.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah. But how do I do that without my parents finding out, especially my mother?”

“Leave that part to me.”

Mason nods in agreement and walks over to the door. “Tomorrow.”

“*Tomorrow*,” I repeat.

Oh Brother

Mason

I walk back to my room slowly, letting the cool of the night saturate my skin. Tomorrow is a big day, but I don't know what to make of it. Every time I get some clarity on one subject, another pops up.

I am pretty sure I know who Violet's murderer is, but I can't even attempt to contact the police at the moment. They are too involved with the Beaufords. That, and the fact that my entire family and I are now on wanted lists everywhere.

A sigh leaves my lips as I open my door. Something needs to be done about Arthur and his family. While I'm glad I haven't murdered anyone, a part of me wishes I had finished him off. I had the feeling it would make things a little easier. I am tired of the constant fear that has been slowly affecting my thoughts. I walk inside and draw the curtains tight. I don't even want to see the pale light of the moon. I need my mind to be at ease and clear for tomorrow. To do that, sleep is in order. I've already missed four hours. Even if I could get in five, it'll help. I lay in bed, willing my body to calm down and quiet, but it fights back. No use. My thoughts race around in circles while I force my breathing to slow. With a few deep breaths and a final sigh, I finally drift off to sleep.

I wake with the sun hanging in the sky, beaming into my eyes. It makes them sting, and I get up sourly. It's a bad start to the day, but I'm positive things will only get better from here on out.

I shower and get dressed in the clothes prepared for me already. They're not quite my style, but they fit, so I don't fuss over them. Lydia greets me, and we wait on my parents so we can all drive down to the cafe.

There, Lydia has gotten a job for my mother as a waitress. Next, she helps my father find a job at a local hardware store.

“It’s different from what he’s used to, but he’ll manage,” I say as we walk back to the car. My parents think Lydia’s taking me to work at a bakery, but little do they know what we’re really up to.

After getting settled into the car again, she drives us down the highway. For a beat, it seems like we’re going out of town, but at the last minute, we take a left turn into a small neighborhood. I look on in awe, not because there is anything special about this neighborhood, but because she is so gifted at finding people’s addresses. It’s a part of her job as a private eye, but it’s still impressive nonetheless.

She drives past row after row of houses with a keen eye on the street numbers until we finally stop in front of what I can only assume is our destination. We get out of the car, and Lydia leads us toward a little white house. It’s quaint, with a small porch and ivy wrapping around the columns. It has a certain charm to it that’s hard to overlook. The yard is trimmed, and the windows are clean, meaning whoever lives here takes pride in the upkeep of their house. We stand in front of the house for a few moments while I gather my thoughts. I’m about to meet another product of my father. I’m curious how different he turned out without my father’s influence. Based on the little house he lived in, he is less sheltered than I am. He lived in the real world.

“Hey, even if you change your mind now, we can still leave,” Lydia says, noticing my hesitation. I knock on the door, and she offers a warm smile. In a matter of moments, the door opens, and a man stands before us. He’s thin and tall. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s six feet. Despite his intimidating height, his face is warm and kind. I take in how his skin is almost the same shade of tan as mine and the way his dark hair flows down to his back. The resemblance is there; this has to be my brother.

“Hello, what can I do for you?” he asks when he answers the door. I want to speak, but my words feel as if they are running around in my mouth but won’t come out. It makes me feel foolish. Luckily, Lydia steps in and introduces us.

“Hi, my name is Lydia, and this is Mason. He believes he might be related to you and wants to meet you.”

His face goes pale as he looks back and forth between us both. I wonder what that’s about. “Oh.” he croaks. “I knew it was only a matter of time before you found me.” He steps aside from the door frame, inviting us in. As we walk in, I can’t help but notice the stare he’s giving Lydia from the corner of my eye. I let it go once the living room comes into view. It’s filled with books and a few minimalist decorations. *Already different from me.*

We have a seat on his couch, and he sits across from us. We both are twisting nervously. I can feel Lydia stare at me. She’s probably rethinking bringing me here. After a few awkward glances, the man speaks again.

“I’m sorry about Violet.” he starts, and my stomach jolts. “I thought the outcome would’ve been different.”

“You’ve met her?” I blurt. He nods his head and glances at Lydia again. That’s when I finally catch on to the reason for his skeptical expression directed at Lydia. He’s noticing the similarities between her and Violet too.

“I have met her. More than once. She was a beautiful soul,” he adds. I don’t care to hear him say that. It only makes this meeting that much more difficult.

“How did you meet her? When?” I ask.

“About a month before she died. Somehow she found out about me and came to see me. My name’s Dawson, by the way.” He holds out his hand to me. I shake it but return to the conversation.

“What did she say?”

“She wanted to know more about me, actually. If I knew about you guys.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, but it was all fresh.” Dawson sits back. “I never reached out because I figured there must have been a reason our father left me behind. I didn’t care to know someone who wanted nothing to do with me.”

I wince at his words. He looks at me, an emotion in his eyes I couldn't place. He lets out a small breath. I remain silent. There isn't anything I can say at that moment to make things right, to justify why I ended up with a family, and his family is broken. All I can do is listen.

"It was a good thing I hadn't bothered to." He smiles, but it's bittersweet.

"Why is that?" I finally found my voice.

"We both know the kind of things our *father* is into. The criminal things." His words come out with a hint of disgust. I try to hide my surprise by looking over toward Lydia, who is sitting at the end of the couch with her hands clasped together.

"You knew about it?" I ask.

"Violet filled me in. We were becoming close. She told me about you. Said you were clueless to everything going on around you." He pauses, giving the words time to sink in. They hurt a little, but I know it's true. Dawson's eyes flicker to Lydia as if to ask if she should be here for this. She catches on and offers to wait in the car. I nod and thank her for understanding, and she exits the room quietly. I'm grateful for the moment alone with Dawson.

"I don't know how you had no idea of everything. I mean fraud, murder, theft, gang affiliation ... the list could go on forever."

"Di-did she tell you why I had no idea?" I ask.

"No. Just said you were clueless."

"Well, she was right about that. I was also an alcoholic at the time. I wouldn't have been able to tell anything was wrong even if they had told me. Guess that's why she didn't." I stop talking when my chest tightens. I take a few deep breaths until the feeling is gone.

Dawson gives me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I know it must be hard for you to talk about this."

I don't say anything; I just continue to stare at the wall behind him. I want to question Violet's reasons for never

telling me. I want to say I would have sobered up and done something to help, but a part of me knew it wasn't true. It would only take the shock of something major to shake me from my incoherent state.

I break the train of thought and go back to what happened when Dawson met Violet. "How did she find out any of that?"

"She mentioned something about a vault filled with files. She managed to read through a few and found some pretty incriminating information. She was really upset about it all. She wanted to turn in the files. She even confronted your parents at one point." He shifts his leg. "They denied it all."

"I'll bet," I murmur.

"I just wished things had gone according to her plan."

"She had a plan?"

"Yeah. It was a bit extreme, but who was I to say how she should deal with her problem? Especially with a problem of such magnitude." My eyes never leave his face as he speaks. I'm invested in everything he says, as if it is coming from Violet's mouth herself.

"She wanted to go to the police, but most of all, she wanted to be rid of her life with her family and the problems that came with it." My mouth gapes at the thought of Violet wanting to leave me behind, but Dawson quickly clears up my misunderstanding.

"Of course, she wanted you to come with her. You were always a part of her plan."

The one that never came to be. The one I could have helped with. I shudder when a thought crosses my mind. It could have been a plan that helped cost her life. Even if it never worked out, I want to know more.

"Can you tell me what she planned?"

The Plan

Mason

“Are you sure you have the time for that? Did you forget your friend was waiting for you outside?” Dawson reminds me.

“I’m sure she’ll wait, since she knows how important this is to me. I just want to understand everything she did.” Maybe it would help with the decision I know is approaching.

“Right. Well, Violet planned to get away by any means necessary. She started poking around with people your family has ...” His eyes roll up as he tries to think, “dealt with.”

“I know that much.”

“She got threatened a few times, but there was this one man. He really had it out for her. She became frightened for her life and figured the only way out of it was—”

“Death.” I finish his sentence.

“Yes, but not literally, of course. She came up with the idea to fake a kidnapping and murder. She hoped to start a new life somewhere else once everyone believed she was dead. She actually planned to move out here.”

“Where do I fit in?” I ask, and he clicks his lips. I’m making him jump around in his story.

“Well, she couldn’t tell you right away. It had to be believable, so she would keep it a secret until things died down and reach out to you later.” He put up air quotes as he spoke again. “When the time was right.”

“Did she really think she could pull it off alone?” I ask rhetorically. Dawson answers anyway.

“No. She had people helping her.”

“Did she mention any names?” I ask.

“Yea. There were a man and a woman helping her. I don’t think she ever mentioned the woman’s name, but I remember the guy. His name was ...” He stares off into space as he recalls the name. It looks like he’s having trouble, which gets me anxious. He rubs his temples in circles a few times and snaps his fingers. When his face lights up suddenly, he blurts out the name.

“Damien! His name was Damien.” My anxiety turns into realization within the second it takes for the name to leave his mouth. My fist clenches involuntarily until it trembles from anger. I stand from my seat.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“The day before the grand plan was set to take place, she told me she was going to be with Damien and her other friend. The next day, she was supposed to meet up with you, make sure you were safe, then set her plan in motion. But when two days passed and I hadn’t heard anything from her, that’s when I knew something wasn’t right.” His expression changes. It’s thoughtful, almost sad.

“Then, I found out she was gone. Just like that. For real.”

“It was Damien. I know it was.” I raise my voice. It frustrates me to know I couldn’t act on this information.

“Not to intrude, but why don’t you tell the police about this. I mean, if you really believe he murdered your sister. Get them involved.” He said with a small tilt of his head as if it were the most obvious answer.

“I can’t exactly do that right now.”

“Why? I thought you were innocent in all this. They can’t charge an innocent man for his father’s crimes.”

“Some things you inherit.” I leave my answer vague. With that, I see myself out the door.

I used to be innocent, but not anymore. I’m on the run too. I’ve shot a man, and even worse, I wish I had killed him. I couldn’t drag the police into this without putting myself in prison too.

Lydia is waiting outside the car when I get there. She takes in my expression.

“Did it go well?” She says softly.

“I learned a lot,” I respond flatly and walk to my side of the car. I open the door and slide into my seat. Lydia reads the room and doesn’t ask any more questions. She simply starts the car and takes us back into town. All the while, I stare out the window, mulling over Dawson’s words.

They can’t charge an innocent man for his father’s crimes.

The words echo in my head repeatedly. It’s almost worse than the torture Damien put me through. Almost. It’s enough to make me wonder how my life has gotten so off track again. What started as a search for justice somehow turned into a kidnapping, fighting for my life, and attempted murder. It seems like everything will end with a prison sentence. The only good thing that has come from all of this is that I met Lydia and Dawson, two very helpful people in different ways.

I look over at the driver’s seat, where Lydia is concentrating on the road ahead and maneuvering accordingly. She doesn’t realize how much of a help to my sanity she is. Just being able to talk with someone who is clear-headed.

Just as quickly as I break my train of thought, another appears. This time, it’s more helpful to my original plan.

Violet had people helping her.

Anger starts to bubble up in me at the thought of Damien being anywhere near my sister. Even with bitterness gripping me like a vice, a ray of logic manages to slip through the cracks.

Dawson said there was a man and a woman around her in her final days. The woman is the only one yet to be named. I sit up in my seat abruptly, and Lydia takes her eyes off the road for a split second to see what has happened.

I wonder to myself if this mysterious woman is the same person I found in Violet’s contacts by the name of “Sister.” What is her part in everything? Could she help? Did things go

left, and Damien murdered her too? Was she in on it all along?

As I fight to answer these internal questions, images of the past come flooding back. Damien did have someone helping him the night of the kidnapping. I had just been so caught up in figuring out the man that I forgot about the getaway driver. Perhaps that could've been this woman.

“Damien had help.” I finally say aloud to Lydia.

“Huh?” her reply is delayed, as if she isn't sure whether I'm talking to her or not. When I repeat myself to her, she replies. “So someone else was in on it.”

“Yes, his getaway driver. It was most likely a female.”

“And Dawson didn't say if Violet mentioned her name?”

“No. She's the missing piece.” I say. “I just need to figure out how to bust them. I need undeniable evidence.”

The determination I feel to get this done is unshakable. Lots of people would have given up by now, tired of all the turnarounds, dead ends, and never-ending problems—but I can't. Even though it's mainly about getting justice for Violet, it also feels like something bigger. I could get justice for everyone else who has been taken advantage of due to Damien—the innocent people, the people in the wrong place at the wrong time. I just hope to find the proof that I need to put him behind bars forever.

“I don't mean to rain on your parade, but I will always remind you to be realistic,” Lydia replies. “Damien and his family aren't known for leaving behind evidence, especially for old crimes.”

My words come out in a sigh. “I know.”

“Even if you find some sort of proof, they will do whatever they can to make sure it never reaches the courts.”

I nod, understanding that she is right. Nonetheless, it doesn't dampen the fire burning inside of me. It locks me into a dangerous game of chess with their family. They aren't giving up, and neither am I. I can only hope that the people I care for don't get hurt in the fallout.

“You know, based on everything you do know about their family, there is another option.” Lydia’s eyes dart downwards briefly. It makes me interested to know what she has in mind.

“Like what?”

She slows the car down to a halt, and I peer out of the window to know why. When my eyes land on the small building, I understand.

The aroma of sweets and bread flow through the air, temporarily distracting me from the conversation at hand. I hold onto my stomach, which so conveniently bubbles with acid. A deep sigh across the car causes me to refocus my attention.

“You could skip the local police and go straight to the FBI,” Lydia states, her voice direct and serious. “If you bring up a case to them, they’re obligated to look into it. They’re probably already watching the Beauford family.”

“And probably also watching my father.” I remind her. “Do you think if Arthur has to go down, that he’ll just go without a fight? He’ll spill the beans about everything he knows.”

To some, it’s debatable whether or not we all deserve to pay for the crimes we’ve committed. People have a way of finding justice in actions that weren’t defensible.

No matter how you twist it, you all should be imprisoned. The intruding thought enters my mind. They’re coming so frequently that I begin to wonder if it’s my conscience instead. If it is, I need to work a little harder because I still can’t answer the moral dilemmas I have.

Am I willing to put the only people I have in prison to get justice? Despite being self-righteous, deep down, I know I’m like my father, doing whatever I have to for my own selfish reasons. It took me spending the last few days with him to see it.

“So what are you gonna do?” Lydia places her hand on the steering wheel again, although we’re not moving. Her expression displays genuine care, and it causes a wave of guilt to wash over me, a trait I wasn’t sure I was still capable of lately.

“What would you do?” I ask her. Her answer is hesitant, but I get the feeling it’s because she knows I don’t want to hear it and not because she’s being disingenuous.

“I’d do the right thing.”

Into The Unknown

Lydia

Lies .

I'm not sure why I opened my big mouth. I wouldn't do the right thing, not if it meant putting everyone I loved away. I'd do the wrong thing. I just didn't want Mason to know.

My answer puts him off a little. He probably could have seen it coming, but he hoped I'd say something different. *To be honest, maybe.* A tinge of guilt pinches at me, and I turn away from him, desperate to escape his piercing eyes. How could he be so transparent with his thoughts all the time? I struggle to articulate anything I genuinely feel, unless it's curiosity.

When I peek back at him, his gaze is still penetrating. It makes me feel like he can see through my facade too.

I clear my throat. "You have time to think about it. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

This answer seems to work better. He relaxes his shoulder a bit before reaching for the door handle.

"I've already set things up with one of my finds for you to start today. You won't be doing anything too hard. Just assisting with cleanup and maybe going with her on delivery runs."

"I got it." He exits but turns back to the open window. "Don't worry about me. Have fun with your job." He walks off.

For a second, I feel lost. With Mason gone, I'm forced to enter into my own mind space. It's a place I avoid at all costs. It's filled with too many feelings of anxiety, haunting questions, and regret. It's the reason why I prefer to keep busy with work. Focusing on other people's problems is more

manageable. Their issues don't overwhelm me or affect me. In fact, they help me. They fill a void in me, a longing for answers.

I throw my head back with a deep breath. It was time to stop running from my past when it was obvious no one could help me besides myself. I just have to live with whatever I find.

Biting the insides of my cheek, I drive back to my room and pick up where I left off in my browser. I go through numerous articles and pages dedicated to people with my name. Soon enough, I stumble upon a news article from several years back. Twenty-three, to be exact.

A family dies in a house fire.

The headline reads. I scour through it, collecting the horrifying details of what happened. An older couple burned beyond recognition in their home after taking a nap. Authorities believed a pot left unattended on the stove was the cause of the fire. The only survivor was a two-year-old toddler by the name of Lydia. Somehow the lucky child managed to escape and was rescued by a passerby while wandering the road. The child was then given to the local police and taken into foster care.

The article ended where the beginning of my sorrows started—Foster care.

I try not to think about the time spent in and out of the system—just another vagabond being forced into homes. I wouldn't have complained had I ended up in a decent home with an okay family. No. I had to end up with monsters. I feel my breathing increase, and I try to calm myself down before I go into a full-blown panic attack. It did nobody any good for me to go crazy right now. I need to focus on my present.

I stare at the picture in the article. Gray debris filled the frame, and pieces of black ash were scattered around the grass. The little ruins left of the house were still smoldering with thick clouds of smoke. It feels like I can almost smell the smoky aroma emanating from the building in the picture.

Where there had once been a home, there was nothing but charred remains of furniture and walls. It's a small reminder of what was once, no doubt, a beautiful home. My home.

I'm not sure why looking at the old picture makes me emotional, but I can feel the tears streaming down my face. Somehow, just seeing it brought me clarity. It gives an explanation as to why so many of my childhood dreams were of fire. Why they haunted me. The most important thing I understand is why I have been left alone in the world. It helps to ease some of the pain I've been carrying for years to know that I haven't been abandoned by my family; I am just a lone survivor.

I wipe my tears with the back of my hand and drop my phone onto my pillow. I finally allow my mind to conjure up pictures of what I think my family looked like. Ironically, the only face that comes to mind when I think of my mother is Anya. I frown and close my eyes, squeezing them tighter. A memory of Mason pops up. He's hugging me while I sob into his shoulder.

I hadn't realized how much I think of him as family already. I flop back onto my bed. I am in a new city with a new name and identity. I could start a new life and leave behind Mason, his family, and their bad reputation, but instead, I'm sticking beside them by choice. If that isn't a bond, I don't know what is. They say shared trauma has a way of bringing people together. Thinking back to the way they saved my life, it's just another reason to add to the list of why I'm attached. Maybe it's some kind of syndrome.

Because I can't just have normal attachments to people.

I lie back and roll to my side. There are too many reasons why I relate to their family. It's why I don't have the heart to turn them in for their crimes along with the Beaufords, even though I know I should. I owe them nothing but continuously sacrifice my morals—twisted as they may be—for them. All in the name of family.

It's Your Choice

Mason

It's been days since I last visited Dawson. The information he dropped on me the last time has been a lot to process. It's understandable that I needed a few days to let it all sink in. Despite it, I knew I'd be back. I have to know everything he did. I knock on the door. Minutes later, he opens it up, surprised to see me. He's still in pajamas and socks.

"Sorry, I would have called before I came, but I never got your contact." My mouth twists to the side a little.

"You came back?" He ignores my statement with a question.

"I had to."

"Let me guess, here to ask more questions?" He starts to walk into the house, prompting me to follow him. He goes into the kitchen and pulls something out of the cupboards. "I'm honestly curious; what else do you want to know? I think I told you everything." He turns on his coffee maker. Soon the house is filled with the strong but pleasant scent of coffee. He pours himself a glass and offers me one.

"I already had my morning cup." I share, tempted to have another. He takes a seat on the couch, and I take the armchair.

I don't waste any time getting to my question. "Did Violet ever tell you anything about our parents? At all."

He takes a sip of his coffee and yawns. "You guys seem to have a complicated family. She said your parents were super secretive, but I figured it was because they were doing so much ... yeah." He doesn't finish the sentence. "She also told me she confronted your parents a second time before she decided she really wanted to fake her kidnapping."

"And what happened?"

“Just what you’d imagine. They tried to hush her. She said the second time kind of blew up. At least with your mother.”

I immediately understand what he’s referring to. It’s why I first thought my mother had something to do with the murder. I was a little insensitive to that situation.

“I still don’t understand why your mother would threaten Violet. If her whole reasoning was to keep her safe, why throw threats around? Especially when you know your daughter is aware that you’re capable of seeing it through.” He shakes his head. It feels like he’s judging us, but I don’t let my offense take root.

“Our mother has a lot of anger. She really does mean well. Sometimes she just doesn’t think when she gets in those moods.” I defend my mom. Dawson doesn’t buy my reasoning. It doesn’t matter.

“Violet used to say the same thing. About your mother. It still didn’t excuse her actions.” He shrugs. It’s clear he has his opinions and that they’re very strong. I can’t blame him. I would probably feel the same way if I weren’t in this family.

Looking at it from the outside, our whole family probably looks like a nutcase to him. We aren’t perfect. We’ve made mistakes— *and ruined lives*.

We could get better, I told myself, fighting with myself internally. I want to believe it, but the damage could never be undone. We are a family that will always stick together, but maybe it wasn’t best for anyone.

My head starts to throb with the full weight of my decision pressing. I take out my cell phone with shaky hands and send a text message to Lydia.

Send me the FBI’s number.

I know what needs to be done to solve my sister’s case. I won’t be the one to solve it. I don’t have the resources alone. I need help, real help. As I wait for Lydia’s reply, I bid Dawson farewell. I’ve heard more than enough from him for now.

The only people I want to speak to are my parents. I’ve let them get away with keeping so much from me for so long.

Why did I always have to find out things from strangers that my parents could have told me?

I know they have their secrets, but I'm about to blow everything out into the open. Depending on their answers, I would have to decipher if we were worth sparing and could be redeemed.

I walk down the street, heading back in the direction of the bakery. I may be a few minutes late, but I don't regret how I spent my morning.

I let the morning sun beam down on me while I used the walk to think. This time, no one will decide for me. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I take it out, scanning the screen. It's a message from Lydia that consists of a phone number. My phone vibrates again. *Are you sure?* The message reads. I don't reply.

I am fully prepared to deal with the repercussions of my actions. To say I'm not afraid is another thing. I try not to think about how I'd spend the rest of my life in prison for allowing myself to be corrupted by the very same thing Violet was trying to fight.

When I'm a few blocks away from the bakery, I turn on my heels suddenly. I can't wait any longer for something that could significantly affect my life.

I need answers from my parents, and I can't wait another second.

It's NOT over yet..

[Theres a fourth book! \[Click HERE to start reading "Lies on Lies " book 5 in the Violet Carter series Today!\]](#)

Book 5 Description

As everything winds down in this small-town series, the heat is being turned up.

Now that Mason and his family are back together, they can regain a sense of normality. Only, unfortunately, that means having spontaneous combustion.

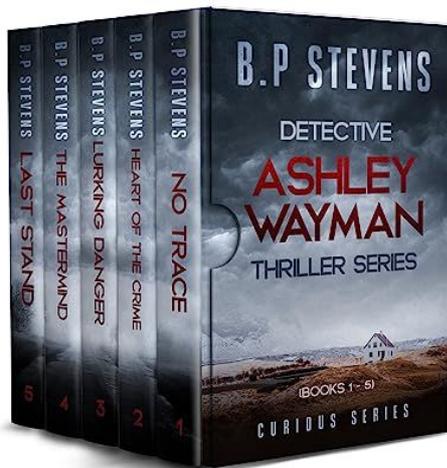
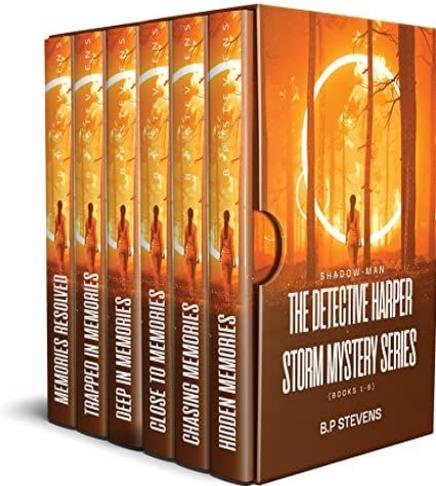
After confronting his parents, Mason learns more than he could have ever imagined and hears things he hoped he was imagining. Mason is left fuming and runs right into the arms of the law—the ones he's been on the run from. After his eventual capture, Mason soon learns that corruption can be everywhere, especially among those who are supposed to fight it.

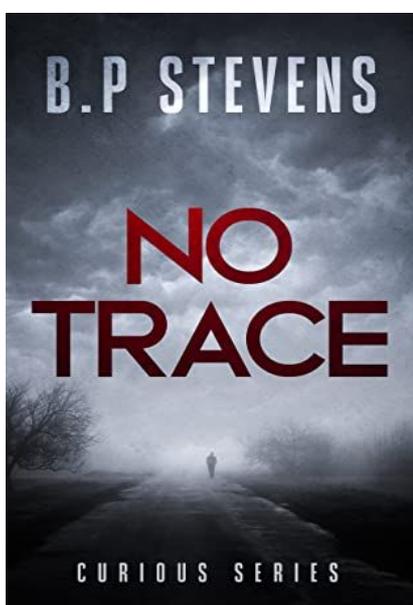
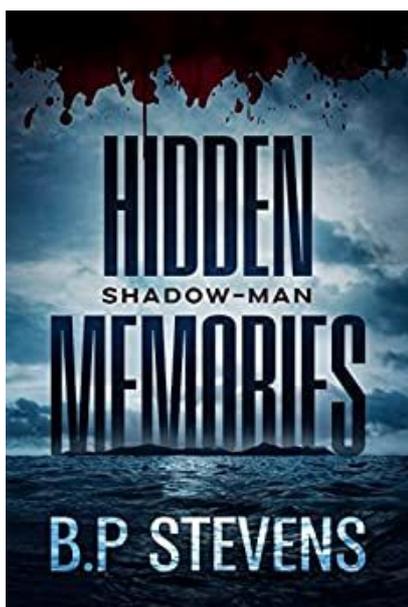
As Mason fights his battles, Arthur Beauford emerges from the shadows. With his plan in motion, he and his nephew set out to finish everything they started

With tensions at an all-time high and time being of the essence, will Mason get the ending he hoped for? Will Violet ever get the justice she deserves? Keep tuned for more twists and turns in this murder mystery suspense series.

Don't Miss Mason's journey to his small town as he searches to uncover what really happened that fateful night. [CLICK HERE today and continue.](#)

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About This Author

B.P Stevens lives in Ontario Canada and enjoys writing mystery thriller books. He has always enjoyed reading books. Whether it be as a teenager reading for hours on end or now as a father reading to his children. From his home in Ontario, he just can't seem to stop writing books and that's okay with us!

If you would like to join Stevens's email newsletter and get his exclusive **FREE** book "The Bleeding Carpets".

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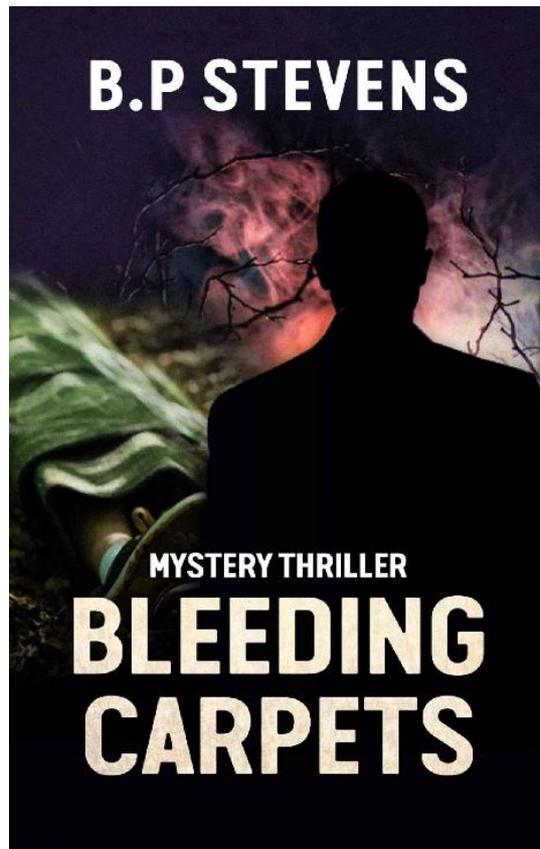
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