

WHERE
THE
TRUTH
LIVES

a novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Mia Sheridan

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TRUTH
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Where the Truth Lives

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To the healers.

PROLOGUE

A crash echoed through the small house, followed by a curse. The front door down the hall slammed. Liza scooted closer to her sister, pulling the threadbare blankets all the way to their noses, hardly daring to breathe.

She heard the refrigerator door open, the rustle of the plastic bag she'd used to cover the leftover food, and then another curse as something landed on the floor.

"He's drunk," Mady whispered, voicing what Liza suspected, but didn't want to let herself believe. Cold dread settled in her stomach, far colder than the frigid air of the house that their father didn't allow them to heat when he was gone. *Please just let him pass out on the couch or in his bed. Please.*

"Shh," Liza said, trying to soothe her younger sister, even while panic sluiced through her veins. She ran a hand over her sister's wispy, white-blond hair. "Just pretend you're sleeping. Everything will be okay." *I'll keep you safe.*

Liza felt her sister's shoulders shake but didn't dare pull her closer. His steps were already approaching, an uneven clop-slide as he lurched down the wood floor of the hallway. He laughed, a greasy sound that made the fear inside her belly rise to her throat. She swallowed it down. *Please God, please God.*

Only God had never made time for Liza before, and she didn't really expect Him to now.

Their door creaked open and Liza squeezed her sister's hand under the covers, her heart pounding, eyes shut tight.

"Who left the goddamned shoes by the door for me to trip over?" he yelled. "And what the fuck is that sludge you left for me to eat?" She heard him spit on the floor.

Liza opened her eyes, meeting her sister's gaze in the darkened room. The slice of moonlight glimmering through the curtain allowed Liza to see the stark fear in Mady's eyes. Her lip trembled.

Liza shook with fear too, but a faraway resignation crept closer, like a thief in the night, there to steal any unlikely notion that this could end well. It wouldn't. The most she could do now was survive it . . . and keep him away from Mady.

Not that he wanted much to do with Mady anyway. His disabled daughter. Damaged. Unwanted by anyone other than Liza.

But sometimes Liza let herself dream. And when she did, she dreamed of taking her sister far, far away, somewhere safe, somewhere where the devil—their father—would never find them. She'd buy Mady the wheelchair her father refused to pay for, opting instead to use his money on liquor and gambling, and she'd make sure they were safe.

But for right then, that misty dream was very far away. Reality was a heartless drunk who would take out his rage at life on her.

“Answer me, or I’ll shake it out of the both of you! You think a man wants to come home to a goddamned pigsty and a plateful of slop?”

Liza turned, sat up. “I did. I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice shaking. There were no shoes by the door. If he’d tripped, he’d tripped over his own two feet. And she’d done the best she could with the small amount of money he’d left for her to buy groceries with that week. But that wouldn’t matter. It never did.

“Daddy, please,” Mady said, her voice a quiet croak.

“What’d you say, you useless piece of garbage?” His dark form, backlit by the hall light, tipped and took a small stumble, his hand reaching out for the doorframe to hold himself steady. “Lying there all day like a piece of trash eating my food and using up my hot water,” he hissed.

Liza’s heart lurched. She pushed the blankets aside, standing quickly. “I’ll go clean up the shoes, make you something hot to eat,” she said, her words tumbling out. *Lead him away from Mady. Away, away.*

She scooted under the arm he was using to hold himself up and prayed he’d follow. An exhale ghosted from her mouth when she heard the sound of his footsteps as he stumbled along behind her. She’d distracted the monster. But now she’d have to deal with him herself.

A blackness filled her. A loneliness so deep and bottomless that she both feared and hoped she'd drown in it. Suffocate. Disappear beneath its fathomless depths.

What was left of the dinner she'd made for herself, Mady, and her older brother, Julian, a pitiful concoction of frozen vegetables, cream of mushroom soup, and a piece of sausage, lay splattered across the peeled and dingy linoleum. The meal had only been half-edible, but she'd been happy the electricity was on so she could use the stove. It wasn't always.

She stepped over the mess and opened the refrigerator. A half can of beans, a jar of mayonnaise all but scraped clean, three carrots, a potato, and a carton of milk that held just enough to make Mady and herself a bowl of cereal before school in the morning.

"I could, ah, bake you a potato," she said. Why did she feel so ashamed? Why was her mind swimming with it? She hadn't set up this life. He had. So why did she carry the shame while he blamed her? It was all backward, wasn't it?

"I don't want a goddamned potato. Stupid girl. You can't even buy groceries with the money I give you to make a decent meal." He teetered slightly, stepping in the mess on the floor as he advanced on her. The slap came quickly, like a viper striking, despite the unsteadiness of his drunken stagger.

Although the slap was sudden, it did not come as a surprise. She knew it was leading there. It always led there.

Before she could react, he grabbed her by her arm, twisting so she cried out in pain. She slipped in the congealed mess on the floor, her feet coming out from under her as he hauled her up, squeezing her arm and careening down the hall with her. *How is he so strong? He can barely walk, and yet he's so strong.*

She heard Mady sob softly from the room they shared as he dragged her past that door. She expected him to turn right into his bedroom, but he kept on going, toward the back door.

Oh God, no. No. “No,” she said, hot tears coursing down her cheeks, renewing the fight in her. “Please, no. Dad, no, not the cellar. Please.” She tried to turn toward his room instead, the lesser of two horrors, but he pulled her onward.

A door opened and Julian stood there, watching. He wore no expression, but there was hatred in his eyes. *Save me*, she wanted to beg. But Julian never did a thing. He would not help her now, and she would not ask. Another slap. Her head spun away, arm shrieking in pain as her father pulled her through the door into the cold February night.

“Your mother was a whore, a whore who left me with three useless mouths to feed, one more useless than the next,” he muttered. “I shoulda

drowned you all at birth. Put you in a sack and weighed it down, thrown you in the river. Plop, plop, plop.”

Liza wished he had.

His laughter cut the night, sliced her in places deep inside. The door of the cellar creaked as he threw it open, the musty smell that haunted her nightmares punching outward. She tried to turn back, but he shoved her so she lost her footing, tripping, and grasping blindly for the railing. Her hand clamped over it and she barely kept from tumbling forward. Her father followed, pushing her again and she did trip then, missing the final few steps and landing in the hard-packed dirt below. Blinding pain shot up her arm and she whimpered, tiny white dots filling her vision, though it was almost completely dark, the only dim light shining in from the open door above.

There was a soft skittering behind her and she pulled herself into a ball, sobbing openly now. He was going to leave her here, in the pitch-black. Alone. As she slowly lost her mind.

Her throat filled with vomit. Above her, his eyes were black holes. Empty sockets. *Dead eyes.*

The eyes of a monster. A beast. A demon.

Something moved behind him, the moon shifting in the sky, blotting out the starlight. Only . . . no, it was a human form, and it was moving down the stairs.

Shock reverberated through Liza.

Her father looked back. He laughed. “What? You want a turn, boy?”

Her brother didn’t say a word. Her father’s body spun very suddenly, her brother’s forearm wrapping around his chest, his other hand moving in a quick sideways arc. Something hot splashed across Liza’s face. It happened so fast, she couldn’t make sense of what it was.

“Julian?” she choked. Something thick and wet slid down her cheek as the metallic smell of copper filled her nose. *Blood*. Bile surged to the back of her throat again. *Oh God, blood. Blood*. Her father’s body crumpled to the ground. Liza let out a terrified sob, scrambling to her feet as fast as she could while cradling her injured arm. Julian moved toward her slowly, the knife in his hand glinting dimly in the meager pool of moonlight. Liza looked behind her, her heart thundering in her ears, the only escape going farther into the bowels of hell.

“Please, please, no,” she whimpered, backing up slowly, terror and confusion zigzagging through her. Her foot crunched on something, horrible visions rising in her mind. Bones. Teeth. The leftover meals of gruesome creatures that lurked in the blackness beyond. She couldn’t move.

She couldn’t *move*.

Julian stepped right up to her and with silent sobs wracking her chest, she gazed up at him. The muted light of the stars filtered in behind him, his

eyes as black and empty as her father's had been. He spun her around and she felt a white-hot slice of pain move across her throat. She reached up, gripping her neck with her hands, warm, slippery blood coating her skin. She sank to her knees. *No, no*, she thought wildly.

I can't die . . . I need to get to Mady!

She tried to scream her sister's name, but the sound that emerged was a soft wet gargle. She toppled to the ground.

The world began to fade. Julian turned and left her there.

Warmth. Light.

Liza's eyes cracked open. She drew in a wet, rattled breath. *Where am I?*

She felt so . . . she felt so *weak*. And then the smells hit her . . . dirt and mustiness. Blood. Something dank and undeniably human.

With great effort, she pulled herself to a sitting position, her head swimming, warm blood still trickling down her throat and pooling between her breasts. *Oh God, it hurts. It hurts.* Her gaze landed on the crumpled heap near her feet. Her father, eyes closed, a dark gash across his throat, blood thick on the dirt next to his head. He stunk. She could smell him. He'd shit

himself.

She tried desperately to organize her spinning thoughts.

Julian. Julian had slit her father's throat. Hers. Here. In hell. Terror rose and she looked behind her. The light filtered in, grew dim and then faded completely in the deep recesses of the cellar. They were hiding there. In the shadows. She could *feel* them.

Her head swam as she struggled to draw in a full breath, but she gathered what little strength she had and pulled herself to her feet, stumbling forward, past her father and toward the stairs. Above her, the sky was still dark, stars blotted out by thick, dark storm clouds.

Mady.

Something acrid hit her nose. Not a cloud. *Smoke.* With her hands grasping the rail, she pulled herself up the steps. If she could have cried, she would have, but she didn't have the strength. She couldn't afford to waste a single tear. Her sister needed her. *Mady. I'm coming.*

Her body shook, her vision fading in and out as she came up out of the hole in the earth and stumbled forward. A blast of heat made her cry out and turn her head. Behind her, the house was engulfed in flames, a wild inferno that shot sparks into the charred sky. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.*

Black smoke billowed, causing Liza to wheeze and cough, blood sputtering from her neck wound. Orange flames leapt from the room at the

back, the room that had been her father's.

She took her hands from her throat and grabbed for the back door handle, jerking her hands away when her skin made contact with the burning hot metal. *Too hot, too hot.* Her vision swam, her body tipping before she caught herself. She placed one blistered hand back to her wound, staunching the blood once more and with her other hand, she slapped her own face. She could not pass out again, she could not. *Would not. Hold on, Mady. Hold on.*

Again, she slapped herself. Again. Again. Gritting her teeth against the pain and the terror.

Liza stumbled around the side of the house, searching for a way in, but each window was broken, hot flames leaping from inside. She swore she heard laughter, a delirious demon glorying in the rise of hell, dancing within the flames. It whipped her hair across her cheek as she turned the corner and saw that the front door was wide open, and that the flames hadn't yet reached the front of the house. She staggered toward it. The fire sounded like it contained a hundred howling beasts now, angry that, for the moment, she'd evaded the flames. But the fire was coming for her. A crash echoed from within, and she pictured Mady, scared and desperate as she cried for Liza to help her. She didn't have a second to spare.

Liza peeled off her blood-soaked nightgown and wrapped the material around her face, ducking her head as she entered the inferno.

I'm coming, Mady. Hold on. Just hold on.

CHAPTER ONE

“You should go on in.”

Reed startled where he stood, whipping his head around to see a young girl with her dark hair in a messy braid, wearing blue shorts and a white tank top. She held a red plastic scooter by her side as she gazed at him placidly. His heart rate, which had spiked momentarily at the unexpected voice, steadied at the sight of the child. He turned to her and raised a brow.

“Go on in where?”

She nodded her head in the direction of the farmhouse just a few hundred feet up the road but kept her gaze on him. He glanced backward as though he needed to confirm the farmhouse was in fact what she was referring to, and not something else nearby that he may not have noticed. But no, it was the pretty white house he knew well—at least from the outside—waving under the summer sun. He turned slowly back to the girl as she dropped her scooter to the dirt road and placed one foot on it, using her other foot to push forward. She wheeled halfway around him, moving between his body and the rear bumper of his car. He turned his head to follow her movement. “I know who you are.”

He smiled, both bemused and confused. Where had this kid come from?
“Oh yeah? And how’s that?”

She made her way around him, the tires of her scooter scratching in the rust-colored dirt. She paused in her answer, circling him once more. “Because there are pictures of you all over our house.”

Surprise caused his body to still. “Pictures?” he repeated, the word fading into the hot, still air. *Our* house.

She came to a stop in front of him and nodded. “You’re Reed. I’ve seen you here before.” She inclined her head toward the farmhouse again. “You should go on in. She’ll be real happy to see you. You shouldn’t be scared she won’t.”

He moved his gaze to the house in the near distance, then looked back at the girl. “You’re Arryn,” he guessed.

Arryn grinned, showing off a gap-toothed smile and a one-sided dimple. “You know me too.”

Reed let out an exhale. “I know *of* you.”

Arryn’s smile faded and she nodded sagely. “You should get to know me better. I think you’ll like me.”

Reed smiled. “Really? What will I like about you?” he teased.

Arryn looked him straight in the eye. “I’m loyal.” She stepped back on her scooter and did another ring around him. “I’m a force to be reckoned with.” She shot him another toothy grin. “That’s what my dad says.” She stopped, her brow scrunching momentarily. He noticed she had a scrape on

one tanned knee, and a scab on the other that was almost healed over. “He says I’m incorrigible, too, and I’m not totally sure what that means, but I’m pretty positive it’s good because his eyes always smile when he says it, even if his face doesn’t.”

Reed held back a smile of his own, nodding as seriously as he could. “I think your dad means you don’t give up easily.”

Arryn’s eyes lit up. “Oh! Is that why I’d make a good lawyer?”

Reed laughed. And he already knew Arryn was right—he’d like her if he knew her better. He *already* liked the kid after a few minutes with her.

“So what’s the deal? Are you going in or not?” she asked.

Reed’s smile faded. He regarded her for a moment. “When you said, *she’d* be happy to see me, did you mean—”

“Mom.”

Mom.

Reed cleared his throat, his chest giving a harsh squeeze. Arryn was watching him closely, her eyes squinted very slightly. “I’ve seen you out here a few times before, over the last year, and when I saw you this time, I decided to come talk to you. I thought”—she glanced off behind her toward the house—“well, I thought you might need someone to hold your hand.” She looked down, grinding one sneaker-clad toe into the dirt, momentarily shy. “That’s what sisters are for,” she said, glancing up at him.

Reed swallowed, his throat suddenly tight. Overwhelmed. *That's what sisters are for.* This girl, this gap-toothed, skin-kneed girl was his *sister*. His half-sister, to be more accurate, but still. A sibling. He'd thought so long and hard about what it'd be like to know his birth mother, but he'd never really considered what it'd be like to know the half-sister, and two half-brothers he knew Josie Stratton had gone on to mother.

What age was Arryn now? Nine, he thought? Yes, nine. He'd been nine himself when she was born, completely ignorant of her existence until three years later when he'd turned twelve and his adoptive parents had sat him down and rocked his world in the most loving way they possibly could.

Arryn held out her hand. It was smeared with dirt, and she had callouses along her palm as if she spent a lot of time gripping monkey bars. Reed put his larger hand in her smaller one. She squeezed it and he was surprised by the immediate comfort the gesture provided. He allowed his sister to lead him to the house he'd only seen from a distance.

The screen door squeaked when it opened, Arryn grasping his hand more tightly as though he might turn back rather than step beyond the threshold. And truth be told, he had a mind to. His nerves were buzzing, heart thumping as he entered the house, the screen clattering closed behind him. As Arryn led him through a foyer, his gaze jumped around, landing on a photo gallery hanging on the wall, and another leading up the stairs. His steps

slowed and his breath caught when he spotted his own eyes staring back at him from among the other smiling faces. Third grade, fourth grade . . . fifth . . . all the way up to his high school graduation photo near the top of the stairs, easily recognizable because of the scarlet red cap and gown. Reed swallowed hard. He'd told his mother he looked like a cardinal and she'd laughed and said, yes, but a *smart* cardinal, one with a diploma . . .

Arryn dropped his hand as if she instinctively knew there was no turning back for him now.

Reed ran a hand through his hair, overwhelmed by emotions he couldn't even name. He'd thought . . . what had he thought? That Josie had started her own family, and that he should let her move on? But she hadn't moved on. Not from him. It hit him then—she'd meant every word of the letter she'd written, the one that he'd read over a hundred times since that day his adoptive parents gave it to him, and then sat clenching their hands, gazing at him with worried eyes as he read it.

I want you to know that even before they took you in their arms and welcomed you into their hearts and their home, you were already loved, deeply and unconditionally . . .

Yes, Josie had meant every word. Not just then, but every day since then. She'd not only loved him, but she'd made room for him in her family despite that, physically, he wasn't there. She'd made room for him in her

heart.

She hadn't let him go. Ever.

A sudden feeling of intense remorse hit him that he hadn't come sooner. He looked down at the little girl staring up at him. Waiting for him to be ready to move forward. "Thank you," he said, his voice gritty with gratitude.

She smiled sweetly just as the sound of a woman's voice came from what he thought must be the kitchen beyond. "Arryn? Is that you? Get washed up for dinner, honey. I could use some help—"

A woman stepped into the doorway holding a stack of plates. Her gaze landed on him and she came to a dead halt, eyes flaring with . . . fear. The plates slipped from her hands, crashing to the floor and shattering loudly. No one moved. As quickly as he'd seen the flash of terror, it was gone, replaced by shock, then . . . understanding. Her expression collapsed and she brought a trembling hand to her mouth. "Reed," she whispered. "Reed."

He stared at her, assessing her reaction to him. The fear . . . for the breath of a moment she'd thought he was his biological father. He cringed internally. He knew he looked like him, the infamous serial killer. He knew that much. "I'm sorry it took me so long to . . ." His words faded away, and he sucked in a quick breath, trying to rein in the emotions running rampant through him, trying to gain control. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. I probably should have called." He *definitely* should have called. He should

have prepared her, not appeared out of nowhere. He hadn't even considered that she might mistake him for the man who'd victimized her. Stupid of him. Selfish. It was just, he hadn't had any idea what to say. Didn't know what to say *now*. "I just wasn't sure . . ." He frowned, glancing out the front window toward the field beyond filled with white and yellow wildflowers. It bolstered him somehow, gave him the strength to continue. "I came by a few times before but I couldn't seem to make myself knock on the door. I was, uh, nervous, I guess. Scared." He managed a quick smile, glancing at Arryn, who was looking between him and Josie with great interest. "Arryn helped me out today."

Josie let out a gust of breath as though she'd been holding it since she'd stepped into the doorway and spotted him. She looked at her daughter, her eyes brimming with tears as she smiled at her. "I'm so glad." She looked back at Reed, a tear spilling over and tracking down her cheek. "I'm so very glad you're here now."

The field shimmered golden in the glow of early evening. Josie trailed a hand behind her as she walked, her palm grazing the tips of the tall wildflowers. She kept glancing at Reed, a nervous smile tipping her lips. "So, UC."

Reed smiled back, nodded. “Yeah.” He looked toward the farmhouse where the happy shriek of a child could be heard. Josie’s husband, Zach, had come home with their two younger children moments after he’d arrived, his gaze moving swiftly between Reed, Arryn, Josie, the broken plates and back to Josie. “I’ll clean that up,” he’d said. “And I’ve got the boys.” He’d looked at Reed and Reed had seen worry in his eyes. Worry, but also kindness. And so Josie had led Reed outside to the field beyond where they now walked under the lowering summer sun.

“UC has a great criminal justice program.” He looked over at her to gauge her reaction, his stomach tightening. Funny thing that she was a virtual stranger and yet he found that he wanted her approval. He respected her. He wanted to tell her how much. He wanted to tell her how often he’d pictured what she’d gone through as he grew within her body, but it wasn’t the time for that. Not yet. But he also hoped someday it would be. He wanted to know her. Maybe he hadn’t been ready to admit just how much until right then. “I want to be a cop,” he explained, and she peered up at him again before squinting into the distance. He couldn’t read her expression, but her body language changed in some minor way he couldn’t articulate, but sensed all the same.

“My husband’s a detective,” she said, giving him a small smile.

He nodded. “Yes. I know. My parents told me that.”

She paused, a worry line appearing between her brows. “Does . . .” She looked away from him as though rethinking the wording of what she was about to ask, or maybe second-guessing asking it at all. But after a beat she said, “Does your interest in law enforcement have anything to do with . . . with—”

“My birth father?” he finished for her.

Josie bobbed her head, her eyes moving over his features as if there was where she’d find his every thought and feeling about the man who had raped and impregnated her. The man he shared DNA with. The man responsible for his creation, a creation that had resulted from such a heinous act against the woman standing in front of him. But he refused to give him the credit for that. It was Josie who’d nurtured him, not just his body, but his heart, when she’d unselfishly left him to be raised by the only parents he’d ever known so soon after she’d finally found him.

He stopped their slow stroll, turning toward her and she did the same. If he wanted a relationship with this woman—and he did—then he wanted to begin with the truth. “Partly.” *Mostly?* How could he put this into words? He never had. When people asked him why he wanted to go into law enforcement, he gave all the stock answers . . . he wanted to make a difference, serve his community, protect the innocent, and all of that was true. But the main reason stemmed from the man named Charles Hartsman. “I

want my life to mean something.” He looked her straight in the eye. “I want what you went through to . . .” He let out a frustrated breath. “I want it to be for something.”

She was staring at him so intensely, hanging on every word, and he suddenly felt embarrassed. Vulnerable. Unsure. But then he spotted it, the pride in her eyes. The . . . what was it? Relief? A mix of emotions he didn’t know her well enough to break down. “Oh, Reed. You don’t ever have to feel like you need to make up for what he did. You bear no responsibility for that. None.”

He nodded, looked away. He knew that. He *knew* that. Or at least he did on a rational level. But in his heart, a specific desire burned brighter. The need to prove he belonged. That he wasn’t just a terrible accident not meant to happen. That his existence mattered—not only to him or those who loved him, but to others too. Strangers who might one day be thankful he’d shown up in their life when he did. “I know.” Only his voice sounded unconvincing, even to himself. A flicker of worry crossed through Josie’s eyes, but he still saw the pride there too.

“Good.” She paused. “You’ve had a good life so far, Reed.”

She hadn’t posed it as a question. After all, she’d obviously kept up on his life. He knew his adoptive mom had sent Josie pictures and annual updates, even before he’d walked into her house and seen the many photos on

the wall, but he answered it anyway so she'd have confirmation from him.

“Yes. I've had a great life so far.”

She smiled, reaching out tentatively. He offered her his hands and she took them, squeezing gently. “Good,” she breathed. “It's all I ever wanted.”

With her touch, conviction filled Reed. Yes, he'd work hard, for Josie, for his adoptive parents who'd raised him to respect life and others. Every day, he'd strive to honor the people who'd loved him so deeply. Both from up close . . . and from afar.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten Years Later

Reed sidestepped his overserved co-worker before he could stumble into him, stepping off the small platform the bar used as a karaoke stage.

“One more!” he heard Broyer yell as he headed toward the bar. “Oh shit, they’ve got ‘Purple Rain.’ Come on, guys. ‘Purple Rain’!”

No fucking way. Reed laughed over his shoulder, holding up his hand and gesturing an *I’m done* signal. He’d only joined the guys in a boisterous rendition of “Another One Bites the Dust” because it was his co-worker DiCrescenzo’s bachelor party and he’d been pressured to serenade the guy. They hadn’t been . . . awful, but then again, he’d had a couple of beers since he’d arrived an hour ago, and the other guys had been there since eight and it was now almost midnight. He didn’t plan on catching up to them, but if he was going to resist leaving early like he wanted to, it would take at least another drink—maybe three.

He moved through the smallish crowd, finding an opening at the bar and leaning forward to see that the bartender was busy pouring a line of martinis from a silver shaker at the other end. A girl in a leopard-print top standing in front of the line of drinks raised her arms and let out a loud squeal. The three

girls surrounding her followed suit.

“That was something.”

He swiveled his head as a blonde directly next to him took a casual sip from the glass of white wine she was holding in her elegant fingers. When she lowered her glass, she turned to face him, and his mouth went dry. *Jesus*. Something punched hard at his gut, nearly stealing his air. She looked like an angel. All lips and eyes and supple skin. She’d said something to him. What had she said? *That was something*. For a second, he couldn’t figure out what in the world she was talking about. Then it dawned, she must have watched him and the guys on stage.

He grinned. “Thanks.”

“I didn’t mean it as a compliment.” The line was delivered as dry as smoke, though a teasing glint entered her wide, blue eyes.

Surprised laughter bubbled out of Reed, his smile ending in a grimace as he put his hand to his heart. “Ouch.” He turned more fully to her. “So by *something*, you meant—”

“Disastrous. Migraine-inducing.”

Reed pressed his lips together, resisting another grin. Evidently, he’d been optimistic about the quality of the performance. Reed bowed his head, indicating concession and then held out his hand to her. “I’m—”

“Wait, let me guess,” she said. She tapped one finger on her full lips as

her eyes perused his features. God, she really was so incredibly pretty. Reed wanted to stop time, to stare at her uninterrupted, the way one might stare at a beautiful work of art, letting the vision itself fill something previously empty deep inside. He gave his head a small shake. Shit, maybe he was more drunk than he thought.

As if on cue, the bartender appeared. “What can I get you?”

He looked at the woman, pointing at her glass with raised brows, but she shook her head. “A Sam Adams please.” The bartender turned away, and he looked back at the woman who had just finished typing something into her phone and was returning it to the purse in her lap. “You were going to guess my name.”

She nodded, pressing her lips together for a second. “Spencer. But everyone calls you Spence.”

Reed feigned surprise. “Are you a detective too? How come I’ve never run into you at the station?” She laughed just as the bartender slid the beer in front of Reed, and Reed handed him a ten, telling him to keep the change.

“No, not a detective. A psychic,” she said.

He leaned closer, cupping his hand over his ear. “I’m sorry, did you say a psycho?”

She’d just taken a sip of wine and she brought her hand to her mouth, swallowed, and then laughed. “No promises.”

“All right.” He took a sip of his beer. “Two can play at this game. Let me guess your name.” He allowed himself to peruse her slowly. His gaze moved from her black heels to the tight black jeans that hugged her slim legs up to the loose black top that went halfway up her neck. The top that was somehow wildly sexy even while being completely demure, old-fashioned even with the small pearl buttons on the side of the high neck. He met her gaze. In the midst of the black, her flaxen hair and creamy skin were that much more stunning. What did he *really* read about her? A rule follower with a secret, rebellious side, something edgy and darker that she didn’t talk about with her friends. A woman with enough confidence to sit in a crowded bar alone and strike up a conversation with a stranger, but with a certain . . . innocence in her eyes. Hmm. She was a conundrum. A puzzle he’d like to piece together, see where the parts of her joined and why. He’d always had a thing for puzzles though. It was one reason he liked his work so much. He didn’t say any of that however. They were playing a game and he liked the sound of her laughter. “Brittany. But your sorority sisters started calling you Bunny for reasons you only disclose to close, personal friends, *or* after you’ve had one too many cocktails, and it stuck.”

She cracked up, making a small snorting sound that made Reed laugh too. “Amazing. And on the first guess.”

He tipped his beer back, pausing his grin just long enough to take a sip.

Behind him, the beginning notes of “Purple Rain” started playing. *Oh dear God, Broyer, don’t do it. Don’t do it, man.* He glanced over his shoulder to see an obviously drunk Broyer sitting in a chair on stage, head bowed, microphone to mouth, preparing to sing the first lines of the iconic song. And when he did, Reed shuddered. If Reed wasn’t so taken with his present company, he’d rush up there and lead his co-worker away, save his reputation, but he was, so Broyer was on his own. Given the phones held high ready to capture this catastrophe, the poor guy was never going to live the humiliation down. When he turned back to the woman, she was also turning her head from the stage. “Well. That will forever be known as a song I once liked.”

Reed laughed. “I think I’m with you there. All right, Bunny. It’s become very clear my friends and I can’t hold a tune. But you have to admit, our dance moves were stellar.”

She turned more fully to him as well, a lock of silken hair brushing her cheek and making his hand twitch to feel the texture of it between his fingers. He shrugged off the inappropriate impulse, tapping his fingers on the bar instead. She shrugged. “I didn’t see. I was too busy searching for something to stuff in my ears.”

“Ah, but that’s a lie. How else would you know I was one of the guys up there if you didn’t look?”

The woman laughed, shaking her head. “All right, you’ve caught me. I sneaked a peek. You’re a good detective.”

“It’s why the city of Cincinnati pays me the big bucks.”

“Hmm, interesting. So solve this mystery for me, Detective. Why do men get married if they see it as *biting the dust*?”

“I’ll tell you a secret.” He looked over both shoulders, pretending concern at being overheard. “See, there are rules. We have to relinquish our Man Card to the Bureau of Masculine Affairs if we don’t at least pretend we’re being dragged to the altar kicking and screaming.”

She widened her eyes. “Ah. And when are you given these rules? Kindergarten, I suppose?”

“No, not that early. We call them *commandments*, emphasis on *man*, and they’re given to us in a secret ceremony when we come of age.”

She grimaced at his bad pun, but amusement danced in her eyes. “Oh, I see. A *ceremony*. Very official. I’m assuming there’s lots of chest beating and —”

“Foul bodily noises, grunting—”

“Ball scratching?”

Reed laughed. “There’s not an itchy ball in the place when all is said and done. How did you know?” He raised a brow. “Did you somehow discover the underground bunker where the ceremony’s performed and sneak in to

watch?”

“No, no. Just a shot in the dark. I’m assuming you weren’t supposed to tell me about this *secret* ceremony though. Should I fear for my life now?”

He shook his head. “Being that you’re a self-professed psycho, I don’t think anyone will believe you.”

She laughed and he grinned, their gazes snagging, energy buzzing between them. Unseen sparks igniting in the air. God, it felt *good*. It made him feel *alive*, focused. He hadn’t been pulled to a woman like this in a long time, maybe ever, and he relished the feeling. Let himself fall into it.

Someone behind them let out a loud scream and the blonde next to him startled. They both looked back to see a young woman throwing her arms around a friend in a drunken greeting. They turned back to each other, and the blonde started to stand. Disappointment gripped him as did a vague sense of panic. *She’s leaving*. He stood back to give her room, his mind grasping at what he might say to either make her stay, or cement a way to see her again. *Ask for her number. I should ask for her number*. But she spoke before he could. “Let’s get out of here, Spence.”

His mind went momentarily blank. “Uh. Okay. Yeah.” He set his beer down on the bar. “There’s a coffee shop up the street that—”

She pulled on a leather jacket hung on the back of her bar stool and swung her purse over her shoulder. “I don’t want coffee, Spence.” She

turned, heading toward the door and he only paused for a moment before following. *I don't want coffee . . .* They wove through the crowd, Reed's mind spinning as he kept the blonde in his sight. This was the last thing he'd expected when he'd headed to the bar straight from work to celebrate his soon-to-be-married co-worker with a round or five of drinks.

Just as the thought of DiCrescenzo passed through his head, the guy almost plowed into him. "You leaving, buddy?" he slurred.

"Yeah. Ah . . ." The blonde moved between two men and out of his sight, and another frisson of panic buzzed inside him. He took DiCrescenzo's hand in his. "I gotta head home. I'm happy for you, man. She's a good woman."

DiCrescenzo nodded. "I really love her. That's the best part, you know? I really losh . . ." He appeared confused for a moment. "I really losh hers." He laughed, tipping slightly and Billings, another co-worker, came up beside DiCrescenzo and caught him before he wobbled over.

"Whoa there, big guy. You okay? We promised to get you home in one piece tonight."

"I gotta piss," DiCrescenzo said.

"I got ya, my man," Billings said. "You leaving, Davies?"

Reed turned toward the door again but there was no sign of the woman. "Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow." He nodded to DiCrescenzo. "Make sure he

gets home safe?”

“You know it.”

Reed turned in the other direction as Billings led a stumbling DiCrescenzo toward the men’s room. He wove around the people blocking his way, pushing the door open and stepping out into the cool night air. He looked left and right but didn’t immediately spot the woman. But then he saw a flash of golden hair and realized she was ducking into a black SUV down the block. He walked toward it, unsure now. He had no read on this situation, was completely out of his element, truth be told.

“Are you coming?” the woman called from the open back door of the vehicle. She’d ordered an Uber. That must have been what she was typing into her phone at the bar. That had only been a minute after they’d started chatting, though. When had she decided to ask him to leave with her? Reed hesitated for only a moment before jogging toward the car. He climbed inside and closed the door as the car pulled away from the curb.

“What’s your address?” she asked.

Reed hesitated but then gave the address of his apartment in downtown Cincinnati, an historic building that had been turned into condos, only five minutes away. The woman leaned forward, addressing the driver. “Can you take us to that address?”

The driver nodded, repeating the address, and typing it into his GPS. She

sat back, scooting next to Reed and leaning toward him. There was a brief second where their eyes met in the dim light of the vehicle and he swore he saw uncertainty move over her features. But before he could be sure it wasn't just a trick of the light, she was pressing her lips to his and his mind went blank. He opened to her. It wasn't even a choice—almost *instinct*—as if he'd been built to innately respond to her, and she slid her tongue between his lips. She kissed him almost tentatively at first, and then with growing hunger as he met her tongue with his own, the kiss going deeper, spiraling dizzily.

“Are you drunk?” she asked breathily against his mouth when they came up for air.

Am I? Fuck, he *felt* drunk. Only, no. It was *like* being drunk, only without the blariness. “No,” he said, and he had the odd sense that it wasn't the answer she was hoping for.

The Uber came to a stop and when he glanced up, he saw they were in front of his building. She opened the door, and he followed her out of the car, nodding thanks at the obviously embarrassed driver on his way out. “Have fun,” the young guy said, smirking as Reed closed the door.

Reed took the woman's hand as he led her toward his building, keying in his code and leading her to the open elevator. The door slid closed behind them and she took a step toward him, pressing her body against his as he stumbled backward against the wall. He smiled against her mouth. “Whoa,”

he said, his words stolen by the warm press of her full lips. God, she tasted so good. Like warmth and wine, and some feminine sweetness he couldn't describe any better than that. Blood pulsed in his groin. He wanted to slow down and speed up, and he really wanted to understand this woman and know what she was thinking.

That's stupid, Davies. Just enjoy this for whatever it might be.

But that wasn't him. He'd never gone home with a stranger from a bar. She ran her hand over his crotch, cupped him as she continued to lap at his tongue with hers, and he groaned from the pure pleasure of the moment. The intensity. The white-hot lust throbbing through his veins. And why? Why *couldn't* this be him? Just for tonight. Just with her. He wanted a taste of her beautiful body. He wanted to see her, touch her. This perfect stranger who he desired so strongly, he ached.

The elevator dinged, and they both startled, laughing as their mouths broke free, stumbling from the car. He reached in his pocket for his key, inserting it easily—thank God—into the keyhole and pushing open the door. She flipped the switch on the wall, flooding the hallway with light. He closed the door and their mouths met again, hands roaming, bodies pressing. *Glorious.*

It had all happened so fast, he wondered distantly if he might be dreaming. He felt out of his body, out of his mind, and he grasped for control,

to bring himself up from the depths of the place she'd led him, a place of pure sensation and nothing more.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he asked.

She expelled a breath on a smile as she shrugged her jacket off and let it fall to the floor. “No thanks. I’m good.”

He leaned back slightly so he could look in her eyes.

“Why this?” he murmured. “Why me?”

Her eyes met his in the light of his small entryway. Her lips tipped though the smile from a moment ago had left her eyes. “Have you ever looked in a mirror?”

He blew out a breath. He knew he was attractive. Why pretend he didn't? He'd be a shitty detective if he didn't notice the looks women gave him, the opportunities that presented because of his face and nothing else. But he'd never used it to his advantage. Charles Hartsman had done that, and he admitted he had some hang-ups about the fact that he looked just like the devil who'd passed along his genes, but he shut those thoughts down for the moment. He offered her a slight smile. “There's gotta be a better reason than that.”

“Does there?” she asked. They stared at each other, and he couldn't decipher what was in her gaze. Hope? Challenge? That uncertainty he thought he'd spotted in the Uber? Or were her eyes simply shining with the

same desire that must be in his own? He tried to shrug off the disappointment her answer had elicited. He had hoped for more than that. *Who are you?*

He leaned in and kissed her slowly, softly, bringing his hands to her hair and weaving them through. *Silk. Just like I thought. Your hair feels like silk.* It seemed as though she was tilting slightly, so he took his hands from her hair, reaching down and weaving his fingers through hers, holding her steady, trying to slow things down. She melted into him, the kiss going deeper, more intimate than the ones they'd shared in the Uber or the elevator. More intimate somehow because there were no hands involved. Just breath and lips and tongues, and the steady thumping of their hearts. When he pulled from her lips, he whispered hoarsely, "I want this to be more than just a sloppy hookup."

"Then let's not make it sloppy."

"I mean, I'd like to know who you are."

Her eyes grew softer and she moved a piece of hair off his forehead. She started to say something and then changed her mind, leaning toward him again, their mouths meeting. A minute later she was pulling him down the hallway. "Which one?" she asked, and it took him a second to realize she was asking where his bedroom was.

"Second door on the right."

Clothes came off as they moved toward his room, her shirt first as she

fumbled with the small buttons, finally pulling it free, followed by his shirt, then her jeans falling to the floor and he stepped over them, entering his room. She flipped the light switch and closed the door behind them. When she glanced behind her, he cringed at the sight she was looking at: his unmade bed, sheets hanging onto the floor, pillows everywhere, clothes strewn haphazardly. “Sorry, I didn’t expect . . . this.” *You*. “We’ll just pretend you didn’t see that,” he said jokingly, flipping off the harsh overhead light.

As the room plunged into darkness, she tensed in his arms, a small sound of distress coming from her throat. She reached for the switch and flipped it again, her expression strained and fearful in the sudden light. Reed frowned, caught off guard, but she shook her head, laughing softly as she leaned in and kissed him. “I want to see you,” she said, her voice a throaty whisper.

He hesitated for a moment, but then turned and walked to his dresser where there was a small lamp. He clicked it on and then tilted the shade toward the wall so that there was just a hazy glow of dim, yellow light in the room. “Good?” he asked, when he returned to where she stood and flicked off the overhead light once again. She bobbed her head, offering him a smile, her gaze moving down his bare chest. She ran her hands over his pectorals, down his abs, causing him to hiss in a breath. Without meeting his gaze, she unbuttoned the top of his jeans and reached inside, stroking him, both of them

watching as her thumb smeared the bead of liquid on his tip. He was helpless. Mindless. He'd do anything she asked of him. He groaned, reaching for her, but she moved backward, sitting on the edge of the bed and then lying back, her pale skin glowing with shifting shades of pearl and amber. She was offering her body to him. Every part. And something suddenly occurred to Reed. He ran a hand through his hair, grimacing slightly. "I don't have any condoms."

She stared at him for a moment and then looked past him to the door of his bedroom. "My purse. It's in the hall."

He nodded, walking from the room and retrieving her small purse from near the door. He brought it to her and she opened the snap, reaching in and retrieving a condom, and then tossing her purse on the floor. He watched her do all this from where he stood at the end of the bed, taking a moment to stare at her, to drink her in. *So beautiful.* He felt a snag in his chest. There was something vulnerable about her despite that she had initiated this, despite that she had obviously come prepared. What was it? He couldn't say. Just this vague notion that he sometimes got when he was working a case. Something his instincts had noticed before his mind could provide an explanation. She was watching him watch her, and when their eyes met, she beckoned him with her hand, nodding to his jeans, nervousness skittering across her expression. He removed his jeans quickly, joining her where she lay, their

naked skin meeting, warmth melding, atoms meshing.

“What are you thinking?” he whispered when he joined her on the bed, kissing the swell of one breast, moving a finger over the white lace of her bra.

She released a pleased sigh. “I’m hoping you’re better at this than you are at dancing.”

He laughed, but it turned into a moan when her hand gripped his erection, stroking it more fully. God, he could die of pleasure right here.

He opened the front clasp on her bra, her breasts spilling free. Full. Beautiful. Rose-tipped nipples begging for his mouth. He’d shaved that morning, but he knew that if he reached up and felt his jaw, it’d be roughened with stubble. He ran it lightly over the sensitive skin of her breasts. She shivered, tipping her head into the pillow as she fisted the sheets and he soothed her with his mouth, kissing, sucking, switching between each breast until she was writhing beneath him.

He slipped her underwear down her hips and she lifted so he could remove it swiftly and toss it onto the floor. He moved up her body, kissing her mouth once, and then leaning away as he dipped a finger between her legs, using the slippery liquid he found there to help his fingers glide slowly over the spot that caused her to gasp and moan and press toward his hand, seeking more. “Tell me your name,” he said.

Her face was turned away from him, hair strewn across her cheek,

bottom lip beneath her top teeth. A short tremble moved through her, and then she was turning her body, lifting, and he moved with her so she was on her knees and he was leaned over her. “Fuck me, Spence,” she breathed.

He had a moment of pause. He wanted to look at her as they had sex. He wanted to watch her face. This first time at least. But he didn’t press the issue. They had all night and he was more concerned with giving her what she wanted. Anything she asked him for. He grabbed the condom from beside them and tore it open with his teeth, pulled it on. He leaned over her, molding his body to hers, his hardness pressed against the soft, wet place she was offering him. She moaned, arching her back. A request. *Fuck me*. “My name is Reed.”

She moaned again. “Nice to meet you, Reed. Now fuck me.”

He leaned back, watching as he pushed inside her slowly, his toes curling as her hot, slick body grasped his. “God, you feel good.” He grasped her hips as he started to move. Steadily. Slowly. The up-close visual of their joining added to the stimulation and his brain went fuzzy as sensations swirled and rolled inside him, overlapping, competing, merging, and then becoming separate. She grabbed hold of his headboard and thrust back against him, forcing him to pick up the speed and their sex turned wild. Primal. Skin slapping, sweat pooling, moans and gasps—his, hers, he didn’t know—mixing with the staccato creak of his bed frame. A symphony of

fucking, each note driving them toward the crescendo. He reached forward, using his fingers to stimulate her from the front, slowing down so he could hold his orgasm at bay, stroking her to the beat of his thrusts, his finger slick with her juices.

He didn't want this to end. It was heaven. Pure, euphoric heaven.

“Oh God,” she gasped, and he saw her knuckles turn white where they squeezed the headboard. “I'm going to come. I'm going to come,” she chanted. There was something in her voice he couldn't identify with her faced away and his own pleasure rising and spiraling, peaking. *Surprise? Wonder?*

She came with a guttural cry, letting go of the headboard and dropping to her elbows as she pressed her face into his pillow. And then he was coming with her, his whole body tensing as he pulled back and gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her soft flesh as he came with a booming intensity that crashed over him, through him, like a tidal wave of bliss.

They collapsed, Reed half on top of her, both panting harshly with the exertion. He slipped out of her and lifted himself up, nudged her over so they were facing each other. Their eyes met, and he got that sense of vulnerability again, though her eyes were sleepy with satisfaction, her lips tipped in a sweet smile. He pulled her into his chest and she tensed. For a second, her muscles seemed primed to flee, but he pulled her forward gently. “Shh,” he

said. “Just for a minute. Let me just hold you for a minute.”

Later, Reed woke, and she was still curled in his arms, warm and soft. He blinked at the clock and saw that it was after four. He tilted his head toward her, drawing in the scent of her hair. Lemons and fresh grass, with the underlying muskiness of their sex. *Them*. God, he liked it. It caused a pulse of desire to beat through him. She mewled softly in her sleep, pressing closer. His blood hummed lazily, and she made a sound in the back of her throat again, only this time it was deeper, richer, as though even in sleep, her body responded to the change in his. He rolled away, reaching for her purse on the floor and finding a condom just inside. He ripped it open, rolled back toward her, and she opened to him, her hand cupping the globe of his ass and pulling him in. They made love slowly this time, half-asleep, their eyes meeting in the dim glow of the muted lamplight. Their gazes held as their bodies rocked together gently, pleasure cresting, and it wasn't only her body that was softer, but it was her eyes as well, something that hadn't been there before, or perhaps something she hadn't allowed him to see until just that moment.

“Tell me your name,” he whispered against her throat.

And though she paused, she finally whispered back, “Liza.”

“Liza,” he repeated, lifting his head and meeting her eyes. “Hi, Liza.”

She blinked up at him, so beautiful his heart gave a small leap. “Hi, Reed,” she said softly, her legs coming around his hips, and though they'd

spent most of the night together, though he'd been inside her, though he was inside her now, he felt like they might just be meeting for the very first time. He had the strange urge to reassure her, to tell her it would be okay. But why? He didn't know.

He reached down and grasped the underside of her thigh, pulling her leg higher so he could go deeper. She let out a raw sound of pleasure that sent a flash of arousal zigzagging through him, urging his thrusts faster, harder.

He watched her as she shattered beneath him and then followed her over the edge, their cries merging and fading away, melting into the approaching dawn. After quickly cleaning up, they burrowed together again, and minutes later, Reed fell back into a dreamless sleep.

When he woke, he was alone. He sat up, disoriented, scrubbing a hand down his face and glancing at the bedside clock. 7:23 a.m. Shit, he needed to get ready for work. He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair and looked around the room. The lamp was still on, shade tilted toward the wall. Liza's purse was no longer on his floor, though a couple of random condoms that must have fallen from it dotted his rug, like a disappointing version of Cinderella's slipper. He stood quickly and walked naked out of his room, peering down the hall toward his front door. His clothes remained, strewn here and there, mapping their desperate path toward his bed, but hers were gone.

He went to his kitchen, glanced around, peeked into his living room, and his bathroom too, and then returned to his bedroom, looking at the places she might have left a note—his dresser, the second nightstand. But there was nothing. She'd left without so much as a goodbye.

CHAPTER THREE

“Yo, Davies.” Reed looked back to see his partner, Ransom Carlyle, shutting the door of his personal car and then jogging toward him, carrying a fast food bag. His white dress shirt stretched precariously over his muscled arms and when he raised his hand for a fist bump, Reed half expected the movement to accompany a loud tearing sound as the fabric split.

He tapped his fist to his partner’s. “You accidentally put on Cici’s shirt this morning?”

Ransom made a tsking sound and brought his arm up, flexing his muscle and further stressing the fabric. “Don’t be a hater. I might not have a pretty face like you, but these guns have the ladies showing up in droves.”

“Yeah? Drive the badge bunnies wild, huh?”

Ransom let out a sniffing sound. “Man, that’s like shooting fish in a barrel.”

Reed snorted. Ransom was full of shit. His partner was only interested in one “lady” and that was his wife. Ransom was one of the most happily married men Reed had ever met.

“Did the sergeant give any details about the scene?”

“No,” Reed said, continuing through the station parking lot, Ransom following. He unlocked the driver’s side door of the city-issued vehicle and

climbed in. Ransom slid into the passenger seat next to him. “All I know is a staff member was found murdered at Lakeside Hospital on Hamilton Avenue.”

Reed pulled out of the lot, heading toward the crime scene that had been called in just before he arrived at work. He’d called Ransom who’d been five out and told him to meet him in the parking lot. “No shit? The psycho joint?” He unwrapped what looked like a breakfast burrito and took a bite. “Gotta be an inside job, right?”

Reed wiped his cheek and gave his partner a look of disgust. “Can you chew your food before talking and spraying it all over my face?”

“All those violent nuts running around? Someone’s bound to get shanked eventually.” Ransom took another bite of his burrito. “Cici did a rotation in the psych ward when she was in nursing school and told me some stories that would turn your stomach.” He polished off the last of his burrito. Obviously whatever stories he was referencing did nothing to dampen his own appetite. “But the real psychopaths? The scary ones like they keep at Lakeside?” he said around the food in his mouth. “They don’t even need to manufacture weapons out of objects. They’re just as happy using their own bodies—excrement, nails, *teeth*. They’ll go Hannibal Lecter on you if you give them the slightest chance. Eat your face right off. No remorse.”

Reed made the conscious decision to turn the conversation away from

the topic of face eating. “How is Cici?”

“She’s good. She’s mad you canceled on us for dinner last week. I told her you’ve been in a real shitty mood lately though, and she wouldn’t have wanted to spend time with you anyway.”

Reed shot him a look. “I haven’t been in a shitty mood.”

“Maybe not for the average person. But for you? Yeah, shitty. Ever since the day after DiCrescenzo’s bachelor party. What happened that night anyway? You get roofied? Because you’ve been hungover ever since.”

Reed sighed. *Hungover*. That was one way to put it. And sex with a beautiful stranger wasn’t supposed to do that. It was annoying that he’d thought about her as often as he had over the past two weeks. He was a grown man, and it was irritating as hell that he was *hurt* that the woman he’d spent one night with obviously didn’t want to see him again.

“You’re doing it again.”

He glanced at Ransom. “Doing what?”

“*Glowering*. It looks like this.” Ransom hunched forward and the expression he made brought to mind a black, male, and heavily muscled Cruella Deville.

Reed laughed, breaking the tension that had built inside him. He pulled into the parking lot of the hospital, noting several city vehicles, a crime scene van, and numerous patrol cars. “That bad, huh?” He pulled into a space near

the front.

“That bad.” They both got out and walked quickly to the front entrance. A security guard manned a metal detector, but when they flashed their badges, he waved them through, buzzing open the second set of double doors just beyond.

The unmistakable smell of a hospital greeted them: disinfectant, pharmaceuticals, the underlying scent of . . . sickness, whatever that could be broken down into. It all conjured up an aura of human misery. Lakeside was where you were sent when your own mind betrayed you.

A few staff members moved through the lobby on their way to other parts of the hospital. They glanced at Reed and Ransom nervously, their gazes flitting away. A high, half-circle reception desk stood directly in front of them and they approached it, flashing their badges again. The woman at the front looked up, blinking. She offered no smile.

“Detectives Reed Davies and Ransom Carlyle. We—”

“Third floor,” the woman said, pointing behind her at a bank of elevators at the end of a short, empty hall. Another security guard sat in a chair, looking down at some form of reading material in his lap. The woman picked up her phone as they nodded and walked away, and when they got to the guard, he used a card to allow them entrance into one of the elevators. The doors closed and the elevator began rising. Music piped into the small

space, tinny, and soft.

“This song is creepy as fuck,” Ransom said.

“‘Theme from A Summer Place’,” Reed noted. “A classic elevator tune.”

“Spend a lot of time in elevators, do you?”

“Dentists offices, grocery stores. You can’t live life without knowing this song.”

“Trust me, you can.” Ransom rolled his eyes, frowning. “You know what? I’ve been here before and this place just makes me feel . . . weird.”

“It’s a liminal space,” Reed said.

“What the hell is that?”

Reed watched the floor numbers change as the car rose. “It’s a space that makes you feel *off*, sort of like you’re in an alternate reality. Empty airports at night, school buildings after hours—”

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

A short woman with dark red hair streaked with white stepped up to them immediately, holding out her hand. “Detectives. I’m glad you’re here. I’m Marla Thorne, Lakeside Administrator.” She seemed slightly breathless as though she’d just run to meet their elevator. More likely a symptom of adrenalin. She looked to be in a slight state of shock. They shook her hand and followed her to a small reception area where a woman in scrubs sat

behind a window. “This is awful, just awful. Unbelievable. His body’s back that way.” She pointed to a set of double doors, her hand trembling. “I know you need to look at the crime scene. I just wanted to let you know that we have our guards and the CPD officers who arrived first manning all the exits. A search of the hospital was started immediately after Mr. Sadowski was found, and is still ongoing, but so far, everything seems to be in order on all the floors.” She laced her fingers together as though unsure what to do with her hands.

“Mr. Sadowski, you said? What was his role here?”

“He’s—*was*—the director.” The bright spots on her cheeks deepened when she corrected herself to past tense. “I have no idea who would do this. No idea.”

“Okay. Thank you, Ms. Thorne. We’ll take a look. Please have someone update us with any new information. We’ll need to ask you a few questions later too.”

“Yes, of course. Just have any of the receptionists ring my extension or page me if need be.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Ms. Thorne nodded to the receptionist behind the glass and a buzz sounded as the set of double doors swung open. Reed and Ransom entered another hallway. The hospital scent intensified, overhead fluorescent lights

buzzed. Ransom paused to squirt a dollop of clear antibacterial gel onto his hands from a dispenser hanging on the wall, lathering it slowly. “Here’s another one, the electrical section near the back of a Ma and Pop hardware store.” He shivered dramatically.

Reed offered him a wry tilt of his lips. “Definitely.”

A cop Reed recognized as a newer guy from District Five, the district where Zach worked, came around the corner, tilting his chin. He looked decidedly pale and possibly ill, but relieved by the sight of them. “That way,” he said, gesturing backward where Reed could hear a hum of voices. “It’s . . . not good.” For a second, Reed wondered if the guy was going to vomit. *Shit.*

“Were you the first on scene?”

“Yeah, me and Mallory. We disregarded fire. It was obvious the victim was deceased.” He leaned toward them as if sharing a secret. “That’s the first dead body I’ve ever seen.”

Reed almost told him it got easier, and that was the truth. But he hated that it was, and it didn’t exactly seem comforting so he said nothing. “Where’s Mallory now?”

“He’s with the docs who found the deceased. A couple other guys are helping man the exits while they complete a search and make sure whoever did this isn’t still in the building.”

“But the building’s full of nuts. How are they going to rule anyone out?”

Ransom asked.

The cop shrugged. "I guess they're looking for any out-of-place nuts."

Ransom rubbed at his eye. "Christ. Okay."

"Is Copeland working today?" Reed asked, wondering if he should expect to see Zach on scene.

"Off day."

"Okay, thanks."

The cop bobbed his head, glancing backward quickly, looking ill again. Ransom patted his shoulder as he walked by. "We'll talk to you after we get a look. Get some air, man." As they passed him, Ransom muttered, "Newbie."

They walked around the corner and headed toward the end of the hall where two criminalists were squatted near what was obviously a dead body, half propped up on the wall.

"Lewis," Reed greeted the criminalist they'd worked with before. Lewis turned, acknowledging Reed and Ransom and that's when Reed got a good look at the face of the male victim.

"Holy Christ," he muttered, leaning closer. "What the hell happened here?"

"Steven Sadowski, the former director of this facility. And by former, I mean as of several hours ago. And he's been enucleated," Lewis said.

Enucleated. The surgical removal of an eye. Or in this case, both eyes.

Good God.

Reed squatted down next to the body, but Ransom remained standing, possibly regretting that burrito right about then. Reed stared at the victim. It was something out of a nightmare, mouth hanging open as if in a silent scream, two gaping, empty holes where his eyes had once been, black and dripping with an inky, black substance. “Have you identified what that is in the sockets?”

“We think it’s oil paint, though that will have to be confirmed,” the second criminalist said. Reed glanced at her shirt, stitched with the name Seidler. He nodded, looking back at the eyeless face, black tears streaking down his gaunt, lifeless cheeks. Reed had been doing the job for long enough—and seen practically every manner of death—that not much fazed him anymore, but he couldn’t help the chills that skittled down his spine like a thousand moving spiders under his skin.

“Do you think the eyes were removed pre- or postmortem?” Ransom asked.

“We were just discussing that,” Lewis said, glancing up at Seidler. “We think post.”

“How can you tell?” Reed asked. Usually it was lack of blood that made it immediately obvious whether a wound had occurred before or after death, but with black paint filling the gaping holes and dripping out of them, it was

unclear whether there was blood present or not.

“We can’t definitively. But even with the paint, there’s no visual blood whatsoever, not even a drop, and it doesn’t appear as though the muscles contracted as the enucleation was being performed.”

That skittling again. “Cause of death?” Reed asked, standing so he could get a better overall look at the body. The man was wearing suit pants, a button-down shirt and tie, but no jacket. Ransom took a step back to make room for him.

“It looks like the cause of death was strangulation by some sort of cord or wire.” Lewis used a gloved finger to pull the man’s collar down, showing a deep red gouge in his throat. “It appears to have been done from behind.”

“So, someone snuck up on this guy, looped a wire around his neck, strangled him to death, and then cut his eyes out and filled them with black paint?”

Lewis shrugged, standing as well. “I’m just a collector, my theorizing friend. But my best educated guess? This man was not murdered here.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose. He swept his hand, indicating the area around the body. “Too neat. Even if the killer performed the enucleation here, there’d be some manner of mess. We’ve only just started collecting. We have a lot to process. But going by appearance alone, it’s far too clean.”

Reed looked around, spotting a camera near the end of the wide hall.

“This place has got to have eyes everywhere.”

“One less set than before,” Ransom pointed out.

Reed ignored him. Gallows humor. A necessity of the job that few understood unless they’d been there and done it. Sometimes it kept them sane in the face of evil—but he wasn’t going to extend it with a dead man lying at his feet. A man who could have a spouse and children unaware that their loved one had been murdered and mutilated. He was sure there was someone whose life was going to be shattered at some point today. And he was probably going to be the one to do it. He walked down the hall, getting a closer look at the camera. It appeared to be pointed in the direction of the dead body, but more toward the door to the left with the exit sign above it than the corner where the victim was located. They’d need to take possession of the footage and talk to staff to determine which cameras would have likely caught something they could use to identify the person who did this.

“Do you know anything about the two doctors who found him?” he called to Lewis and Seidler.

Lewis was bent over the body, putting something in a paper evidence bag. Seidler looked over her shoulder. “No. McDugal and Mallory were first on scene. We arrived after the docs were gone.”

Reed nodded, heading around the corner, Ransom on his heels. McDugal was sitting in a plastic chair near the door that led to the lobby. He

stood when they approached. “The coroner transport is held up in downtown rush-hour traffic,” he said. He still seemed nervous, spooked. Reed understood why now that he’d seen the body. It was a hell of a first DOA experience.

“The criminalists will be a while anyway,” Reed said. *And there’s no rush for the victim.* “Where are the doctors who discovered him?”

He motioned toward the double doors leading to the lobby. “Actually, only one doctor found him. But there was another one with her when we arrived.” He reached into his pocket and unfolded a small piece of paper with jittery-looking writing on it. “Dr. Elizabeth Nolan, and Dr. Chad Headley. It was Dr. Nolan who discovered him. Dr. Headley heard her scream. She was pretty shaken up. Mallory took them to the staff lounge. They’re waiting there.”

“Okay, good.”

The elevator doors opened outside the door and Reed saw through the glass that a few more criminalists had arrived, along with another officer. He and Ransom waited to be buzzed through from the other side and then greeted them before asking the two employees at the reception desk for directions to the staff lounge.

“I’ll walk you there, Detectives,” the security guard said, standing. “You’ll need someone with a key card to let you through.”

They followed the guard down a series of halls, him buzzing them through two doors. “Is this a patient floor?” Ransom asked as they both glanced into a door with a glass window that appeared to be an office.

“No, mostly offices on this floor. A few group therapy rooms for the low-level patients.”

“So, no Hannibal?”

The man shot him a wry smile. “We don’t house Mr. Lecter here. But if we did, he’d be on the fifth floor. This is the staff lounge.” He indicated a door, pushing it open and holding it for them.

Reed walked through first. A man and a woman were sitting at the round table in the center of the room, the woman’s hands curled around a white mug, the man’s hand on her shoulder. She looked up and everything inside Reed came to a sudden, jarring halt.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dr. Elizabeth Nolan—*Liza*. Her gaze hit him like a million tiny bombs detonating in his cells. Their eyes locked. Time slowed. Ancient plates far beneath the earth shifted, and Reed felt the echo of the aftershocks thrumming through his body.

“Drs. Nolan and Headley, these are detectives with the Cincinnati Police,” the guard said.

Liza stared back, her expression a mixture of shock and confusion. Blue eyes wide. Pretty mouth slack. Color blooming in her cheeks the way it had when she’d come beneath him two weeks before.

The cop—Mallory—sitting in a chair near the door stood. “Detectives.”

Ransom greeted him. “Thanks for staying. We got it from here.” He turned to the guard at the door. “Will you escort Officer Mallory back to his partner?”

“Sure thing.”

The other doctor, a bookish-looking man in his thirties, wearing glasses and a severe side part stood, offering them his hand. “We’re so glad you’re here, Detectives. This is such a shock. Terrible. I’ve just brewed a pot of coffee if either of you would like a cup,” Dr. . . . *what was his name*—he’d just heard it seconds ago and couldn’t for the life of him bring it to mind—

asked.

Liza suddenly came back to herself, her body twitching as her expression smoothed and she stood. She wore a straight gray skirt that hugged her slim hips, a silky white blouse, and a choker of pearls at her throat. Her hair was smoothed back and gathered in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She looked classy and professional, the sophisticated twin of the leather-clad free-spirit he'd met in a bar two weeks before. "Detectives," she said, holding out her hand, her voice devoid of emotion, though her fingers trembled very slightly.

Reed made himself move. He stepped forward and took her hand, his mind flashing back to that same hand reaching down the waistband of his pants, grasping. Her eyes shot to their linked hands, a fresh wash of pink appearing on her cheeks, and somehow he knew the very same thought was crossing her mind. "Detective Reed Davies," he said, haltingly.

"Elizabeth Nolan," she murmured, breaking eye contact and pulling her hand back quickly.

"Detective Ransom Carlyle," his partner said, stepping forward and shaking her hand. Her lips tipped slightly as she greeted him, but it didn't touch her eyes. "I'll take a cup of coffee," he said to the male doctor. Headley, his name was Headley.

Reed's mind was clearing, shock dissipating. Elizabeth Nolan was a

doctor at Lakeside Hospital who'd just found the mutilated, dead body of her boss. For now, that was all. He needed to compartmentalize, not just for his own sake, but for hers, and for the man who'd suffered a terrible, violent crime and now lay in a corner nearby swarmed by a forensic team of techs. And yet he couldn't stop staring at her. It felt like he'd just come face to face with a ghost. *Or a dream.*

Reed felt Ransom's gaze on him. Heavy. Questioning. His partner of three years knew Reed well, so it wasn't surprising he'd noticed something was going on that had nothing to do with the crime they were there to investigate. Reed pulled his gaze from Liza, dragging a chair toward him. It scraped loudly across the floor and Liza let out a small sound of surprise. It ended in a short, nervous laugh as she took a seat at the table.

Dr. Headley poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Ransom.

"Will you tell us how you found the victim, Dr. Nolan?" He opened his black leather folder, removing a pen he kept inside. Ransom was a note taker. Reed preferred to keep all his attention focused on the person he was questioning so he didn't miss a flicker or an expression that might mean something, or let him know when his line of questioning was headed in a direction that would deliver the most information. Between the two of them, they covered all the bases. But right now, he really wished he had something to do other than stare directly at Elizabeth Nolan.

“I . . . I had just arrived at work.”

“What time?” Ransom asked.

“Seven a.m., ah, maybe a little before? There’s a camera on that back entrance that will pinpoint the exact time.” Her eyelids fluttered momentarily as though her own statement had caused her to recall something. Reed waited for her to go on, but she remained silent.

“Is Ms. Thorne the one we need to speak with to access the hospital security footage?”

Liza paused and then bobbed her head, swallowed. “The thing is, Re . . .” She blinked, looked down, fiddled with the napkin sitting next to the mug she’d been drinking from. “Detective Davies, there aren’t many security cameras on this floor as it’s mostly administrative.” She glanced at Dr. Headley as though confirming what she’d said. He nodded, giving her an encouraging smile.

“There’s a camera facing the door next to the corner where you found Mr. Sadowski.”

“Yes, that’s the stairwell door I used to enter the hallway.” She glanced at Headley again and Reed felt irritation bubble in his chest. He did his best to tamp it down. “That back entrance is used solely by staff.” Liza fingered the edge of the napkin and Headley reached over, stilling her movement by placing his hand on top of hers and offering a squeeze. She glanced up and

smiled at him. Reed's muscles tensed. This felt all *wrong*. Weird.

Like he was *living* in one of those liminal spaces, not just experiencing it momentarily. *Relax, Davies. This sucks, but you have a job to do.*

“Did you see the victim right away?”

“Yes, I did.” She grimaced and shook her head as if denying the image that must be front and center in her mind as she recalled that moment. He had the insane urge to comfort her—this woman who'd snuck out of his apartment like a thief in the night and then pretended she'd never laid eyes on him in her life five minutes before—and wanted to kick himself. “I . . . I dropped my briefcase and my phone. I screamed. I was just so . . . It was . . .” She shook her head again. “Chad came running a minute later.”

Chad.

“Where were you when you heard Dr. Nolan scream?” Ransom asked.

“I was already in my office down the hall. I'd used the front entrance about half an hour before.”

“Security footage will confirm that?” Reed asked.

The doctor frowned, pausing as he looked at Reed. “Of course it will.” He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. “We're”—he glanced at Liza—“not being considered suspects, are we?”

“No,” Ransom said easily. “We've just gotta cross all our t's. Did you know the victim well?” he asked, looking between both Liza and Headley.

“Mr. Sadowski had just taken over as director of the hospital three months ago,” Headley answered. “All staff have been working closely with him since then, but it’s only been a short time.” He glanced at Liza. “Nice guy. Competent at his job. No complaints.”

“Any idea who might have wanted to target the man?”

They both shook their heads. “This is more than targeting the man, though, isn’t it?” Headley asked. “What was done to his face . . .” He grimaced. “Horrific.”

“Any chance we’re looking for a patient?” Reed asked. “Someone highly familiar with this hospital?”

Headley shook his head. “No way. Our most violent offenders are closely monitored. There isn’t a second in the day where staff don’t know their whereabouts. There’s no possible way one of those patients could disappear for the time it would take to commit a crime like the one perpetrated against Mr. Sadowski. The fifth floor is, in essence, a high-security prison.”

“What about one of your less closely monitored patients?” Ransom asked.

Liza shook her head now. “Those patients aren’t violent.”

“People aren’t always logical or predictable, Doctor. They act out of character all the time. I’m sure you know that even better than I do.”

She stared at him a beat, two, then lowered her eyes. “Y-yes.” She cleared her throat, making eye contact again. “You’re right, people aren’t always predictable, but we’re talking about people who have never committed an act of aggression in their lives, much less a brutal murder. And while those patients have more freedom than our Ward Five patients, they’re still well monitored too. And in most cases, well medicated.”

“But they do suffer from diagnosed mental disorders,” Ransom said.

Liza’s eyes moved to him. “Yes, they do.”

Reed sat back. “Are there cameras on patients at all times?”

“No. You’d have to verify with Ms. Thorne, but I believe we only monitor the main entrance and exit doors and two back doors, via camera, and a few of the hallways near nurses’ stations. The hospital determined that constant video surveillance is unethical and intrusive to mental health patients.”

“So isn’t it possible that one slipped out for a time?”

“Not for the time it would take to do something like . . . that. And if one had, we’d have been notified by now. Chad—Dr. Headley checked in with security on each of the floors as we were waiting for you, and there are no patients currently unaccounted for, head counts from this morning don’t show anyone missing. The hospital is doing a comprehensive search nonetheless.”

Yes, that’s what Ms. Thorne had said. They would follow up with her

afterward. Liza glanced at Headley and Reed allowed his gaze to linger on her a moment. He remembered thinking of her as a conundrum and now he knew why. The Liza she'd shown him had been a completely different side of her than the buttoned-up doctor he was looking at across the table now. And it made him wonder why. Was that the side of her that went out drinking and *looking* for random men to pick up? Had he been one of many? A way to blow off steam from a stressful day job? He looked away, just as she turned her head back toward him.

“We need to know who to notify on Mr. Sadowski’s behalf,” Reed said.

Liza nodded, seeming hesitant. “He wasn’t married. But I can get his personal information for you.”

Headley put his hand over Liza’s again. “Dr. Nolan can email that information.”

“We’d prefer to have that now,” Ransom cut in. “Detective Davies will accompany her to wherever that’s filed. If you’ll take me to Ms. Thorne’s office so I can retrieve the necessary video surveillance, that would be much appreciated. The sooner we can begin reviewing those recordings the better.”

Headley paused, appearing annoyed that someone else was giving directives, but nodded and began standing. “If you’ll follow me, Detective.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Reed and Liza walked down the corridor, the only sound the clicking of her heels on the peach-colored linoleum floor. She glanced at him nervously. A faint buzzing sound still filled the background of her mind, separate from the incessant electrical issues the hospital experienced. She massaged her temples, the echo of the shock that had slammed into her when he'd entered the staff lounge twenty minutes before causing the beginning of a headache.

It didn't feel real.

Nothing about this day felt real. Maybe she was still in her bed, twisted up in some bizarre nightmare. Only . . . the man walking next to her was no nightmare. He was a dream, one she'd revisited often over the past few weeks, her body shivering with the memory of his touch, her mind conjuring images of his naked perfection. "I thought you were kidding when you said you were a detective."

"I wasn't."

She let out a sound that might have been a short laugh if there was anything remotely humorous about this situation. "Obviously."

He looked over at her and her breath caught. God, he was so *incredibly* handsome. She was dazzled by him, the same way she'd been as she'd watched him sing that stupid song on the karaoke stage with a bunch of

drunk, stumbling fools.

She'd thought he was one too. Just a beautiful man with a fit body who'd be more than willing to enjoy a no-strings one-night stand. Actually, she hadn't even planned on a night, just an hour, maybe two. Then things had taken an unexpected turn . . . He'd not only been gorgeous, he'd been *sweet*. She'd relaxed so completely that she'd fallen asleep and—

Damn it.

Her hand shook as she began to raise her key card to the card reader. “Liza,” he murmured, wrapping his fingers around her wrist. She turned to him, breath hitching. “Are you okay?”

Are you okay? She wanted to crumble. No, she wasn't okay. She'd just seen a dead man with black, empty holes where his eyes should have been. A nightmare. Something straight from hell. A vision that materialized from the darkness, and came toward you, arms reaching as you stood, paralyzed. Helpless. “Yes, I'm fine.”

Reed's eyes moved over her features for a second, and her heart squeezed at what she saw. Concern. He was concerned for her and she did not deserve his worry.

“No one would blame you if you weren't. Maybe you should take the rest of the day off.”

She nodded, a jerky movement. “I know. But . . . I can't. I have patients

to see. They'll have heard what happened. Word spreads quickly in places like this." She glanced to the side. "I'll need to reassure them. They'll be upset. Anxious." And home was not her solace anyway. It was her work that had always saved her. Her work that allowed her to lose herself when she needed to.

She lowered her arm and he let it go. Thank God, because otherwise she might have fallen into his solid chest, buried her head there. And she wouldn't let herself do that. Couldn't. Not only that, but it wasn't as if he'd want her to anyway. He was very aware that she'd used him, and even if he'd been interested in knowing her before, she was doubtful he still felt the same. He had every right to judge her harshly.

God, she thought she might stop breathing when he'd walked into the staff lounge twenty minutes ago.

She buzzed them through the door, and he followed her into the filing room where clerks worked. The room housed three desks and a line of filing cabinets against the back wall. Only one of the desks was occupied, and when they entered the room, Doris, a sweet grandmotherly type in her late sixties with a short, gray pixie cut stood, rushing around her desk to Liza. "I heard what happened. Police are swarming the building." She put her hands on her cheeks. "I heard you're the one who found him. Are you okay?"

Liza patted the woman on her shoulder. "I'm fine, Doris. Thank you.

The police are going to find out who did this. But in the meantime, Detective Davies here needs Steven Sadowski's personal information so he can notify the people who need to be notified. Can I go back and get it for him?"

"Oh." She glanced at Reed, blinked rapidly, and then looked back at Liza. "Yes, of course. Help yourself. All employee records are filed alphabetically. If you need any help, just shout."

Liza nodded and heard Reed's footsteps behind her as she led him to a door at the back of the room. It led into a smaller file room, overfilled with more file cabinets, and Reed closed the door behind them. Liza's skin prickled and a flush of warmth made her feel slightly woozy at being alone with him in the small space. He was behind her and she felt his presence as a ten-ton weight. She opened one of the cabinets and started rifling through the files. After a minute or so she located what she was looking for and turned around, offering Reed the manila folder in her hand. Wordlessly, he took it from her.

He opened it, glancing at the basic information about the man. "Unmarried. No children," he murmured. "Emergency contact looks to be a mother who lives in Spokane. I'll put in a call to her when I get back to the station." He closed the file and looked up at her. "Thanks."

She nodded and there was an awkward pause between them, the air filled with all that wasn't being said, but both knowing it was not the right

time. Perhaps there *was* no right time, not for them. And damn it, regret and disappointment vibrated inside Liza, the same way it had as she'd gathered her clothes and headed for Reed's door as he lay sleeping in bed. She'd almost turned back, almost scrawled a note for him with her number on it and she'd never even *considered* doing that before.

He tilted his head. "You're a psychiatrist?"

"A psychologist." She shifted on her feet, leaning her hip against the file cabinet right behind her, nervous, edgy. This was so unlike the first time they'd talked, laughing, enjoying each other. That had been easy, fun. But that could never be recaptured. And wasn't that the point? It was *easy* because it was a one-time deal. *Easy* because he didn't know who she really was. "I finished my doctorate two years ago. I haven't been here that long, but, ah, it's . . . I like it. It can be challenging. Difficult sometimes." She glanced to the side, the cool, calm demeanor she'd managed—at least on the outside—in the staff lounge, splintering.

"Liza."

She squeezed her eyes shut. God, why had she told him her name? He'd know it now anyway whether she'd met him that night and gone home with him or not. But he'd call her Dr. Nolan, or Elizabeth maybe. Not Liza. And moreover, *whatever* he called her, she wouldn't have to picture the way he'd first said it, directly in her ear, voice filled with such guttural pleasure, his

heat all around her, in her.

“We’re going to find out who did this. So many good people are working on it, right this minute.”

She bobbed her head, glad that he’d misunderstood the cause of her distress. Not that she wasn’t distressed about the murder. But she felt sort of numb now . . . shock settling in. Disbelief. “I know.” She met his eyes. “I see a lot of bad stuff in here, Detective. I hear a lot of sad stories. I . . . the things people do to each other . . .” Her voice faded and she looked away for a moment and then back. “The way those things can bend a person’s mind.” Their soul maybe, though Liza wasn’t sure souls existed. Maybe they were all just tissue and bone and synapse. All things that would one day turn to dust, swept away by the wind and the water and the earth. And really, wasn’t it a relief to believe that might be so? Who wanted to exist on and on for eternity anyhow?

He paused, regarding her intently. He read things, this man. This detective. Saw things other people did not. What was in his past that might be responsible for that particular sensitivity?

No, she didn’t want to know.

“I experience the same things in my job,” he said. “I know. It can make you feel alone. To have seen the proof of the worst of human nature. It can feel like a heavy burden. What you saw today, it will stick with you. You

should expect that.”

She felt some of the tension drain from her shoulders. His words made her feel better. *He* made her feel better. Calmer. She couldn't help the ghost of a smile that tilted her lips. “I'm supposed to be the psychologist here.”

He smiled, that sweet one he'd given her as he'd held her in bed. “Yeah, but you're still human.”

“Can I ask you a question about the . . . the murder?”

He nodded.

“Why would someone *do* that? I mean to his eyes?”

Reed glanced away, looking thoughtful. “It means something to him.” He looked back at her. “I don't know what, not yet. But it's specific.”

The door opened, causing them both to startle slightly. Doris peeked in. She glanced at Reed, a blush pinkening her cheeks. Liza resisted a smile. The old lady had a crush. She was painfully sure Reed Davies was used to that reaction. “Were you able to find the right file?”

Reed held it up. “Yes, I've got what I need.”

“Good,” Doris said, a frown bringing out more creases in her forehead than were already there. “I suppose you have some difficult calls to make.”

“Yes,” Reed said. He looked at Liza. “Thank you for your help.”

Doris ducked out of the room and Reed took his wallet from his back pocket, removing a card. He moved toward Liza, holding it out to her. She

took the edge of it, but before he let go, he asked quietly, “Were you always going to leave without saying goodbye? Was that the plan?”

Their gazes held for a moment before Liza looked down at the business card with his name, title, and phone number, both office and cell, in simple black type. She met his eyes again. “Yes.”

His expression changed only minimally, but a reluctant acceptance entered his gaze. He nodded once. “If you think of anything else that might help, you have my number.” And with that, he turned and left the room.

Liza leaned back on the cabinet behind her. She had a sudden, unexpected urge to cry. And Liza never cried. Not anymore.

CHAPTER SIX

Liza closed her apartment door behind her, exhaling as she engaged the locks and then kicked off her heels.

It felt like a million years since she'd left that morning, her travel mug of coffee in her hand, the only thing on her mind, the appointments she had scheduled.

She'd made it through the rest of her day, gone through the motions, met with her patients, said goodbye to her co-workers, and driven home. But somehow, she still felt shaky inside, even though her body and hands had stopped trembling hours ago. She remembered that form of shaky. She'd lived with it for years. The feeling that something bad was coming. That something bad was *always* coming. She'd moved beyond that, at least the constant of it, but in one fell swoop, it was back, and though the feeling might be temporary—she would regain her equilibrium, wouldn't she?—the memories were not.

She stood in her entranceway, the quiet consuming her, the shakiness a drone of anxiety inside her chest. Here there were no distractions, no schedules, or patients to reassure. Perhaps she should have stayed at work. But no . . . each time she walked near the hallway where she'd found Mr. Sadowski, she pictured him again, and she'd needed to put distance between

herself and that particular spot. At least temporarily. Tomorrow she'd be okay.

“Buck up, Buttercup.”

She smiled. “Hey, sis,” she said, her sister's voice just what she'd needed to break her from her spinning thoughts. She stepped forward.

“What are you thinking so hard about that your body's as useless as mine?” Her eyes were shut but she heard the teasing note in Mady's voice, could picture the twinkle in her blue eyes.

Liza managed a smile. “There's nothing useless about you. You're perfect.” She walked to the couch and sank down on it, leaning her head back and staring at the ceiling. She heard the low whir of her sister's wheelchair as it came up beside her, smelled her soothing, little girl scent.

“There's something wrong. Talk to me.”

Liza hesitated, but it always helped to talk it through with Mady, so she told her about finding the dead body of the hospital director, about what had been done to his eyes, about the horror that was still coursing through her.

“The eyes,” Mady said softly. “Why would someone do that?”

“Reed says it means something to the killer,” she murmured, recalling his words. “I agree. It . . . symbolizes something to him.” *But what?* What kind of person was capable of something like that? She'd asked Reed the question earlier to get his take as a detective, but what did she think? If she

was going to do a psychological assessment, what would it say?

“That’s right,” Mady murmured. “Step away. Break it down. Make it clinical. It always helps, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Liza said, but why didn’t she sound convinced, even to herself?

“So,” Mady went on, a teasing note in her voice, “what else did *Reed* say?”

Liza blew out a breath.

Reed, Reed, Reed.

“I can’t think about him,” she said.

“You can’t, and yet you *are*.”

Ah, but nothing got past Mady.

“You’ve never thought about a man like you’ve thought about him. You always seem glad to be done with them.”

Yes . . . and *why*? What was different about him? Other than . . . well, *that*. But that wasn’t the whole of it. She couldn’t put her finger on it. All she knew was that ever since that night two weeks ago, she’d felt empty and restless. Caged.

The *opposite* of what she’d set out to feel in the aftermath.

Liza sighed, standing, and walking to her kitchen counter where she’d tossed her mail for the last week or so, without even glancing through it. She looked through it now, mindlessly, tossing the junk aside, and placing bills in

front of her so she could take them to her small home office where she'd pay them online this weekend.

She halted in her sorting, frowning at an official-looking letter from the State of Ohio. A tremble moved through her as she ripped it open, scanning the lines and then dropping it to the counter. It hit the edge and fell off, drifting to her feet.

“They’re considering letting him out.”

“What? How?” Mady asked. “He wasn’t supposed to be out for another five years.”

Liza swallowed. “Parole.” *Oh God, they might give him parole.* Her brother, who’d turned out to be as evil as the man who fathered them. Liza smelled smoke, felt the heat, her blistering skin. She clenched her eyes shut as though that would shut out the memory. Her hand went unconsciously to her throat. No blood, just her pearl choker. She ran a finger over one of the beads, the smooth texture grounding her. “They won’t let him out.”

For a moment there was only silence, and then Mady voiced what she didn’t want to. “I’m not so sure about that.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Liza cleared her throat, giving Simon Mullner a smile, tilting her head in an effort to get the young man to meet her eyes.

His shoulders curled forward and he continued to chew at his thumbnail.

“How are you doing, Simon?”

He shrugged. His eyes were glassy, unfocused. She’d asked Dr. Headley to lower his medication, and he had for a while, but then Simon had had a couple of outbursts where he’d banged his head into the wall repeatedly until an orderly had restrained him, and so his dosage was raised again.

Was this *better* than an outburst? It was certainly easier for *them*, but Liza had to believe that where there was an outburst, there were emotions that were accessible. And how could she help him, if she couldn’t access his emotions?

She saw it, the flicker of pain that moved through his eyes. She not only saw it, she *felt* it inside, recognized it for what it was. There were ghosts in there, ghosts that would begin clanking their chains the moment the medication wore off.

“I want to help you if you’ll let me. Talk to me, Simon.”

He looked at her, his mouth forming a grim line. “Talk, talk, talk, that’s all you want to do,” he said, his words slow, slightly slurred.

Liza leaned back in her chair. “I . . . yes, for now. I can’t know how to help you unless you confide in me.”

“Why should I? You can’t understand what it feels like to be me.” His eyes moved down her crossed legs to her heels and then back up. “You in your pretty suit with your pretty hair and your pretty life. You leave here and go home and smile, smile, smile . . . and me, I’m haunted. Just . . . haunted . . .” His words faded away as his gaze halted on a ray of sunlight filtering through the window.

“By what? What are you haunted by?”

His knee began bouncing and he started chewing on his thumbnail again.

Liza flipped his file open. “You lived with your mother before you came here?”

Simon’s knee picked up speed.

“Do you have a good relationship with your mother? She hasn’t been to visit you, I see—”

The man moved like a bolt of lightning, springing from his chair, and grabbing her shoulders. Liza’s surprised scream wavered and filled the room as he shook her. He leaned in, eyes wild, spit flying from his mouth as he yelled, “You don’t see, you don’t see, you don’t *see!*”

The door crashed open and one of the orderlies rushed into her office,

grabbing Simon, and pulling him away from Liza easily. Liza jumped to her feet, shaking as she attempted to catch her breath. Tears were streaking down Simon's face. "You don't *see!*" he cried.

The orderly, a muscular man named Jon, held Simon's hands behind his back, with seemingly little effort. Simon looked drained, broken, as though the outburst had used up every bit of energy in his underweight body. "Are you okay, Dr. Nolan?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. I—"

"Liza, what the hell happened?" Chad appeared in her doorway, his gaze flying from her to a restrained Simon. His mouth set in a thin line. "Take him back to his room," he told Jon. Jon nodded, leading Simon out.

Chad approached Liza. "Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes. I will be. He just . . . took me by surprise."

Chad took hold of her upper arms, stepping closer to her. "You shouldn't be alone with patients who have already proven to be violent."

She frowned. "He *hasn't* proven to be violent though." Or if he had, he'd only ever tried to harm himself. She thought back to what had happened a few minutes before. He'd shaken her and yelled—*scared her*—yes, but had he actually been violent with her? Actually harmed her? No.

What had he said? You don't see, you don't *see*. A shiver went down her spine.

“Liza,” Chad said softly, bringing her from her thoughts. She focused back on him. He was standing very close. She began to step back, seeking distance from him, but he pulled her forward and wrapped his arms around her. Liza stiffened but allowed the embrace. They were friends; she’d told him they could be friends.

He rubbed her back in slow, circular motions. “I care so much for you, Liza. I don’t want to see you hurt. If one of those animals hurts you—”

Liza pulled back, making a sound of disagreement in the back of her throat. “They’re not animals, Chad. Simon is not an animal. He’s a kid. And he’s very hurt, confused—”

“Sick.”

Liza cast her eyes to the side. “Perhaps.”

“He needs to be medicated.”

“I don’t disagree, Chad. Perhaps medication is necessary, especially now. But there are other things there too. Other root causes for his behavior. Things I might be able to help him with if he would trust me.” Medication worked best when combined with therapy. They were supposed to be a team.

Chad moved a piece of hair off her cheek, his eyes softening as he gazed at her. “You have too much empathy for your patients, Liza. I understand why but . . . I don’t want it to end up making you blind to what these people are capable of. They’re very sick individuals. Very sick.”

“This isn’t Ward Five, Chad. I’m not dealing with psychopaths.”

“No, but they’re still unpredictable.”

She exhaled a breath, casting her eyes to the side. Hadn’t Reed Davies said something similar when he’d interviewed her? But Reed’s question had been directed at her. He’d been alluding to her own behavior . . .

Reed. Why did the very thought of him cause an electric thrill to vibrate in her belly?

Movement made her focus back on Chad just as his face came forward, his lips meeting hers. He grasped her head in his hands and tilted it so he could deepen the kiss. Just as his tongue probed her closed lips, she pulled back, stepping away from him. His eyes snapped open, tongue partially sticking from his mouth, creating a comical expression that caused a nervous laugh to erupt from her.

She clapped a hand over her mouth as his face darkened. “Sorry,” she breathed. “I . . . sorry. It’s just . . .” Liza shook her head. “Chad, we’ve already gone over this. You and me, we’re not a good idea. I’m sorry.”

The anger in his expression turned sullen. “You haven’t given us a real chance.”

“We’re associates, Chad. I . . . I respect you so much. I don’t want to ruin that, please.”

He stepped toward her again, toying with the same lock of hair that had

fallen from her bun. “You won’t ruin it. Who else knows all your secrets, Liza? Who else accepts you for all you are? All you’ve *done*?”

Anger crashed through her, as did shame. He was using what she’d told him as a means to convince her to date him? She regretted that she’d gone out with him a few times when they’d first begun working together, and that she’d confided in him as a psychiatrist and friend—not about all the details of her history, but *enough*. In the beginning, when she’d believed they were a true team. She’d shared her past, thinking he’d be able to look at it clinically as she’d attempted to do since she’d begun studying psychology, to reassure her that she shouldn’t feel like a fraud who had no business treating the mentally ill. And he *had* . . . sort of. He’d prescribed an anti-anxiety medication that she’d stopped taking when she had trouble concentrating on her patients. He’d told her there were others she could try—sometimes it was a matter of finding the right cocktail—but she’d declined. Liza was determined to try a few other solutions first. “I appreciate your support. You’ve been a good *friend*, Chad.” She added some steel to her voice, enunciating the word *friend*.

Annoyance flashed in his gaze, but he stepped back, sighing and smoothing his hair. “Just take care of yourself, Liza.” He turned to go. “And conduct your therapy sessions somewhere more public from here on out.”

He left, closing the door behind him. Liza rolled her eyes. Right,

because patients really wanted to open up about their deepest secrets sitting in the middle of the cafeteria. With a loud sigh, she sank into the chair behind her desk. At least she'd stopped shaking. But in the aftermath of the adrenalin rush she'd experienced when Simon charged at her, she felt drained.

She was rattled. God, she'd just been *rattled* on one scale or another since she'd opened that stairwell door two days before. Mr. Sadowski . . . her brother's possible release . . . the session with Simon . . .

She crossed her arms, placed them on her desk and laid her head on them, taking deep, calming breaths. Her phone rang, startling her, and she grabbed for it, answering breathily.

“Hi, Dr. Nolan?”

Her stomach leapt. “Detective Davies.”

There was a short pause. “Yes,” he said, seeming surprised. Probably that she'd recognized his voice so easily. And maybe she was a little surprised too. Why couldn't she get him out of her head? His expression, his laugh, his voice . . . *him*. “I hope I'm not bothering you, but I just received the log of recent key card usage. Unfortunately, it only goes back several days as the information is wiped that often, but I had some questions the man . . . ah”—Liza heard paper rustling—“Mike Henderson, who provided the log, didn't seem equipped to answer.”

Liza blew out a breath on a smile. “The key card system here is a bit lax

to say the least. I don't know that any one person is in charge of it, to tell you the truth. Mike is actually a file clerk."

"Ah, well that explains that."

Liza smiled. "I'll try my best to answer your question."

"Great. So, it appears Steven Sadowski left the hospital around six thirty Monday night. He's visible on several cameras doing so. Records indicate that a key card was assigned to Steven Sadowski on the day he was hired, and that card was used once to access a back stairwell with no camera yesterday morning."

"Oh," Liza breathed, her skin prickling.

Reed paused for a second. "The strange part is that the key card that corresponds with the video from him leaving Monday night is a *different* card registered to Gordon Draper."

"That's the name of the former director."

"Ah, okay." Reed paused. "Any idea why Steven Sadowski was using Gordon Draper's assigned card in addition to his own?"

"Hmm. Well, like I said, the system could use some management. My best guess is that Mr. Sadowski was given the former director's old card as well as a new one, but the old one was never officially transferred into his name? Mr. Draper might have more information on that. He lives in Hyde Park. I have his address right here actually." She moved a few papers aside

and found the sticky note she'd written his address on that she'd gotten from the admin department. "I sent him flowers several months back. There was a death in his family," she said, sadness creeping into her voice.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Reed said. "Sure, I'll take his address."

Liza read it off to him and then Reed paused again. Liza felt the weight of the silence through the phone. She gripped it tighter, closing her eyes, somehow knowing that he was wearing that half-worried, half-thoughtful expression on his face, the one that made her want to take her finger and smooth the worry line from between his eyes. *You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Reed Davies, and something makes me think you're happy to do it.* "Can you think of any reason the old director might have wanted to harm Mr. Sadowski?"

Liza laughed softly. "No. And if you do chat with him in person, I think you'll understand why that's not possible."

"Okay." She heard a smile in his voice. That heavy pause again, something weighty between them that defied distance. "How are you? After what happened?"

She sat back. She could give him a stock answer where she tried to convince everyone around her that she was *fine*, per usual. But she wasn't . . . and she . . . trusted Reed. Surprising, really, because another man she'd trusted had just tried to manipulate her with a shared truth. "Okay. Rattled. A

little scared maybe.”

“I’m going to do everything in my power to find answers so you don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

And Liza believed him. “Thank you, Detective.”

“Have a good day, Doctor.” She heard that smile in his voice again and when she hung up the phone, realized she was wearing one of her own.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Take a look at this,” Ransom said. “This is the footage from the exterior staff door.” He rewound the video and pressed play. “There’s nothing until six fifty-four a.m. and then Dr. Nolan can be seen approaching the door.” Reed set down two paper coffee cups he’d just filled in the staff room as his more tech-savvy partner went through the files the hospital had provided, and leaned closer, watching Liza walk up to the door, reach into her briefcase, look up as if something—or someone—had caught her attention, hesitate, and then turn around.

“What’s she doing?” Reed murmured, mostly to himself. They’d received the video they’d requested from Lakeside Hospital and had been going through it in the hopes of catching the killer, face tilted to the camera, walking through the halls with Steven Sadowski’s limp, dead body. Of course, no such luck, and there were hours and hours to sift through. Despite that they had his key card being used that morning, there was nothing on surveillance to correspond to its usage. It seemed as if the killer—and the body for that matter—had materialized out of thin air.

They’d first looked at Steven Sadowski’s movements from the night before to ascertain that he’d left the building.

After that, they’d watched footage from the camera in the hallway where

the body was found, but it was, unfortunately, focused in the wrong direction with only a view of the door several feet away. The corner where Steven Sadowski's body had been discovered couldn't be seen at all.

They were now beginning to look at the video of Liza Nolan discovering the body. *Something* had to have been caught on camera. *Somewhere*. Perhaps from some random angle. They just needed to find it.

Ransom picked up his coffee and took a sip. At six fifty-seven, the video showed Liza return to the door, pull out her key card, and enter the building.

"Pull up the footage of her exiting the stairwell and finding the body," Reed said. Ransom clicked through the other files, and it only took a minute until they were both looking at a picture of the hallway door, waiting for Liza to emerge.

The clock at the bottom of the screen ticked by. One minute past seven, two . . . "How slow does she climb stairs?" Ransom murmured. "It's only three floors."

Apparently, pretty slow. Too bad there was no camera in the stairwell.

At four minutes past seven, the door opened and Liza emerged. She slipped through quickly and stood with her back pressed to the door, hands flat against it. Reed leaned closer. Her chest rose and fell as though she was breathless, and her eyes were shut. *What the hell?*

"That's weird. She's acting like she just sprinted up the stairs, but it took

her seven minutes to climb three short flights.”

After a few seconds, her shoulders lowered, and she seemed to pull herself together. From what, it wasn't clear. But she smoothed a piece of hair back and turned to walk toward the hall that led to the lobby. She startled severely, jerked back, dropped the things she was holding, and let out a blood-curdling scream. Although there was no shot of Steven Sadowski's body, it was very clear what Liza Nolan was reacting to. She put her hands to her mouth, stumbled backward, let out another scream, and a minute later the man Reed now knew as Chad Headley appeared from around the corner, eyes wide as his gaze faced the direction of Sadowski's body. He pulled Liza backward and wrapped his arms around her. It looked like she was shaking.

Reed's muscles tightened and he took a deep breath. Ransom paused the tape, jotting in his notebook as he spoke. “So she begins entering the building at six fifty-four a.m., changes her mind for reasons unknown, steps out of camera range, and is back at the door at six fifty-seven a.m. whereupon she enters the building, climbs three flights of stairs in seven minutes, which seems excessive, and exits the stairwell appearing flustered and overheated.”

“Scared,” Reed murmured. “She seemed scared.”

“Okay, flustered, overheated, and in fear of something. But what? Something she saw in the stairwell? Something that detained her there?”

“I don't know.”

He tapped his pencil on his pad. “After a few seconds, she turns toward where the body of Steven Sadowski was discovered, and reacts by screaming, to which Dr. Headley responds. Their statements about what happened when Dr. Nolan discovered the body are confirmed by the video. But I’m curious about what happened to Dr. Nolan in that stairwell.”

Reed pointed at the screen. “Rewind the video of that exit door in the hallway to six forty or so.”

“We’ve already determined that no one else entered the building through that door that morning.”

“I know. I just want to see something.”

Ransom rewound the video and stopped at six thirty. He let it run for a few minutes. “Now go forward to six fifty,” Reed said. Ransom did and once it’d played for a few seconds, Reed pointed at it. “There. Pause it.”

Ransom squinted. “There what?”

“The shadow. See it?” He tapped his index finger on the paused picture of the door and portion of empty hallway. “At six thirty it’s not there, and at six fifty, it is.”

“Huh, yeah. I think I do see it. It’s small though. What’s making the shadow?”

“It’s gotta be Steven Sadowski’s foot. Remember how his body was sitting all splayed out? You can’t see his foot, but you can see the edge of the

shadow it's casting."

"Could be," Ransom said, tilting his head. "Hold up." He reached for the folder with the crime scene photos enclosed and opened it, comparing the shots. "Yeah, definitely could be. The angle is right." He rewound the tape again and they sat watching for twenty minutes, until the shadow appeared.

At six forty-seven, the shadow appeared. If they hadn't had their eyes trained in that spot, they never would have noticed it.

"So whoever dropped the body in that spot, did it at six forty-seven a.m."

"Right. And he used an entrance without a camera and completely evaded the one in that hallway. It's gotta be someone who knows enough about the hospital to know where cameras are placed. Someone who knew exactly where to walk so they wouldn't be caught on surveillance or by other employees already there, and exactly where to position the body."

They were quiet for a moment as Reed stared unseeing at the grainy video. "Okay, we don't have anything on video except a shadow. But that helps us narrow down the time. And tells us it *had* to be the killer who used Sadowski's card—it fits right into that timeframe."

"Agreed." Ransom reached into his pocket and brought out a nickel. "Next up, flip for a visit to the ME or Sadowski's place to talk to his neighbors. Video, and the guard at the front door has Sadowski leaving the

hospital at six thirty p.m. the night before. Maybe one of the neighbors can tell us if they saw him come home or if whoever killed him nabbed him before that. His vehicle is still missing.”

Reed sighed, rubbing at his eye. He’d slept like shit the night before. He knew very well the loser of the coin toss would be the one visiting the ME and spending more time with the eyeless corpse of Steven Sadowski. And then he’d carry the smell of death on his clothes for the rest of the day. “Tails.”

Ransom sent the nickel flying into the air, caught it, slapped it onto the top of his opposite hand, and pulled it back to reveal Jefferson’s silver profile.

“Sorry, my man.”

“No, you’re not,” Reed grumbled.

“No. I’m not.”

Ransom tossed the nickel onto his paper-strewn desk and sat back, regarding Reed. “Before we leave, are we going to address the elephant in the room?” His chair squeaked as he rocked back in it. “What was going on between you and hot lady doc?”

Reed sighed again. He wasn’t going to insult Ransom’s intelligence by denying what had clearly been obvious to his partner. And furthermore, maybe it would help to get it off his chest. “I met her in a bar two weeks ago.

The night of DiCrescenzo's party. We went back to my place. She stayed the night, skipped out in the morning. The end."

Ransom blew out a whistle. "So that's why you've been in such a shitty mood for the past two weeks? You banged the hot doc and she didn't come back for more."

"I haven't been in *that* shitty a mood," Reed grumbled. Only . . . maybe he had been.

Ransom chuckled. "Pretty boy got dumped on the first date." He shook his head. "Sad." He leaned in. "You know, if you need some pointers on satisfying women in the bedroom, I'd be happy to help. There's this little thing called the cli—"

"Fuck you, Ransom." Reed stood, but a smile tugged at his mouth. Leave it to Ransom to help him remember not to take himself so damn seriously.

"What does this mean for the case though?" Ransom asked as they put their coats on.

"Nothing. Over before anything started. She's as good as a stranger to me." So why didn't that feel true, other than the obvious—that he'd seen her naked? Which wasn't what the feeling was about. He decided not to ponder on it—it was already hurting his head. And as far as the murder investigation? She was a witness. And a contact at the hospital if he had a

question or two.

Reed frowned. The whole seven-minute stairwell deal was mildly suspicious. And confusing. Although at this point, there was zero evidence it had anything to do with her finding Sadowski's body. Her reaction to finding him there—*horrified shock*—had been 100 percent real. Unless she was the best actress on the planet.

Still . . . it needled at him. What was she *doing*?

“You know what else I want to know?” Ransom asked, as he stuck a few papers in a folder and then picked up a Lakeside Hospital brochure he must have taken while they were there.

“What?”

Ransom held the brochure up next to his face. “Where the fuck is the lake?”

Reed's gaze moved to the full-color glossy photo of the large white building surrounded by grass and trees on the cover of the brochure, no lake in sight. Before he could answer, Ransom tossed the brochure on the desk. “To call a mental hospital Lakeside when there's no actual lake?” Ransom shook his head. “Man, that's gotta mess with some crazy people. Seems like a cruel joke to me.”

Reed chuckled softly.

“Call me if Dr. Westbrook has anything interesting to say,” Ransom

said.

“Will do.”

They each turned, headed for their vehicles.

Seriously though, Reed wondered, where the fuck is the lake?

CHAPTER NINE

Reed pushed open the double swinging doors that led to the coroner's examination room. Dr. Westbrook turned from where he was standing at a back counter, jotting something on what looked like a pile of forms. He placed his pen down.

“Detective Davies,” he said, coming forward. Dr. Westbrook was a grandfatherly looking man with a head of thick gray hair and a kindly demeanor who spoke with a slow rhythm, and in low tones as if doing otherwise might wake the dead surrounding him. Reed found him pleasant and warm, the direct opposite of the person he'd expect to work in such a stark, sterile environment, filled with death and stories of depravity.

Dr. Westbrook had come on as coroner right about the time Reed was graduating from the academy, taking the place of Dr. Cathlyn Harvey, who had been the coroner during the time Reed's biological father was terrorizing the city. Reed had heard nothing but praise for the previous coroner, but frankly, he was glad he was part of a new generation of Cincinnati law enforcement and forensic science. It was enough that Reed thought of his genetic legacy as often as he did. He didn't need others reminded every time they saw his face as well.

Reed offered a slight smile, despite the overwhelming urge to keep his

lips pressed together in the midst of the myriad of unpleasant smells.

“Doctor, how are you?”

“It’s difficult to come up with complaints after working with the dead all day.”

His eyebrows shot up with amusement. But truthfully? He figured that was a pretty good way of looking at things.

The older man led him to a gurney holding a human form with a white sheet over it. He pulled it back and Reed was surprised that the sight of the man with black, dripping holes for eyes was almost as jarring the second time as the first.

The coroner pulled the sheet to Steven Sadowski’s waist, exposing the Y-shaped incision on his chest where the autopsy had been performed.

“What can you tell me about the missing eyes?” Reed asked, gesturing to the black sockets.

“It was done postmortem, I can tell you that.”

Reed nodded, glad for some small mercies on the victim’s behalf. “And the black substance? The criminalists on the scene thought it might be oil paint.”

“They were correct. Spray paint is my guess. Otherwise the holes wouldn’t have been filled so . . . thoroughly and neatly, for lack of a better word. Plus, you can see a film of overspray around the periphery of the

wounds. Concentrated in the center, mist at the edges. An aerosol can would do that, a paintbrush, or even pouring it in, would not.” He used his finger to gesture to the black drips tracking down the victim’s cheeks. “These tracks indicate the victim was in an upright position when the paint was applied, and enough was used that it pooled at the edges of the sockets and spilled over.”

Reed resisted a grimace. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

Dr. Westbrook paused. “Enucleation, yes. Unfortunately. Before I took the position here in Ohio, I was working in Texas when a serial murderer known as The Eyeball Killer was on the loose.”

Reed nodded, thinking. “Yeah, I vaguely remember reading about that. He was murdering sex workers and removing their eyes postmortem.” He paused. “Didn’t he turn out to be a taxidermist or something?”

“He didn’t do it for a living, but he’d taken taxidermy courses in his youth after his adoptive mother caught him killing small animals.”

“That’s never a good sign.”

“No,” Dr. Westbrook said. “But the person who committed this crime”—he gestured to Sadowski’s missing eyes again—“is not nearly as skillful. If I had to make a guess, I’d say, it was his first time.”

“The murder?”

“Not necessarily the murder, but the enucleation itself.” He gestured

again. “The extraction was not clean in the least. In fact, it appears that the perpetrator of this crime had quite a bit of trouble.” Reed leaned in a little closer, noting the jagged pieces of tissue around the edges, the tearing, even small cuts and slices in the skin around the sockets.

“What’d he use?” Reed murmured. “A butter knife?”

“Not a butter knife, but let’s put it this way, whatever it was, it was the wrong tool for the job.”

Dr. Westbrook turned around, reaching for something behind him. He held up a baggie holding what looked like two lumps of bloody flesh. He angled the bag and Reed realized what he was actually looking at. *Holy shit.*

“Are those . . . the victim’s eyes?”

“Yes. I found them stuffed down his pants.”

“Jesus,” he murmured. “What the hell does *that* mean?”

“I wish I could tell you.”

“Have you verified the cause of death as strangulation?” He pointed at the red mark surrounding the dead man’s throat.

“Yes. I’d guess a garrote wire. His windpipe is crushed and whatever was used dug very deeply into his tissue. Something that would make it almost impossible to dig out if the person behind him was stronger.”

Reed regarded the frame of Steven Sadowski. He was not a tall man. Slight of frame. Anyone of average size would be larger than he was. Plenty

of *women* would be larger than he was, or at least pretty evenly matched.

“When did he die?”

“I’ve estimated time of death to be between seven and ten p.m. Monday night.”

So, somewhere between nine and twelve hours before his body was discovered by Dr. Nolan. But *where* did he die? And if it was off the hospital grounds as it appeared to be, considering the man had already left the building for the day, why in the world was he *returned* there?

“Anything else you can tell me?” Reed asked.

“Just one thing.” He gestured Reed over, and Reed walked around the gurney as Dr. Westbrook donned a pair of gloves that he removed from his pocket. He lifted Steven Sadowski’s head and turned it slightly so Reed could see a small red mark about the size of a quarter that appeared to be . . .

“Is that a *brand*?”

“Yes. And it’s fresh, made premortem.”

Reed furrowed his brow, studying it. “It looks like a . . . leaf?”

“That’s about all I can tell too. Brands don’t create the most precise art, and no professional did this. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s a marijuana leaf.” Dr. Westbrook placed Sadowski’s head back on the gurney, his sightless sockets once again aimed at the fluorescent lights above. He wondered if there was some way to remove that paint from his dead flesh or if Steven

Sadowski would require a closed casket.

But that was not his department. His job was to find a killer and bring justice to this victim.

“I’ll send you a photograph of the brand for your files.”

After Reed had thanked the doctor and took leave of the examination room, he made his way through the building and outside to his city assigned vehicle. He sat behind the wheel with the window rolled down for a few minutes filling his lungs with fresh air. He looked down at his dress pants and button-down shirt, wishing he could take them off, ball them up, and throw them in the trash. Now. Death was a clingy bitch.

His mind conjured the picture of Steven Sadowski again, and the small brand on the back of his neck. A marijuana plant of all things? How the hell did *that* fit into this? Was there some sort of drug angle here? The killer had murdered the director, branded him with a leaf symbol, removed his eyes, sprayed black spray paint in the sockets, and then posed him. Reed knew there were very specific reasons for each of those acts.

Figure out what, and he might figure out who.

And *why*.

CHAPTER TEN

Reed used the silver knocker on the door of the historic white-brick home in Hyde Park, looking around at the peaceful tree-lined street as he waited. A couple walked by, a golden retriever on a leash trotting in front of them. They glanced up at Reed, the man raising his hand in greeting and the woman offering a smile. Reed nodded back. He knocked once more and waited another minute before turning and beginning to descend the steps.

“Hello?” Surprised, Reed turned to see a man had just swung the door open behind him.

“Gordon Draper?” he asked, climbing the steps again.

The man seated in the wheelchair with a pile of what looked like lettuce in his lap smiled, backing his wheelchair up slightly. “Yes. Sorry for the delay.” He gestured to the plants in his lap. “I was out back in the garden. What can I do for you?”

Reed unclipped his badge and held it up for the former director of Lakeside Hospital to see. Gordon Draper glanced at it, a worried expression creasing his already-lined face. “A detective with the CPD? Is something wrong?”

“Can we talk inside?”

“Tell me. Please,” he said, his face stricken.

Reed paused, but nodded. “The man who replaced you at Lakeside Hospital was murdered yesterday. I just have a few questions.”

Gordon Draper blinked at Reed, confusion skating over his expression, followed by what looked like . . . relief? Mr. Draper pulled in a big breath and then let it out slowly. “Please, come in.”

He followed the older man inside the home, first entering a spacious foyer that led into a sunny living room. Reed expected him to stop there, but he kept going, moving through an open doorway into a kitchen beyond. “I just need to put this arugula in the refrigerator,” he said. “If you’ll have a seat, I’ll only be a moment.”

Reed sat down, glancing around at the room. There was plenty of space between the furnishings to allow for Gordon Draper’s wheelchair to move easily, but it didn’t appear as if it got much use other than as a pass-through. The pillows on the sofa were neatly placed, not a speck of lint or a dent where someone might sit on the couch or easy chairs. There were several photos in frames on the fireplace mantel, and Reed’s gaze zeroed in on one of a younger Gordon Draper, standing, though with the assistance of a cane. Despite the cane, he looked hearty and robust. Much different than the shrunken man who had greeted him at the door. Whatever physical malady he suffered, it had obviously progressively worsened over the years. He understood now what Liza had meant about the former director not being a

likely threat to anyone.

“I’m sorry about that,” Gordon Draper said, his wheelchair making a low hum as he approached. He parked it across from where Reed was sitting. “My grandson Everett loved to work in the garden I planted out back when I was lighter on my feet.” A brief smile passed over his face before his expression shifted to sadness. “He . . . took his own life six months ago.” His forehead creased and his shoulders lowered with the words, but he pulled himself higher in his chair. “I’d let it get so out of hand . . . untended. Gardening is not the easiest of pastimes for a man in my predicament.” He waved a hand toward his thin legs. “I’ve been trying to bring it back. For Everett . . .” His voice faded away, and he seemed to lose himself for a moment before looking back at Reed. “My apologies. My reaction to you on the porch was born only of the fact that detectives have not come bearing good news in the recent past.”

Christ. Liza had said he’d experienced a recent death in the family. His heart went out to the old guy, not only broken of body, but by loss as well. He’d been clumsy in his approach, even if he’d had no way of knowing Mr. Draper’s specific circumstances. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Thank you. Not that the news of Mr. . . .” He shook his head, bringing one hand to his temple. “Forgive me, I’ve forgotten his name—”

“Sadowski. Steven Sadowski.”

“Yes, of course. Sadowski. I sat in on one of his interviews, but I never worked with him directly. I left a few days before he began. And *murdered* you say? *How?*”

Reed went through the circumstances of Steven Sadowski’s murder and Gordon Draper grimaced when he told him about the enucleation, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the arms of his wheelchair. “My God,” he murmured. “*Inside* the hospital? Do you have any suspects?”

“We don’t have any suspects as of now. But it appears that whoever placed the victim in the spot where he was discovered, was somewhat familiar with the hospital layout.”

Gordon Draper nodded. “I’d think so, if he made it past the cameras without so much as a glimpse of his shirtsleeve. No one’s that lucky. But why place the body in the hospital at all?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out. Any theories?”

Gordon Draper looked to the side, frowning, and appearing to consider the question.

“Anything, no matter how small, could help,” Reed said. He could always tell when someone was weighing whether or not to say something. Sometimes it turned out to be nothing, but sometimes . . .

Gordon Draper blew out a breath. “During his interview process, there was something in his file from years before . . .” His forehead creased again,

and he looked deeply torn. “It turned out to be nothing.”

“What did, Mr. Draper? It could help find the person who committed a terrible, violent crime. The person who’s still out there now, free to harm others.”

“I’m afraid this might waste your time, but it’s the only thing that comes to mind when you ask who might have something against him.” He rubbed at his eye. “He had worked for another hospital before Lakeside and during that time, he’d been accused of watching the female patients as they changed in the showers and used the women’s facilities.”

“Watched? So . . . a peeping Tom?”

“That was the charge. Only it was unfounded. And later, the female patient who made the accusation recanted her story. She said she was angry with him because he’d confiscated her cigarettes.”

“She was a patient. What was her diagnosis?”

“An anxiety disorder, I believe. I can’t recall exactly.”

“If the patient recanted her accusation, why was it still in his file?”

Mr. Draper shrugged. “That’s the paperwork system. And why I hesitated to mention it. It’s always seemed unfair that even if an accusation turns out to be unfounded, the charge still remains part of your file.”

Reed sighed internally. It worked the same way in the police department. Even if you fought a charge and were exonerated, the paper trail

remained in your personnel file. Still . . . it might be worth checking up on.

“Do you remember this patient’s name?”

“I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“Okay. Ah, just one more question, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.”

“We matched the key card used to the time Mr. Sadowski appears on camera leaving the building. Although he was issued one in his name when he was hired, and that one was used the morning his body was placed inside the hospital, the key card he used the night before was registered to you.”

Mr. Draper’s brows furrowed and he looked away for a moment, as though considering. After a second, he shook his head. “I hate to say it, but the key card system there isn’t very well managed.”

Reed gave him a smile. “Dr. Nolan said the same thing.”

“Liza,” he said fondly. “Sweet girl. Very smart.” He blew out a breath. “Yes, the system could use better management, though I must admit as well, I’m not the most organized man. I lost at least a couple during my years at Lakeside and had to have new ones assigned. Old cards are supposed to be de-activated, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that never happened. *And* I wouldn’t be surprised if Mr. Sadowski found one of those old cards in the office he took over from me. Perhaps he used the cards interchangeably for some reason. Perhaps he mistook the one he found for his own. I don’t know.

And I suppose it doesn't make a detective's job easier in light of what happened."

Mr. Draper nudged a controller on the arm of his wheelchair, and began moving toward the hall. He gestured to Reed, indicating he should follow him. When they entered an office down the hall, the older man wheeled himself to a mahogany desk and pulled a drawer open, retrieving something from inside. He held up a white key card. "I found this one when I did a rare desk clean-out last year." He wheeled himself back around the piece of furniture and handed the card to Reed. "Like, I said, it should have been deactivated, but who knows." He shrugged. "I assume you'll be at Lakeside again at some point during the investigation. If you could return it for me, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course." Reed slipped the key card into his pocket.

Mr. Draper tilted his head, peering up at him. "Can I say, Detective, that you look . . . familiar somehow? I've been trying to place it but . . . uh"—he made a small movement with his fingers—"my memory is not as good as it once was."

Reed smiled, but it felt tight. He got that sometimes, and he always figured it was because at some point in time, the person trying to place him had seen his infamous father on one of the dozens of crime shows of which he'd been the subject. "I think I just have one of those faces," Reed said,

reaching out to shake Mr. Draper's hand.

"Yes, well, perhaps that's it," the old man said, though his expression was dubious.

"I appreciate your time, sir. And, I'm sorry about your recent loss."

"Thank you, Detective. That's very kind." He nodded to a picture of two smiling young boys on a bookshelf next to the door. "That was Everett," he said, pointing to the younger of the two. Reed stepped closer, his gaze moving from the chubby, older boy with the wide grin to Everett. He looked slight and bookish, with his button-down shirt and glasses. His smile was shy, but his eyes were squinted as though he might be about to laugh.

Mr. Draper pointed at another photo on the shelf above, placed next to a pile of comic books. It was of a smiling couple, arms linked casually. "This was my son and daughter-in-law, the boys' parents," he said. "They died in a house fire when the boys had just started middle school. They came to live with me afterward." He made a clicking sound in the back of his throat, turning his head to Reed. "I spent my career running programs to help people with mental and emotional issues, many of which were brought on by trauma. But I didn't look closely enough at those in my own home, Detective. Those placed in *my* charge. I . . ." He shook his head, appearing older, defeated. "I failed." His eyes met Reed's again, and there was so much sorrowful regret, such raw emotion in his expression, that Reed almost looked away. "I failed,"

he said again.

After Reed had thanked Gordon Draper again and left the old man sitting in his wheelchair in the doorway of his home, Reed started his car, hesitating as he gazed distractedly up at the house, a sort of . . . sympathetic melancholy pulsing through him. He stared at the front door, closed now, considering the old man's regret. How difficult it must be to know you'd been a part of helping so many other families, and yet hadn't recognized the needs of your own.

I failed. For some reason, the words rang in Reed's head long after he'd pulled away from the curb, leaving the house far behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reed glanced at the blinking screen on his dash, hitting the answer button, Ransom's voice filling the interior of his SUV. "Update me."

Reed first told him about his visit to Dr. Westbrook, Steven Sadowski's eyes found stuffed down the front of his pants, and the possible marijuana leaf brand on the back of his neck.

"Say what?"

"I know. My only guess was that Sadowski was involved with drugs in some capacity?"

"That could have led to his murder?"

"Anything's possible, I guess."

"It's also possible that the killer is just a big reggae music fan."

Reed chuckled and then filled him in on his meeting with Gordon Draper, about the charge in Steven Sadowski's file that had subsequently been dropped, and what the former Lakeside Hospital director had theorized as to the extra key card.

"So he probably just had two, registered in different names. He used one to leave the building, which could be in his car right now, wherever that is. And the killer used the other one, perhaps from Sadowski's wallet."

"I don't have a better theory than that."

Ransom sighed. “Thanks for nothing, Lakeside. Though, I have to say, I’m not surprised at the lax system. The times I dropped a prisoner off there when I was in uniform? I remember guards sitting around with their feet up, playing cards, even asleep on the job. Security is questionable. It only stands to reason that administrative practices are too.”

Reed wasn’t necessarily surprised either, even considering the high-risk nature of the prisoners who were housed there. He knew how outdated hospital systems could be, knew the budgets most of those facilities worked with. And of course, humans were fallible, he knew that too.

“The government can’t do shit right,” Ransom went on.

“The government hired you.”

“Man, even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

Reed chuckled. “True enough. So what about Steven Sadowski’s apartment? Did you learn anything from the neighbors?”

“Not much. There was no evidence that the man was involved with drugs. The old lady next door swears he never came home Monday night. She says she noticed because his cat was outside meowing to get in, and he never answered his door. She said the feline kept her up past midnight.”

“Okay, so he was either abducted somewhere between leaving the hospital but before he made it home. Or, he headed somewhere directly after work where he either randomly came in contact with the suspect, or the

suspect followed him there.” Reed paused. “Although, I have to believe this was not a random targeting. Otherwise, what reason would the killer have to return him to his place of employment?”

“Agreed. I’ve requested video from several cameras on what would have been his likely route home, and video footage from the parking lot of his apartment building. I’ll start weeding through that tomorrow, see if there’s anything to work with. There was a laptop in his home that the digital guys will go through. We’ll see if he was doing anything online that might give us a lead. His phone records don’t indicate anything so far, and the last ping came back to Lakeside. Whether that means he turned it off, someone else did, or it died, I don’t know. You headed home?”

Reed squinted as his SUV went around a bend, lowering the visor so the intensity of the setting sun wasn’t directly in his eyes. “Nah, I’m headed to Josie’s.”

“Yeah?” Ransom said, warmth in his tone. As Reed’s partner, Ransom and his wife Cici had been out to the farmhouse for dinner on many occasions. In a job like theirs, bonds formed quickly, families naturally mingled and expanded. They never knew when they’d all need to come together. Plus, he and Ransom had just clicked from the get-go. He considered him a brother. “Tell her I said hi. Cope too.”

“I will. See you bright and early.”

“See ya.”

The farmhouse came into view and Reed felt a ribbon of calm wrap around him. That’s all it took—just the sight of the place seemed to do that. The picturesque white house with the wraparound porch where the sound of laughter rang from every corner. It was beautiful, and homey, and Josie and Zach had worked their asses off to bring it back to its original glory over the years. But mostly, love resided there.

Reed smiled as he stepped from the car. He heard a voice from the side yard and walked toward it. *Josie.*

“Get *out* of that basket, you filthy beast!” she scolded.

He walked around the side of the house to see Josie, her back to him, pinning something to the clothesline while a muddy puppy sat on top of a half-full laundry basket at her feet, a white piece of material in its mouth as he shook his head from side to side in a tearing motion. She finished pinning and bent down, picking the puppy up and kissing it, rubbing her cheek on its face as it licked her joyfully, before she placed it on the ground. “I don’t have any idea why I put up with you,” she said, and Reed could hear the adoration in her voice. The small dog let out a bark, caught sight of its tail, and chased it in a half-circle. Josie laughed and Reed did too. At the sound, she whipped around, bringing her hands to her mouth.

“Oh my God!” she said, her face breaking into a grin. “Reed!” She

walked to him quickly, throwing her arms around him and squeezing. When she stepped back, she laughed, smoothing a piece of hair away from her face. There was a smear of dirt on her cheek from the puppy. “Oh, it’s so good to see you!”

“Sorry I didn’t call—”

“Oh please, you never have to call.” The puppy jumped up, smearing dirt on his khaki pants. “Oh, no, Bandit! Down! Sorry. Zach brought this rascal home and now I’m stuck trying to teach it some manners.”

Reed laughed, squatting to pet the rambunctious puppy. “It’s fine. A new member of the family, huh?” He picked the small furball up and it licked his face, squirming with delight in his arms. He squinted up at Josie. “Seems pretty unruly. Is he safe around the children?”

“Absolutely not.”

Reed laughed, placing the puppy down and standing. “Want me to grab that?” he asked, gesturing to the basket of laundry.

“I’ll grab it later. It’ll need to be washed again anyway.” Her sigh turned into a smile as she looped her arm through his and they started walking around to the front of the house. “Can you stay for dinner?”

“If it’s not too much trouble and you have enough.”

“Are you kidding? I’m always stocked up. My pantry looks like we’re preparing for the end of the world. The amount of food those boys can eat is

mind-boggling.”

Reed laughed. “I remember those days. How is everyone?”

Josie smiled. “They’re good. Great. They’re usually going in all directions, but they’re home tonight. Even Arryn’s inside working on a class project. You picked the perfect night to stop by. You can catch up with everyone.”

“Good.” Reed drew in a breath of the fresh country air, his heart feeling full. He and Josie had gotten close over the last ten years and he talked to her often by phone or text, but he hadn’t been out to the house for too long. He needed to make more of an effort to visit regularly. It always did his heart well.

“I thought we banned you from this house after the Monopoly incident two months ago.”

Reed grinned as he caught sight of his college-aged half-sister, one hip leaned in the doorway, arms folded over her chest, one eyebrow raised. “I’ve explained this already, Arryn. It’s not my fault that you end up in a debt-induced hysteria every time I attempt to demonstrate how capitalism works.”

She pulled herself straight, putting her hands on her hips. “*Hysteria?* I’m merely passionate in my fight against unethical banking practices. Someone’s gotta stand up for the little guy.”

Reed sighed, patting her on her shoulder. “You’d be more effective if

you tried to stay out of jail.” He leaned toward her ear, and said in a mock whisper, “It’s getting embarrassing having to bail you out repeatedly.”

“Oh, I’ll kill you, you dirty-dealing slumlord!”

She pretended to swing at him and Reed laughed, ducking as he sidestepped into the house, but wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her in for a side hug. “Hey, sis.”

“Hey, yourself.”

Reed heard Josie’s laughter behind them along with the high-pitched puppy barking. “Boys!” Josie called and feet sounded in the upstairs hall, bringing to mind a heard of elephants clomping down the stairs as his half-brothers, fifteen-year-old Vance and twelve-year-old Cyrus, burst into the room, greeting Reed exuberantly. Zach stepped out of his office. Noise erupted and the puppy danced around at their feet, barking with excitement. Reed laughed, glancing over at Josie to see her standing by the door, watching the scene with a smile on her face and so much love in her eyes that it caused his heart to swell.

No one deserves this more than you, he thought, smiling at his birth mother.

He’d been raised in a wonderful, loving home with two parents who adored him, and then he’d been given a second family the day he knocked on Josie’s door.

And Reed was grateful for it all. Every piece of it.

After a lively dinner where Reed got all the latest updates from the Copeland kids and watched his half-brothers shovel insane amounts of food into their mouths, he helped Josie with the dishes, chatting easily with her about random topics as she washed and he dried.

“I saw the news about the murder at that hospital,” she said, placing a pan into the sink. “Zach said you’re on that case.” She shot him a worried glance.

“Yeah. It was . . . pretty gruesome. No leads yet.” He took the plate she’d just washed and began to dry it using the dish towel he was holding. He was always hesitant to talk to Josie about the more violent aspects of his job, which was silly considering her husband did the same work. Zach had moved up the chain of command and was working his final years with the department as a lieutenant on first shift. Reed seldom saw him on the job. But surely Zach talked to his wife about the cases he was a part of, even the ones that were morbid, the ones that contained details that were hard for anyone to hear. She was used to it, Reed was sure. And yet, he couldn’t help feeling . . . protective of her reaction to information that might bring up the trauma she herself had experienced.

“Actually,” he said, placing the dish towel on the counter after drying the final plate, “I wanted to ask Zach about a few aspects of the case.”

Josie nodded, picking up another dish towel and drying her hands as she turned to him. “Go on back to his office. You know he’s always happy to talk shop.” She nodded toward the back of the house where Zach’s office was located, and where he’d gone to take a call right after dinner.

Reed kissed her on her cheek. “Thanks for dinner. It was delicious.”

“Anytime.”

Reed left the kitchen, walking toward Zach’s office. The door stood open and he heard the water running in the bathroom next door. Figuring Zach had left momentarily, Reed entered the office, taking a seat on the couch under a gallery of Zach’s awards and commendations. He’d watched Zach receive a few of those awards and he knew the recognition always made Zach slightly uncomfortable. He was humble that way. Reed didn’t know for sure, but he suspected Josie had been the one to hang the awards on the wall because she was so proud of her husband. Otherwise, they’d be in boxes in a closet.

It was part of the reason Zach Copeland was one of his heroes. He didn’t do the job for recognition. He did it because he cared so deeply about helping victims, about being one of the good guys in a world that desperately needed them.

As he sat there, something on the corner of Zach’s desk caught Reed’s eye and he frowned, walking to where it was. The manila file folder was on

top of several other folders, and sticking out was a black and white photograph of himself. He pulled it out, his blood turning cold as he realized what it actually was—not a photo of *himself* at all, but a photo of his biological father.

Reed blew out a breath, his heart thumping harshly against his ribs. The picture was a close-up, but it appeared to have been enlarged, the manipulation making it slightly grainy, distorted enough that Reed had mistaken the man for himself. Distorted or not, Reed couldn't deny that he carried this psycho's genes.

God, how did Josie look at Reed with such love? Such *pride*? He was grateful for it—amazed by it—but it honestly eluded him how she didn't cringe each time he showed his face.

His birth mother's strength—the purity of her love—went beyond comprehension.

So yeah, he was part of this man. But he was also part of *her*, and that was the part he claimed with all his heart.

But why did Zach have a picture of Charles Hartsman? He set it aside, picking up the paper underneath it, and looking at the ones beneath that too. They were printouts, lists, transcripts of calls . . . all about the man who'd escaped a police manhunt twenty years before. *What the hell?*

He zeroed in on the dates, his gaze moving from one to the other, going

back over the ones that looked familiar to him on a personal level. Confusion descended. His heart sped.

Reed heard footsteps and turned to see Zach standing in the doorway. His gaze moved from the papers in Reed's hands to his face. He paused, assessing Reed for another moment before he took a deep breath, and stepped into the room, turning and closing the door behind him.

"You've been tracking him," Reed said, disbelief clear in his voice. He placed the file back on the desk. "*How?*"

"My own digging mostly, law enforcement contacts in other countries willing to help off the books, a few private detectives over the years." He walked to the other side of the desk and hitched one hip on the corner, turning toward Reed. Reed looked at the paper in his hand, scanning the dates, the locations. "These"—he gestured to the paper in his hand—"are what? Sightings?"

"Mostly. Yes."

"You even have *video* of him?" He pointed at the slightly grainy photo. "This is an enlarged freeze-frame from video footage."

"Yes. That footage was reviewed two days after a sighting that was reported in a small town in France. That was seven years ago."

Reed released a breath, leaning against the side of the desk where he stood. "Why haven't you ever mentioned this to me? We *work* together."

You've always treated me like one of your own sons.

Zach paused. "I didn't think this was something you needed to involve yourself with, Reed. I didn't want this to touch you."

"Does Josie know?"

"Yeah." He paused. "Or at least, she knows I keep track of sightings and that I do some remote hunting of my own. She's never asked to go through the file. I don't think she wants the particulars."

Reed tried not to feel hurt by the knowledge that they'd both knowingly kept something like this from him. Secrets had been hidden from him all his life. He understood why, hell, he even appreciated it on a rational level, but the fact remained that he'd been excluded from the truth when he was a child, and he didn't want to be excluded from information pertinent to his life when he was an adult. "It's not your job to protect me from this, from *him*, anymore. Jesus. I'm a grown man. A police detective."

Zach shook his head. "You weren't being excluded, Reed. There's simply nothing that concerns you directly."

"Bullshit." He looked at the paper, tapping his finger on one of the dates. "You think he was here, in the United States, on this date. That's when I graduated from high school. Or here . . . I graduated from college that month and that year. Another U.S. sighting." He pointed to another one. "And this one. This is when I graduated from the police academy. It's when I

became a cop.”

His eyes shifted. “I don’t have confirmation that he was in the United States, and absolutely zero evidence he was in Ohio. A lot of that is based on unsubstantiated information, some merely my own hunches—”

“Which are trustworthy and based on years of being a detective with a near perfect solve rate. With a few exceptions, Hartsman being one of the ones who got away,” Reed finished quietly. “Is it part of the reason you hunt him? Your own ego?”

Zach’s eyes narrowed slightly. “It’s not about my ego. It’s about my accountability. I let him get away twenty years ago. And God only knows who he’s been victimizing since.”

Guilt speared Reed. Zach was not an egotistical man and he damn well knew it. Knew him. *Trusted* him. Zach had been nothing but good to Reed since the day Reed walked inside the door of his house ten years before. Which was part of the reason this hurt. “Shit, I’m sorry. That was a low blow. But I’m still pissed. You should have involved me.”

Zach blew out a breath, using his index finger to rub at his bottom lip. “What good would it have done you?”

“To know that the man who fathered me might be keeping tabs on my life?” He shrugged. “Maybe I’d have watched my back more, at the very least.”

“I never once believed you were in danger, Reed. If I had—”

“You agree these dates”—he tapped at the folder—“combined with your hunches and whatever intel you’ve gathered, probably aren’t just a coincidence, right? Be straight with me.”

Zach paused, looking to the side, appearing torn. “Yes,” he said when he looked back at Reed. “I questioned it.”

“I deserved to know,” Reed said quietly.

“I’m sorry. Maybe it’s habit, protecting you from him. Protecting you from any knowledge of him.”

His anger dissipated. In a way, he understood that. Hadn’t he had a similar thought about protecting Josie and her potential reaction to hard-to-hear details about his job just ten minutes before? Zach was a natural protector, and Josie had only ever put Reed’s well-being before her own. He couldn’t stay angry at them. Still . . . he didn’t want it to happen again.

“You don’t have to protect me anymore. I’m not a kid. I’m a grown man, a good detective. I respect the hell out of your experience, Zach, but I want to be an equal.”

Zach considered him. His expression was slightly sad, though there was a glimmer of . . . respect in his dark gaze. “Okay,” he finally said. “Fair enough.”

Reed sighed. “Okay.”

Zach smiled. "All right."

"Can I ask you one thing first?"

"Of course."

"You said, God only knows who he's been victimizing." He paused, a rolling in the pit of his stomach. He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to his question, but he trudged forward anyway. "Is there any evidence, or any indication that Charles Hartsman has committed more crimes since he got away?"

Zach's gaze swept over Reed's face for a moment. "No. None."

Reed expelled a breath, picking up the folder. "Fill me in."

Zach stood, picking up the folder and moving to the couch where he sat down. Reed followed, sitting at the other end. "I believe my hunches are right. He was in the U.S. on those dates, and those dates coinciding with particular events in your life is too much of a coincidence. Although there haven't been any sightings of him reported in years, and definitely not in the United States."

Reed looked behind Zach, thinking. "Why though?" he asked after a minute. "Why would he have checked up on me? Why show up for the more notable occasions in my life? Why take that risk? What would make that worth it to him?" A psychopath incapable of caring for anyone but himself.

"He has some stake in your life," Zach said. "I . . . can't figure out the

pathology. Neither Josie nor I are psychiatrists.” His lips tipped slightly, though he appeared troubled too.

“What about this?” Reed asked, fingering a printout that looked as though it’d come from a CPD website.

Zach glanced at it. “That’s a message left on a tipster site under Charles Hartsman’s name.”

Reed frowned. “A lead?”

“No, it’s a message *for* Charles. Probably a nut, or some crazy fan, you know how that works.”

Reed swept his tongue over his teeth. Yeah, he did know how that worked. How fan communities would spring up in the wake of a serial murderer’s arrest. It was a strange phenomenon he couldn’t make sense of. He picked up the printout and read it: *Charlie, I know where Mimi is. She’s my sweet pea, and she did not leave. Contact me.* Following that was a phone number with a local area code.

He looked up at Zach. “What does this mean?”

“No idea. Probably nothing. It caught my attention because it was addressed to Hartsman and not the police. An oddity, though the IP address turned out to be untraceable. Same with the phone, which was apparently a throwaway.”

“And of course, no way of knowing if Hartsman saw this.”

“No, though that was the first and last message.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning if Hartsman did see it and contacted that person before we did, the message writer could have given him a different contact number and ditched the original. But again, that could be nothing more than some attention-seeking kid whose mom subsequently took away his Internet access. I have a hundred similar loose ends in that folder.”

Reed frowned. “Huh,” he murmured. Still . . . weird.

“Like I said, Reed, I have no evidence he’s been in the country in years. And no reason for you to worry.”

Unless he’s gotten better at hiding, Reed thought. But he pushed the idea aside. He refused to live his life in fear of the man. Even now.

It was raining by the time he made it back to the office. He’d started heading home after leaving Josie and Zach’s, but couldn’t stand the thought of returning to his dark, empty apartment when he still felt wired. Troubled. So instead, he’d turned toward the building where he worked with the other Cincinnati police detectives. He needed a distraction. And there was still Lakeside Hospital footage to go through.

He hadn't brought up the case after he and Zach had discussed Charles Hartsman. Reed had been distracted and frankly, he'd wanted to leave and chew privately on the information Zach had revealed. He still wasn't entirely sure how he felt.

So yeah, he'd let this new information simmer and in the meantime, he'd turn his attention to checking through those tapes. He had a feeling they wouldn't find anything—a gut instinct that whoever had committed the crime knew exactly how to sidestep being caught on camera—but the victim deserved due diligence, even if finding anything was a long shot.

Reed spent the next hour watching empty hallways, and confirming what he'd suspected—they had a cleverly orchestrated, not random, murder on their hands.

He rubbed at his eye, thinking about Liza Nolan and that seven-minute stairwell trek. He tapped his fingers mindlessly on his desk for a minute before clicking on the camera that faced the door that she'd exited that morning. He also pulled up the camera that faced the exterior door where she'd entered the building.

He watched it again, her entering the exterior door, and then seven minutes later, exiting the door in the hallway where, if he'd let it play a few more seconds, she'd turn and see Steven Sadowski's mutilated body. Instead, he paused on her, staring at her frozen face, considering her expression, the

way she held her body.

“You’re terrified,” he whispered. “Of *what?*”

He stared at her still image a moment longer and then rewound the video again, this time pulling both images up side by side and watching them play simultaneously. He watched Liza enter the building, and something caught his attention on the closed door of the upper floor. He rewound it, watched it again. “What in the world?” he muttered. A chill traveled down his spine. What did *that* mean?

“What were you doing, Liza?” he asked the mostly empty room.

His phone rang, startling him.

“Hello?” he snapped.

“Yo,” Ransom said. “Are you at home?”

“No, I’m at the office. Going through video.”

“Oh.” He sighed. “Welp. Put that aside and get down to McMicken and Nagel. I’m on my way now. A DOA just got called in. The eyes are missing. They appear to be filled with a black substance.”

Shit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The entire block was lit up. Police lights rotated like strobes, causing the fog to pulse an eerie muted red.

A crowd of civilians had already gathered, a motley looking crew of those who conducted their business in the hours between dusk and dawn and not the other way around. There was a whole segment of society that woke up once most folks had long gone to bed for the night. Some were good, some were not. Most were just trying to survive.

“Hey, Ransom! Ransom!” a skinny girl with tall boots and a short skirt called. “Ransom, I know that guy,” she said. “The one in the alley.”

Reed walked behind Ransom as he approached the girl. “Yeah? Who is he?” he asked, gesturing for her to step aside.

She did, walking unsteadily on her high heels. She glanced around her but everyone’s focus seemed to be on the crime scene crew working around a prone figure down the alley in front of them. She held out her hand. “Can I get some cash first? My baby needs diapers.”

Ransom pulled a twenty out of his pocket, keeping his gaze on her. She picked at a meth sore on her cheek as her eyes darted down to the money. “His name’s Toby. He deals down on Mohawk.”

“Toby what?”

The girl sniffed, wiped at her nose. “I don’t know. Just Toby.”

Ransom regarded her. “You messed up with drugs again, Sheena?”

Sheena shook her head. “Nah. I’m trying to get my kid back.”

“I thought you said your kid needs diapers.”

“He does. He’s with my mom and I’m gonna drop some off. I’m in a program now.”

“Yeah? That’s great. Stick with it.”

She nodded. “I will. Hey!” She looked back and forth between Ransom and Reed, smiled in a way that made Reed think she’d forgotten what a real one looked like and was just moving her muscles in some half-remembered simulation. “If you have any more questions, you know where to find me, right, Ransom?”

Ransom gave her a half-hearted wave and walked toward the yellow caution tape protecting the scene and Reed followed. “Sheena,” Ransom muttered. “She used to work as a CI when I was undercover.” He blew out a breath. “Fucking sad.”

Reed didn’t disagree. Mostly, he was sad for that baby she’d mentioned.

They headed down the alley. The scent of rot hit Reed’s nose and he grimaced.

“Hey, Carlyle. Davies,” a criminalist named Maria Vasquez greeted. After saying hi to her and the other team members close by, Reed swore

softly, bending down next to the dead man lying against a pile of garbage bags so tall, it looked like they might topple over at any moment. It smelled to high heaven.

“Hell of a crime scene, huh?” he muttered, noting the sludge on the ground where bags of trash had leaked onto the pavement. The techs would be there all night bagging rat excrement.

The criminalist next to him sighed but didn't comment.

Reed took in the sight of the murder victim. He looked just like Steven Sadowski had, mouth open, empty eye sockets filled with black paint dripping down his stubbled, sunken-in cheeks.

Reed reached in his pocket and pulled out a pair of nitrile gloves he'd grabbed from his trunk. He snapped them on before pulling the collar of the man's shirt down. “Ligature mark on neck,” he said.

“Looks like the cause of death,” Maria noted as the second criminalist shot a photo next to her, Reed squinting from the flash.

“Have you checked his pockets?” Reed asked.

“We checked for a wallet. There was one in his jacket pocket. No ID, just a wad of cash, and some pills wrapped in plastic. It's all over there in an evidence bag.” She gestured toward a collection case nearby.

“Have you checked down his pants?”

Maria glanced up from her work. “We usually leave it to the ME to

undress the victim.”

“Check down the front of his pants for me, will you?”

Maria shrugged, pulling the man’s track pants down slightly. There was a handkerchief with something wrapped in it sitting on his groin. Maria pulled the handkerchief out and set it on top of a paper evidence bag. When she unwrapped it, they all stared down at a pair of eyeballs, muscle and flesh hanging from the edges in torn clumps. Reed cringed.

“Well then. That’ll haunt my dreams,” Ransom said. “Is there supposed to be some kind of message here? Why not just put the eyeballs in his pocket or something? Why down his pants?”

“Relating his eyeballs to his . . . other balls?” Reed murmured.

“Yeah? How so?” Ransom asked, sounding genuinely interested.

“I have no idea. I’m just throwing out random theories.” Reed addressed Maria, “What about the back of his neck? Can we get a look?”

“Yeah. I’ll hold his head and you push him toward me,” Maria instructed.

Reed pushed while Maria held the victim’s head steady and Ransom leaned in next to Reed. A red circular brand could be seen standing out starkly against the man’s pale, lifeless skin. “Same leaf,” Reed said. Ransom took out his phone and shot a quick photo of the brand and then Reed and Maria positioned the body back where it’d been.

“Same killer,” Ransom said. “No doubt.”

“No doubt,” Reed agreed.

As Maria picked up each detached eyeball and placed them in an evidence bag, Reed noted that they looked far neater than Steven Sadowski’s had looked.

Fuck.

The killer was already improving his craft.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Liza rubbed her temples, attempting to massage away the stress and fatigue of a long day where nothing had seemed to go right.

A knock sounded at her door. “Dr. Nolan, Detective Davies is here to see you.”

At the mention of his name, Liza’s heart lurched and then picked up an erratic pattern. *Reed*. She’d convinced herself she wouldn’t see him again and was irritated by her own excited response to his unexpected visit. She took a deep breath and smiled placidly at her secretary. “Of course. Have him come in.”

Carol nodded and disappeared for a moment and when she returned, Reed was behind her. He entered her office and Carol closed the door behind him.

“Hi,” she said, standing and walking around her desk. She held her hand out and he took it in his. An awkward pause ensued as they both stared at their hands. She dropped hers and their eyes met. The graceless distance seemed so stupid to Liza suddenly. Here they were, two people who had been about as physically intimate as two people could be and they were nervous to shake each other’s hands.

“Hi,” he said back. He did this thing with his expression, a sort of self-

deprecating half-smile that made her heart do an unexpected flip. The man was incredibly gorgeous *and* smart, so why wasn't he cocky? Arrogant? What had made him so . . . intuitive? Thoughtful?

She had to remind herself again that she didn't want to know.

Liza indicated the seating area near the window. He took a seat in one of the chairs, and she sat across from him.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first," he said. "I hope I'm not interrupting you."

"No. It's fine. I've seen my last patient of the day. I was just doing some paperwork."

He nodded, his eyes moving over her features as though he was making note of something he could see in her expression that she wasn't saying with her words. Did she look tired? Overwhelmed? Probably. She hadn't been sleeping well. She'd like to blame it solely on the horror of finding her mutilated boss, but she knew it was more than that. She had woken, shaking in cold sweats more than once, remembering Steven's grotesque corpse. Equally though, she hadn't slept well since the night spent with the man sitting in front of her. Prior to the murder, she'd woken up sweating for an entirely different reason, and *those* memories had calmed her . . . and excited her.

"I have a few more questions."

"Oh. Of course. Okay."

He pulled several photographs of orange pill bottles out of his pocket and handed them to her. Liza frowned, taking them from his hand and reading the close-ups of the partial labels, most of the information peeled off. “What are these?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. I spoke to someone in poison control but figured you might have some additional information.” He scratched at his jaw. “I also wanted to know if you recognized the names on those prescriptions.”

Liza shook her head. “I don’t recognize the names.” She looked up at Reed. “I do know these drugs, as they’re used to treat mental conditions, though I should note that psychologists aren’t licensed to prescribe any medication.”

“Yes, I realize you don’t prescribe medications, but many of the patients you work with must be on them?”

“Most of them, yes. Treating mental illness can often be a multipronged approach. It just depends. And there are certainly conditions with a biological basis that can only be treated with medication.”

Reed sat back, studying her for a moment. “Can I ask a more personal question?”

She raised a brow. “You’re nosy aren’t you, Detective?”

“Sort of goes along with the job.” He gave her that self-deprecating

smile and her tummy tightened.

She glanced away and let out a smile on a breath. “I suppose it does. Yes, you can ask a personal question.”

“Is there a reason you went into psychology as opposed to psychiatry?”

Liza relaxed, giving him a wry tilt of her lips. “Are you asking why I chose the field of study less based on science than on wild theories and fuzzy speculation?”

Reed chuckled and raised his hands. “Whoa. Not at all. I have deep respect for both fields of study.” He paused for a moment. “I sometimes think medications can cause more harm than good when they’re used to mask emotions that are at the root of a problem.” He shrugged. “Or that they’re meant to be a temporary fix to something that requires more long-term solutions.”

Liza nodded. “Yes, absolutely. The truth is, both fields can be hit and miss in their own ways. And we’re dealing with the human mind and a whole bevy of unique experiences. There are endless variables.”

Reed smiled. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Liza gave a short laugh, thinking about what he’d asked. “I guess I simply prefer to focus exclusively on treating mental and emotional suffering with behavioral intervention.” She tilted her head. “Psychology can be similar to detective work. It’s sort of like searching for the lost. If you can

figure out what turns they took, how deep they went, you can find them and ultimately help lead them home.” She leaned forward. “Somewhere in there, Reed, in the midst of all those twisted pathways and shadowy corners is . . . where the truth lives. Find that, and you find *them*.”

“And then the real work begins,” he said softly.

She blinked at him. He got it, he really did. “Exactly,” she answered.

He was gazing at her so intensely and she felt exposed suddenly, as though he’d heard something she hadn’t meant to say. “And of course, I have to be nosy sometimes too,” she said, attempting to lighten the moment.

He laughed. “I guess you do.” They smiled at each other for a moment before he said, “You love it. Your work.”

“Yes. Very much. I’ll be honest, there aren’t many moments of triumph, but when there are, it’s like . . .” She felt a buzz in her chest, the desire to convey to him how those rare moments *felt*. Her eyes widened as she gathered her thoughts, sitting forward and opening her mouth to speak when she suddenly realized she was at risk of getting carried away. She grimaced, leaning back as her pained expression morphed into a short laugh. “Anyway, I could obviously go on and on. But you’re here for a reason and my dissertation on mental health strategies is not that reason.” But as Liza smiled across at him, she realized that, though it was a topic she was passionate about, she enjoyed talking to him in general, and it was clear to her that

whether they were joking with each other the way they had the first night they met or talking about serious topics, she wanted more of it. She wanted to know what baseball team he liked, and whether he'd ever been to the ocean. She wanted to know if he read books or liked movies, and what he thought about first thing in the morning. And somehow she knew he'd have interesting things to say about all of it.

I like you, Reed Davies.

Dammit.

It wasn't fair, because she couldn't have any more of him than she'd already had. And it wasn't enough.

Reed sat back, regarding her. It was like he knew what she was thinking. Liza cleared her throat, her hand moving unconsciously to the collar of her button-down blouse. She tugged at it and then realized what she was doing, her hand fluttering away. His gaze lingered on her throat for a moment and she knew he'd seen the thin pink scar. Her stomach cramped. "Anyway," she said, picking up one of the photos from her lap, "This is a barbiturate that's commonly prescribed for patients with anxiety and sleep disorders." She picked up the next two. "Both of these are benzodiazepines, which are usually used for serious panic attacks." She picked up the last one. "And this is an antidepressant."

Reed nodded as she passed the photos back to him. "Thank you." He

pulled up something on his phone and turned it toward her. “Do you recognize this man?”

Liza moved her gaze to the screen showing a man who looked to be in his forties or fifties with a receding hairline and an unshaven face. There was something seedy-looking about his expression that she couldn’t exactly describe in words. Staring at him sent a shiver down her spine. She would remember him if she’d ever seen him before. “No. Who is he?”

“Another victim. Same manner of death as Steven Sadowski.”

Liza pulled in a surprised breath. “The eyes . . .”

Reed gave a quick nod. “Yes, the same.”

“Oh my God. Why? How?”

“I don’t know, but it appears he was a low-level dealer of prescription medication.” He gestured to the folder where he’d put the photos on the table in front of him. “Those pill bottles were found in his apartment, along with multiple baggies of unlabeled pills.”

“What does he have to do with Steven Sadowski or this hospital?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Is there any way Steven Sadowski had a part in an illegal prescription drug business? That he was working with the man whose picture you just looked at?”

“No. I mean, I didn’t work with Mr. Sadowski for long, but he wasn’t a doctor. He didn’t prescribe medication. And there was never so much as a

whisper of that.” Liza paused. “Is there evidence that that’s what was going on?”

“No. None. I’m just trying to develop a motive. I might be off-base, but I have to ask the questions.”

She nodded. “I understand. You might want to talk to Dr. Headley too. He’s a psychiatrist. He might have more insight on those particular medications, or maybe even the patients.”

“I went to see him first, but he was with a patient.”

“Oh.” Why did she feel slightly disappointed? The knowledge that he’d come to see Chad, and he’d sought her out merely as a default source of information? And was she really so self-involved that she was even *thinking* about that considering the reason Reed Davies was there was because a man had been brutally murdered? His eyes removed.

“I . . . do have another question.” His lips thinned and he looked torn. It made her feel suddenly wary.

“Yes?”

“We watched the tapes of you entering the building and finding Steven Sadowski’s body.”

Her hand went to her throat once more, and again, she quickly dropped it. “Oh. Yes? I mean, of course.” Nerves spiraled in Liza’s belly.

“You began entering the building and then left and came back a few

minutes later. Do you remember why?”

I needed a moment to gather some courage. Liza cast her eyes to the side. “I probably left something in my car. I’m sorry, I don’t really remember what.”

Reed nodded. “All right. I’m also curious why it took you so long to climb the stairs. Seven minutes from the time you entered the building until you appeared on the third floor.”

She stared at him, her heart pounding. She felt a flush creeping up her neck. *This is why*, she told herself. *This is why you cannot know Reed Davies.* She let out a small laugh. “Avoiding work I suppose. Dragging my feet.” She attempted a smile but he didn’t smile back. Her expression slipped.

“That behavioral therapy you mentioned. Do you apply it to yourself sometimes?” His words were direct, but his tone was gentle.

“What?” The word came out breathy. Humiliation swept through her.

“You were testing yourself, weren’t you? In the dark.”

“I’m sorry, are my stair-climbing habits part of your investigation? I can assure you they have nothing to do with what happened to Mr. Sadowski.”

“You entered the building and I watched the light go off from beneath the doorway of the third floor. It went back on right before you emerged. You made it up the stairs, but it took you seven minutes because you were afraid.” He paused, leaned forward, his eyes, those beautiful, knowing eyes boring

into her. “The same way you were in my apartment when I turned off the lights. It was just a moment, Liza, but I saw.”

She forced out a short laugh. “Well, there you go. That’s my big secret. I’m afraid of the dark. What a brilliant detective you are.” There was a waver in her voice and she hated him for it. She didn’t want this. Didn’t want him to see this part of her. It was intensely private. Her hands fluttered to her throat again and then away.

He scrutinized her for a moment and she was tempted to break eye contact. “Is that what you were doing with me?” he asked quietly. “Some form of therapy?”

She felt ashamed. She shrugged. “Yes. I was using you.” She lashed out because she felt hurt by him. Embarrassed. *Small.*

A fraud.

She saw hurt flash in his expression and it brought her no joy. None at all. “Why? Explain to me why.”

She shook her head. “Don’t.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I just want—”

“What? What do you want?”

“To know you. I still want to know you.” He stood up and moved around the coffee table separating them and sat in the chair directly next to her, angling his body toward hers.

She shook her head, forced another small laugh. “I think you have bigger things to focus on right now.”

“That’s my work. I’m good at my job and give it my all, but I’m allowed to have a life too. You’re not my work, Liza.”

“I am. That’s all I am. A witness in your investigation, Detective.”

“For God’s sake, Liza, I’ve been inside you.”

A ripple went through her, of what she wasn’t entirely sure. Shock at his frankness, excitement at the memory, both of those maybe. Her body turned toward his, as if of its own accord. She had this sense that there were magnets inside them, pulling, forcing them together. Part of her wanted to deny the sensation, but part of her wanted to give in to it the way she had that night.

She felt vulnerable, off balance, and she’d fought so long and hard not to feel that way. She’d become a different version of that scared, helpless girl and she didn’t ever want to be her again. “Talk to me,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders, his face so close she could see the velvety fringe of his lashes, the smooth texture of his lips, and the tiny dots of dark stubble on his jaw. She remembered the way it felt against her nipples—

She leaned in even closer, that unseen force pulling, *insisting*. Wanting. He smelled *good*, not like any particular product, just like cleanliness and male skin and maybe a hint of some oil he used on the gun holstered at his waist. God, she liked it. She liked it far too much.

Someone cleared his throat behind her and Liza sprang away. Reed moved back as well, and Liza turned to see Chad standing in her doorway. His eyes were narrowed. "I didn't realize you two knew each other." *My God, he heard us.*

"We don't," she said, standing and smoothing her skirt. Reed stood too, but he wasn't looking at Chad, he was still looking at her, his expression full of so much disappointment, she had to look away.

Reed turned toward Chad. "Hello, Dr. Headley. I actually stopped by your office first but you were with a patient. Do you have time to answer a few questions now?"

Chad gave Reed a smile, one of those disdainful ones that Liza hated. She cringed inside, hating that he'd walked in and ascertained that she knew Reed. Intimately. *For God's sake, Liza, I've been inside you.*

"Of course, Detective. Please follow me."

Reed began to follow him. He looked at Liza and she could tell he wanted to say something, but in the end, he simply left the room, closing the door behind him.

She sank back down into her chair, trying desperately to slow the speeding of her heart. She didn't know if Reed's departure made her feel relieved or disappointed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Reed turned up the speed on the treadmill, increasing the incline as well, his feet pounding rapidly on the black rubber belt.

He pushed his body, running uphill at maximum speed for fifteen long minutes. When the belt slowed, coming to a halt, Reed brushed his drenched hair back, breathing harshly under the bright LED lights of the gym.

He used a towel to wipe away the perspiration, taking a long drink from his water bottle as he stepped off the machine and walked toward the locker room.

“Good workout?” a brunette in a tight sports bra and running shorts asked, smiling as he approached.

He smiled back. She was pretty and was looking at him with clear interest in her eyes. He should stop, chat for a minute, see where it led . . . “Yeah, thanks. You have a good workout too,” he said as he moved past.

He should, but he didn’t want to.

Because, fuck it all, he couldn’t get another woman off his mind. And not even pushing his body to the damn near breaking point had helped.

Yes. I was using you.

He hated that her words had hurt him. A stranger he’d spent one night with. And then he’d asked her to tell him why, as if it was really any of his

business. If she'd used him, he'd basically let her do it. And it wasn't as if he hadn't gotten anything out of it.

They'd made no promises to each other.

He heard his phone ringing from inside his locker and hurriedly dialed the lock code, swinging the door open and fishing for his phone inside his gym bag.

"Ransom."

"Morning. Hey, listen, we might have a case from a few months ago that's similar to our two vics."

Reed threw his towel over his shoulder as he sat on the bench. *Similar?* "Well, I know it's not a pair of missing eyes. We would have heard about that." The Cincinnati detectives all had their own cases and they didn't always share specifics. But something unusual and grisly like an enucleation? Yeah, that would get around.

"No, it's the brand."

"The leaf?"

"Yup. Get in here and I'll fill you in."

Forty-five minutes later, Reed found Ransom in Sergeant Valenti's office, along with Trent Duffy, an older detective who'd worked with Zach before he'd left. Sergeant Valenti wasn't there and Ransom had his feet up on the desk, eating a bagel slathered in cream cheese. He nodded at Reed as

Reed took a seat in a chair next to them.

Ransom handed a file to Reed and he opened it. “I came in early this morning and started looking through the database for any similar crimes in surrounding areas.” Reed nodded. It was protocol for any murder, but especially one where the suspect had left a calling card. “There have been enucleations in other cases, but none recently, and none close by. And the black paint? That’s new. I didn’t find anything similar to that in *any* case, recent or otherwise.” Reed flipped through the file as Ransom spoke. He stopped on a photograph of a small red brand. “But the leaf brand? That got a hit.”

“Margo Whiting,” Reed read, looking at the photo of the deceased woman. “It was your case, Duffy?”

“Yup. Pretty recent too. Forty-six-year-old hooker took a tumble off a fifth-floor balcony. There were rumors that she’d had a public altercation with her pimp and that he might have pushed her.” He pointed to the file. “Name’s in there. There was no evidence he was at her place that day, but we questioned him. Real asshole. Unfortunately, I couldn’t arrest him on that alone.”

“Forty-six? *Christ*,” Reed muttered. He’d seen some twenty-year-old sex workers who looked twice their age. That sort of work, mixed with the inevitable drug use, aged the body in drastic and cringe-worthy ways. He

didn't even want to think about what it did to a soul. "What made you think she hadn't jumped of her own accord? Was it the brand?"

"No, actually, I didn't think much of that. It was fresh, we knew that from her autopsy, but she also had a couple of tattoos that were done somewhat recently. Her whole body was a canvas of ink and piercings. It was very possible she'd had that put there herself." He looked at Ransom. "Do you know there's this kid who works the window at the coffee joint up the street who has his whole neck laced up with some kind of leather string?" He tipped his head back, using his finger to zigzag across his throat from base to chin. "It threads from one hole to another all the way to the top. If my kid did that, I'd break my foot off in his ass."

"You're a dad for the ages, Duff. When does your parenting book release?"

"Yeah, you're funny. Wait until you have a few little Ransoms of your own. Then you can critique my parenting. Kids need discipline, you ignorant motherfucker."

Ransom looked up, stroking his chin. "Little Ransoms populating the earth. Beautiful thought, isn't it?"

Duffy made a snorting sound. "It's a thought, all right. How'd you get the name Ransom anyway?"

"My mom found it in a book titled, *Dope-Ass Names for Your Badass*

Baby.”

Reed chuckled. “All right, focus, dipshits.” He leaned forward. “Who did Margo Whiting’s autopsy?”

“Dr. Egan.”

That’s why Dr. Westbrook hadn’t recognized the brand on Steven Sadowski, Reed thought. It was one of the reasons the database was so useful. No one person had to be responsible for all the case information, but they all could access it, and cross-reference when necessary.

Ransom handed Reed the printouts of the brand on the back of Steven Sadowski’s neck and the man found in the alleyway. “They’re definitely the same,” Ransom noted.

Reed looked between the three of them before nodding. “I agree.” He looked up at his two co-workers. “So why the different MO? Something connects these three victims, and yet this one”—he tapped on the photo of Margo Whiting—“died in a completely different manner. She either jumped or was pushed. We don’t even know if it was a murder, just that she was branded the same as these two eyeless murder victims.”

They looked between each other. “Yeah, I got nothing,” Ransom said.

“Margo was killed in a different part of town than our second murder victim, but they both led street lives. Any chance there’s a connection there?”

“We can show her picture around to people who knew him and vice

versa,” Ransom said.

Reed nodded. “It’s something.” He looked back at the three pictures side by side. What did this leaf brand mean? What connected these three dead people, two murdered in violent, heinous ways, the third a potential suicide victim? Or was it that the killer had meant to take her eyes as well but either hadn’t had the time, or been thwarted in some way?

Reed looked at the date she’d been murdered. *Three months ago*. “If this was his first victim, and the two men were his second and third, it’s possible he’s advancing, that his fantasy is developing.”

“If that’s the case,” Duffy said, “he’s only just getting started.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Liza couldn't sleep. She huffed out a breath, turning over and trying to make herself more comfortable. But after a minute, her eyes opened and she looked around her room, softly lit by a small lamp on her bedside table.

It had begun to rain about thirty minutes before and the soft pitter-patter sounded on her windows. Usually the rain lulled Liza, comforted her.

She turned onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, watching the shifting shapes of reflected rain patterns.

It was only a little past nine thirty, but she'd felt so incredibly exhausted, she'd gone to bed, and despite how tired she was, sleep eluded her.

She felt restless, confused.

She couldn't stop thinking about Reed Davies.

With a grunt of frustration that emanated from the back of her throat, she threw her covers aside, and swung her legs out of bed.

Liza padded to the kitchen, filling a glass of water and standing at the counter as she drank it. She went back over the conversation she'd had with Reed the day before. He'd figured her out, figured out exactly what she'd been doing in that stairwell, and it'd shamed her to her core. It felt deeply personal, like he'd seen her naked. Which was hilarious considering he had *literally* seen her naked and bent over his bed. But, she'd felt ten times more

exposed the day before in her office as he spoke one of her secret shames aloud.

And yet, Reed was right to question her. How must it have looked to them as they'd watched her enter the building and take so long to climb three short flights of stairs? She could only imagine how she'd looked when she'd emerged—shaky, terrified. Because she had been. But she'd been proud too, because despite the pitch-black, she'd made it up those three floors. She had hoped the police wouldn't notice the lapse in time, but of course, they had. *Reed* had.

Yes, he saw things, Detective Davies. But then, she did too. She'd been forced to see, to be hypervigilant regarding every facial expression. To recognize which ones signaled coming danger, to notice the body language that meant shame and torture was inevitable. She might not be able to stop it every time, but at least she'd be prepared. Yes, Liza was a watcher.

And she was painfully aware that the *reasons* she was a watcher had *changed* her. Warped her.

But she'd hoped, *God, she'd hoped*, that seeing in such a way was also what made her a good doctor, a good *listener*, intuitive to the unspoken words of others.

Liza sighed, placing her glass in the sink. It was late, too late for this. Very quietly, she headed to her guest bedroom where she'd put a weighted

blanket in the closet. It had been an impulse buy a year before that she hadn't tried out, and it seemed like the perfect night to give it a go. She was desperate to shut her mind off.

She opened the closet, reached up and slid the blanket off the shelf, holding it against her chest as she turned.

Her father walked past the bedroom door.

Liza froze, her blood turning to ice in her veins.

Terror jackknifed, pounding so harshly that her vision went hazy.

No, no, God no.

It can't be.

It can't be.

She listened for another frozen moment, her ears pricked for any tiny sound. She thought she heard his footsteps in her hallway, moving toward her bedroom. She backed up slowly, stiffly, her muscles coiled tight, until she was standing in the closet.

She was shaking like a leaf as she reached out her hand, barely daring to breathe as she pulled the door closed, an inch at a time. *Please don't squeak, please don't squeak. Don't alert him.* The devil of her nightmares who she'd watched bleed out on a cold cellar floor.

Later—after the fire—they'd removed his charred remains.

Confusion drummed inside her. That had happened. Hadn't it?

Hadn't it?

She tried to hold her breath, but she couldn't for long and it came gusting from her mouth, blood pounding in her skull. *Please don't hear me. Please don't hear me.* Liza sank to the floor where she pulled her knees to her chest, trying to make herself as small as possible.

This can't be real. What's happening to me?

The closet was dark, but there was a thin shaft of light coming in from the room beyond. Liza watched it, her body held tense, teeth chattering with fear. *There's light in here. You're okay. You're okay.* After a few minutes, Liza heard her front door open, heard someone walk out, and close it behind him, his footsteps growing fainter as he moved away down the outside hallway, until they finally disappeared. She sat frozen, listening intently but there were no other sounds. Had he come in, gone to her room, seen she was gone and figured she wasn't home? Liza waited, her ears pricked for what felt like an hour, but was more likely ten minutes.

"He can't hurt you, you know," Mady whispered from the other side of the closet. "You're a grownup now."

Liza's shoulders dropped, a breath loosening in her chest and gusting softly from her lips. "He can try," she murmured to her sister, hiding there with her in the shadows.

"How can he do anything? He's dead. You need to think about this. But

first, you need to see if he's gone. Get your cell phone. It's on your bedside table and call 911. Go now before he comes back. He's unlocked the front door. Be brave. Go!"

Okay. Okay, Mady.

Liza stood, opening the closet door as slowly as she'd closed it. It didn't make a sound. She stood in the open doorway for a minute, listening to her quiet apartment until she got up the nerve to tiptoe to the bedroom door. She took a shaky but silent breath and peeked around the frame. The hallway was empty, but she could see from where she stood that the door was unlocked.

Liza ran quickly to the door, turning the lock with one quick flick of her wrist. Even though she'd heard him exit, heard his footsteps fade away, Liza bent and grabbed the heavy doorstop from the floor to use as a weapon as she moved down the hall to her room—and her phone.

A single white rose lay on her pillow.

Fear trembled through her. Fear and confusion. Deep dread.

Liza held back a scream as she reached for the phone on her bedside table.

"Liza?" His voice. She closed her eyes, took a steadying breath as she heard

Reed talking to the officer who had been searching her apartment. A minute later, Reed was there, rushing into the kitchen where she sat at her table, one of the officers that had arrived only twenty minutes before sitting across from her.

“Hey, Garrity,” Reed said and the officer nodded.

“Davies.”

“Hi,” she said, and she was relieved that her voice had finally stopped shaking.

He looked from Officer Garrity and back to her, not seeming to know whom to address. “What happened?” he asked, his eyes coming to rest on her face. He came around the table, pulled out the chair next to her, and positioned it so it was directly facing her. He leaned forward, his gaze washing over her features as he seemed to assess her well-being.

He looked so worried, so *stressed*, and even though Liza felt somewhat numb, her heart constricted in her chest, a sudden tightening that made her feel almost breathless. He cared about her. He did. And she shouldn’t be happy about that, but she was, and at the moment she wasn’t able to talk herself out of letting him. The backs of her eyes burned. She looked over at Officer Garrity who was filling out some paperwork he’d brought from a notebook on the table in front of him.

“My . . . my father was in my apartment tonight.” She shook her head. “I

mean, I thought it was my father, but it couldn't have been because my father's dead. So it . . . had to be someone else."

Reed's brow dipped. "Did you see this person? His face, I mean?"

"Just his profile. He walked past the door of the room I was in."

"And that's how you thought you recognized him? From his walk?"

"I . . . guess, yes. I just . . . it was him." Her voice broke and she cleared her throat. "I mean, his walk, the set of his chin . . ." Liza wrapped her arms around her body, hugging herself. God, she was cold. So cold.

"Okay. But it couldn't have been, because your father's no longer alive."

She met his eyes. "Right. No. It couldn't have been, but it . . . scared me."

"Of course it scared you. Someone broke into your apartment."

"It appears as though whoever it was, used a window in the office to enter the residence," Officer Garrity said, looking up momentarily from his paperwork.

Reed nodded at him and looked back at Liza. "Do you remember leaving that window open?"

She sighed. "I suppose I could have. I often open it when I work from home. I just can't remember." She rubbed at her temple. "Things have been . . . I've been . . . stressed I suppose. What happened at work and just . . .

personally.”

Reed pressed his lips together for a moment, watching her. “Okay. It’s understandable. So you saw him, hid, and then heard him leaving through the front door?”

Liza nodded. “I hid in the closet. He was looking straight ahead toward my bedroom, so he didn’t notice me.” She paused, a shiver running through her at the realization that if she hadn’t had trouble sleeping, hadn’t gotten up when she did and gone to the kitchen and then the guest room, she would have been in bed asleep. Right where he’d left the rose. She swallowed, hugging herself tighter. “After a few minutes I heard the front door unlock, open, and then close again. I heard his footsteps moving away outside. I came out of the closet a few minutes after that and engaged the lock again.” She took a big breath. “When I went to my bedroom to grab my phone and dial 911, I saw a single white rose on my pillow.”

“Does that have any significance to you? That particular flower?”

Liza shook her head.

“All right. I’m going to go take a quick look in your bedroom. There’ll be a criminalist here shortly to dust for prints.”

Liza nodded. “Thank you, Reed.”

His eyes lingered on her a moment before he gave her a slight smile meant to be comforting, and then left the room.

Her cell phone rang and she startled slightly, grabbing it off the table and connecting the call. *Chad.*

“Hey, sorry to call so late, but I’m doing a bit of work and I had a question—”

“Hi, Chad,” she said, turning her body slightly so she wasn’t looking directly at Officer Garrity as she took the call. “I’ll need to call you back.”

“Okay. Are you all right? You sound strange.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m okay. The police are here. A man broke into my apartment—”

“What the *hell?*”

“Chad, I’m okay. He didn’t hurt me. Listen, I really have to go. But since I have you on the line, will you let everyone at the hospital know I won’t be in tomorrow? I . . . I think I need a day off.”

“Of course you do. Jesus, Liza. Listen, I’m coming over. You shouldn’t be alone.”

“No, Chad, really—”

“Ms. Nolan?” The other officer named Foster, stepped into the room and she caught his eye, gesturing that she’d just be a second.

“Chad, I really have to go. Don’t come over. Everything’s okay. Thank you for passing along the message at work.” Liza hung up, placing her phone back on the table.

“Sorry about that,” she said to Officer Foster.

“No problem, ma’am. I completed the search of your apartment. There doesn’t seem to be another possibility as far as how the suspect entered other than that office window. I just need you to check through the rooms, make sure nothing is missing.”

Liza stood on legs that still felt like jelly. The adrenalin was draining from her body, leaving her weak and sort of spacey.

Reed came back into the room, his eyes doing a quick sweep of her as she walked toward him.

“Ms. Nolan’s going to do a walk-through and make sure nothing is missing,” Officer Foster said.

“I’ll go with her,” Reed said, coming up beside her. And somehow just his presence, the warmth of his body next to hers was a comfort and a strength. “Are you okay? Do you need some water?”

She pulled herself straight, taking in a big breath and letting it move through her body before she spoke. “No. I’m all right.”

They walked through the rooms of her apartment and Liza did a visual sweep of each space but didn’t see anything out of place. Her space looked completely untouched, and yet it felt utterly different to her. It felt defiled, something hanging in the air that made her want to escape the place that had always been a sanctuary. Her home. The place she’d filled with the basic

things she'd never had growing up—warm, clean blankets and cabinets full of food—and even things that simply made her happy like artwork and books, small treasures that didn't cost a lot but spoke to her heart. And now? Now *he'd been there* and it would never feel the same again.

No, not him. Not him. It couldn't be him. But someone.

A knock on the door startled her from her dark thoughts. “That’ll be the criminalist,” Reed said, heading for the door. She waited in the living room with the other officers and a minute later, Reed came in with a young woman wearing black cargo pants and a blue collared shirt with the CPD logo on it, holding a large, black case.

“This is Maria Vasquez. She’s going to bag the evidence in your room and dust for prints there, on the front door, and in your office where he might have touched something else that we can match for a print.”

Liza bobbed her head. She could only imagine this process was going to take a while, and she was so incredibly exhausted. She was honestly worried she might fall over right there. *Be careful what you wish for*, she thought as she remembered her desperate attempt at chasing sleep earlier that night. “I . . . think I’m going to go to a hotel. Can I just pack a couple of things?”

Reed frowned, started to say something, seemed to think better of it and nodded. “That’s not a bad idea. I’ll drive you.” He looked at the criminalist. “Will you take her to her room and help her grab the things she needs,

Maria?”

“Absolutely,” the woman said with a kind smile.

Liza was about to tell her that wasn't necessary, but, truthfully, she preferred not to be alone in her bedroom at the moment. So she nodded, and followed the woman from the room, her steps shaky, the fear in her body draining, but leaving behind an empty void.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Reed watched Liza disappear into her room with Maria. He turned and let out a gust of breath. This was the last place he'd expected to be tonight, and under circumstances he was still attempting to understand.

“We'll stay while Maria works,” Foster said. “And make sure the place is locked up when we leave.”

“Thanks—”

A knock sounded at the door. Reed turned, wondering if they'd sent another criminalist to help make things quicker. But when he pulled Liza's door open, Chad Headley was standing there, his clothes damp, hair wet and pushed back as if he'd just run across town through the rain. He looked surprised to see Reed.

“Officer Davies.”

Reed ignored the incorrect title. For some reason, he got the feeling it had been purposeful, meant to lower him somehow. *Smug asshole*. “Dr. Headley,” he said, standing back so the man could enter.

“I talked to Liza. It sounded like she needed me. Is she okay?”

A ripple of something Reed didn't want to name, and certainly didn't have a right to, moved down his spine. “She will be. She's shaken up, but okay.”

“Do you have any idea who the intruder was?”

“No. Liza initially thought it looked like her father, but that’s not possible as he’s deceased. Can you think of an older man—maybe someone you work with—who would have any reason to break into Dr. Nolan’s residence?”

“No. No idea.” But the man looked troubled suddenly.

“Chad? What are you doing here?” Liza stood in the hall, a travel bag in her hand as she looked at them.

Headley rushed to where she stood, taking her upper arms in his grasp.

“I was so worried.”

“I told you I was fine. Chad, really, you should go.”

Reed moved toward where they stood, holding out his hand for Liza’s bag, but she gave a small shake of her head. “I still need some stuff from the bathroom.”

“Where are you going?” Headley asked, a note of accusation to his tone.

Liza had obviously heard it too because she paused, her eyes narrowing. “I’m going to a hotel. Ree . . . Detective Davies is going to drive me there.”

Headley shot Reed a quick look. “I can drive you there. Even better, you can stay with me. Why stay at a hotel when you have a friend, Liza?”

“Thank you, Chad, but no. Please. You should go.” Liza looked back toward her bedroom. “Maria is going to help me gather a few more things.”

She looked at Reed. "I'll be ready in five minutes."

Headley opened his mouth to speak but Garrity interrupted them as he walked out into the hall. "Ms. Nolan, before you leave, I'll just need a few more pieces of information from you for the report."

"Okay. I'll get my things and then I'll be right with you." She glanced at Reed. "I'll be ready to go after that." She looked at Dr. Headley. "Thank you for coming, Chad. And for passing along my message at work."

Liza walked back toward her bedroom and Chad Headley turned fully to Reed. He offered Reed a tense smile, but there was a muscle twitching in his jaw and hostility in his gaze as he sized up Reed. *He's angry.* What was this? Some sort of pissing match?

"May I speak to you in private, Detective?"

Great, just what he wanted. "Sure." He turned and walked to the alcove outside Liza's office, stopping before they entered the room that needed to be dusted for fingerprints. He wondered if Headley's fingerprints were here. He was obviously familiar with where Liza lived.

Back away, Davies, he told himself.

Headley looked over his shoulder and then back at Reed. He leaned in closer. "Listen, I feel obligated to mention something to you about Liza."

Reed kept his expression neutral, but he was suddenly on guard. He knew instinctively he wasn't going to like what this man said.

Headley looked behind him quickly again. “I wouldn’t say anything except . . . well, you mentioned she thought it was her father who she saw in her apartment tonight and . . .” He let out a sigh. “Liza has a history of conjuring dead people. She speaks to her sister. Pretends she’s alive. Has entire conversations with her. A sister who died fifteen years ago.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m just wondering if you’re sure there was really anyone in her apartment tonight.”

There was the sound of movement directly around the corner of the vestibule, and then Liza stepped into the arched doorway, her eyes wide with what looked to Reed like . . . betrayal. Her gaze went directly to Headley. “How could you?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“Liza.” He moved toward her, reached out his arm, but she stepped backward, away from him.

“I trusted you,” she said so quietly Reed almost didn’t hear the words. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* His head was spinning. What was this?

Headley reached for her again, but she held her hand up and he halted. “Don’t,” she said. She looked at Reed. “I’m ready.”

Headley blew out a breath and started to say something to her, but Reed spoke before he could. “I think it’s best if you leave her alone for tonight, Doctor.”

For a minute it looked like the man was about to argue as he glanced between Reed and Liza, but then his shoulders slumped and he nodded. “You’ll make sure she’s set up in a safe hotel room?”

“I promise.”

He looked at Liza. “Call me if you need anything.”

She looked away and with a sigh, Headley turned and left her apartment.

“Ready?” he asked Liza and when she nodded, he guided her into the hall, moving slowly so Headley had plenty of time to get to his vehicle and drive away before they emerged from Liza’s building. They walked to Reed’s SUV, parked right out front. She looked pale, slightly shell-shocked, and her hands trembled in her lap. He left her to her thoughts, going over his own questions in his head.

Liza has a history of conjuring dead people. She speaks to her sister. Pretends she’s alive. Has entire conversations with her. A sister who died fifteen years ago.

Reed didn’t know *what* to think.

There was no way she’d imagined her father tonight . . . *was there?* He glanced over at her, body held rigid, hair falling loose of her ponytail, tendrils framing her face. She was still wearing the leggings and sweatshirt she must have gone to bed in. She looked very young and very scared.

Liza. Who are you? What happened to you?

“I’m not crazy,” she whispered, her eyes darting in his direction, though her head stayed facing forward.

Reed let out a breath. “Liza, you don’t have to tell me about it, except if it plays a part in what happened tonight.”

She shook her head, looked down at her hands twisting in her lap. “I know my sister’s dead. I know that, Reed. I’m not deluded.” She did turn her head toward him then, the look in her eyes so incredibly bleak. *Oh, Liza. Fuck.* She looked miserable. Ashamed. “I . . . we . . . had a difficult childhood. My sister . . . she . . . died when I was thirteen. I blamed myself. Sometimes I still do.” She looked back out the front windshield, the words coming hard. If she’d said them before in some form or another, it had been very rare, Reed could tell. This wasn’t a practiced story, or even one she seemed to know how to tell. She was picking and choosing her words, leaving things out, he was sure. And that was okay. Everything inside him was still, listening, absorbing. “Anyway, I . . . talk to her sometimes.” She shook her head. “When I’m stressed or unsure. Verbalizing my thoughts through her . . . helps me . . . I don’t know . . . clarify things.” She laughed softly, but it ended in a wince. “She was the only good thing in my life growing up, the person I both protected and turned to, and I suppose I still do that now. Even though she’s . . . gone. I can’t imagine how it sounds to you but . . . I’m not crazy.”

The rain outside started to fall again, splashing against the windshield, and Reed turned on the wipers. For a few minutes there was only the soft sound of the rain and the calming swoosh of the wiper blades. Reed took a moment to think about what she'd said, as the sadness of her confession trickled through him. All the things he knew about Liza Nolan swam together in his mind as he attempted to put together a fuller picture of the woman. A doctor, committed to helping those who had experienced trauma. A woman who'd experienced a difficult, perhaps even traumatic, childhood herself. A woman who was afraid of the dark. A woman who had sexual hang-ups she was attempting to work through by picking up random men in bars.

"I suppose you think I have no business treating patients," she said. She'd tried to infuse some humor into her tone, but it fell flat.

"I don't think that." He looked over at her, took in the outline of her profile, the reflection of the rain and the lights outside the window causing patterns to swirl and dance across her cheek. "You don't have to be perfect to be good at your job. Maybe it's better that you're not."

She blinked over at him and he swore he saw a spark of something that looked a whole hell of a lot like hope in her eyes. It sent a surge of protectiveness through him. Purpose. "I'm far from perfect."

He offered her a small smile. "I'd imagine it helps you relate to your patients, Liza. You know, there's a reason so many counselors at drug rehab

facilities are former addicts themselves. Who can help someone better than a person who's walked in their shoes? Who's more trustworthy to a person in pain? Someone who's never felt it, or someone who's been there, and crossed the bridge to the other side?"

Liza looked down and fiddled with the rings on her index finger for a moment, but her shoulders seemed to relax some. "It's probably more accurate to say I have one foot on the bridge and one foot on really shaky ground."

Not if you can joke about it, he thought. Even if it's done in pain. You're stronger than you think. Reed smiled. "Okay, but you're self-aware. You know the things you need to work on and you're actively doing that." Reed wanted to ask her if he'd helped her in that effort. If that night they'd shared had helped her. And if it had, he'd be glad for it, despite the small price he'd paid—the rejection, the disappointment—and he'd consider it a sacrifice worth making. But right then was not the time to bring that up. Not then, probably not ever.

"That's always the hard part though, isn't it? Knowing how to face your demons and then following through."

"Well, if what you're doing isn't working out so great, maybe you need to try something different."

Liza gazed over at him. Her eyes were tired, but her smile was gentle,

even a little teasing. “I thought I was supposed to be the doctor here.”

Reed grinned in response to the line she’d used when she’d first met him at Lakeside. “Yeah, but you’re still human,” he said, repeating his own line. “And even doctors can’t operate on themselves.”

Liza laughed and seemed almost surprised by the fact that she did. “How in the world are *you* so perfect, Reed Davies?”

He glanced at her, his face going serious. In response, hers did too. He looked back at the road. “I’m not perfect either.” He paused for a moment, his thumb rubbing the stitching on the steering wheel. “You might be surprised to know my father was a serial killer.”

He felt her eyes on him in the dim light of his car but didn’t look her way. “Are you . . . joking?”

Reed let out a huff of breath that he’d intended to be a laugh. “Sadly, no.”

“How . . . I mean . . . you were raised by a serial killer?”

“No. I was raised by loving parents right across the bridge in Kentucky. My biological father kidnapped and brutalized my birth mother for close to a year. I was the result, and she gave birth to me shackled to a basement wall in an abandoned building.” Liza stared, mouth falling open in shock. Hell, the words still shocked him. The stark truth of them. The atrocity they conjured. It still shocked him that he’d *been there*, though he obviously had no memory

of it. “My birth father took me from her and gave me to the couple who raised me. Josie, my birth mother, found me later but signed away parental rights.”

Liza looked forward as though processing what he’d told her. After a minute, she asked, “When did you find out?”

“When I was fourteen. They’d told me I was adopted before that, but sort of skated around the circumstances of my birth. They thought I was mature enough to handle the full truth when I was fourteen. I met Josie—my birth mom—when I was eighteen. She’s . . . remarkable. She sacrificed everything for me, so I could have a normal life. A loving home.”

“Wow. That’s . . . a lot to process.” She tilted her head, studying him for a moment. Outside, the rain dwindled to little more than mist. “Is that why you’re as noble as you are?”

“How do you mean?”

She shrugged. “You’re completely different than your birth father. If he was the quintessential bad guy, you’re the polar opposite. You’re the good guy, Reed Davies. And I think somehow that’s . . . important to you.”

He pretended to grimace. “Ouch. A good guy. Don’t they always finish last?”

Liza laughed, and shook her head. “Not you,” she said, and there was something soft in her voice that he hoped he’d hear again.

All right, so she was a good detective herself. She'd read him right, seen that need in him to somehow counterbalance the sins of his father. It *was* important to him. Although he came up short, again and again. "I'm not so noble," he murmured.

"Yes, you are," she said, and there was a smile in her voice right before she brought her hand up, covering a big yawn.

"You're tired," he said, as the light they were sitting at turned from red to green and he pulled through the intersection.

"Yes," she said. "And I have noticed that you've been driving in circles around the downtown area. Did you have an actual hotel in mind?" She raised a brow and smiled over at him.

He smiled back. "Yes. I'm taking you to one near my apartment so if you need anything I can be there quickly. I was just enjoying spending time with you. Talking."

"Me too," she said softly. "Thank you."

He pulled into the parking garage of a large downtown hotel, driving up the ramp and pulling into a space. He shut off the engine and turned to her. "Can I ask you one last question? It might be sort of personal."

Liza gave him a slight smile. "All right. I asked you a few personal questions. I guess it's only right that I offer the same."

"Look who's noble now."

She laughed and Reed's stomach gave a small jolt. God, what was it about her laugh that got to him the way it did? "What is it, Detective?"

"That scar," he said softly, his gaze going to the pale pink line across her throat, barely visible in the low light of the parking garage. "Does it have anything to do with losing your sister?"

Her hand fluttered there as if unconsciously, but just as quickly she seemed to become aware of the movement, her hand dropping to her lap where she laced her fingers together. She swallowed, nodded. "My brother he, uh, he killed my father. He . . . tried to kill me too, but I survived. He didn't quite cut deep enough." She swallowed again, her eyes drifting off behind him as though seeing into the past. "He set the house on fire and my sister died inside. I tried to . . . save her. I tried, but the fire was too hot . . . too . . . intense. There was so much smoke. I . . . couldn't see."

Oh God.

"I'm so sorry, Liza," he said, his voice hoarse as though he'd somehow breathed in some of that smoke she spoke of.

She gave him the ghost of a smile. "Thank you." She reached over and touched his hand. A frisson of electricity passed between them. He felt it and he saw by her conflicted expression that she did too. Her eyes met his as she drew her hand away. "For everything. You've been . . . nicer to me than I deserve."

“You deserve more than you think you do.” Their eyes held for a few moments before he looked away. “Anyway, you’ve gotta be exhausted. Let me help you up to a room and then I’ll leave you to get some sleep.”

Fifteen minutes later, key card in hand, they boarded the elevator to the floor her room was on. They rode in silence, Reed remembering the first time they’d been in an elevator together. Her eyes darted to his, cheeks flushing, and he thought she was probably thinking about the same thing. When the door opened, he held out his hand. “After you,” he said, his voice deeper than he’d intended, threaded with the recollection of that night.

He walked her to the door of her room and stood back as she opened it. She turned suddenly. “Reed, you . . . believe me, right? That someone was in my apartment tonight?”

“Of course I believe you.”

Liza licked her lips, nodded. She blew out a breath.

“I’m going to do some checking tomorrow, see if there were any other break-ins in the area, things of that nature. Give me your cell number and I’ll call you with any updates.”

“Okay.” She reached into her purse and brought out a business card with the Lakeside Hospital logo on it. “The after-hours number listed is my cell number,” she said as he took it from her. “Thank you, Reed, for . . . everything.”

He nodded once. “Go on in and lock the door. I’ll wait until I hear the chain engage.”

“Okay.” She began to turn.

“Wait,” he said, leaning a shoulder on the doorframe. “Just one last question.”

She turned back, a small line between her eyes. “Yes?”

“Where’s the lake?”

For a moment she appeared confused, and then understanding lit her expression and she laughed. She brought her fingers to her lips as though wiping the smile away, and gave him a concerned look. “You didn’t see the lake, Detective?” She tilted her head, tapping her finger on her lips. *God, you’re pretty.*

“No. I didn’t see the lake.”

“Hmm. Very concerning. Maybe you should make an appointment in the morning.”

Reed grinned, pushing off the doorframe and taking a step back. Their gazes held. “Maybe I should. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Sleep well.” She ducked inside.

He waited until he heard the click of the lock, followed by the chain sliding into place, and then walked back toward the elevator. He didn’t want to leave her, could feel her pull even from a descending elevator car, and

dammit he'd enjoyed making her smile for a moment there. But he knew he had to go, knew it was for the best.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Everyone, have a seat please.” Sergeant Valenti walked to the front of the room, turning toward Reed, Ransom, and the three other detectives who had gathered to go over the murders of Steven Sadowski, Toby Resnick, and Margo Whiting.

“Detectives Davies and Carlyle are managing these cases, but we’re going to need several hands on deck to do the footwork necessary to check into any and all leads. This case could escalate fast and we want to get ahead of it if we can.”

“Sir, are we thinking we have a serial killer on our hands here?” Detective Rob Olson asked.

“Maybe. We usually hesitate to name a suspect a serial killer until there are three victims, but despite that the MO on one of the victims”—he pointed behind him where the victims’ names and photos and all relevant information to each case were hung up, tapping on the photo of Margo Whiting—“is different, the brand they all share links them to the same killer. And we are dealing with someone who is experiencing abnormal psychological gratification through his murders.” He looked around. “For now, internally, we’re going to operate under the assumption that the killer is one person, and that he is in fact progressing in his crimes. We are going to assume he *will*

strike again.”

There was a small murmuring in the room. Detective Jennifer Pagett raised her hand and the sergeant nodded in her direction. “Sir, is there any indication the three victims are connected in some way?”

The sergeant looked over at Reed, gesturing that he should join him, and Reed stood, answering Detective Pagett’s question. “As of now, we don’t have any fact-based evidence to support a definitive connection. However, what we do know is that Mr. Sadowski worked in the mental health field, Toby Resnick somehow obtained medications generally prescribed to those with mental health conditions, and Margo Whiting had a prescription for an anti-depressant present in her apartment. There’s a link to the mental health field there, though it’s nothing direct.

“Any other questions about what we have so far?” Reed asked.

“Why the different methods of killing?”

“We don’t know. We’re assuming there’s something different about Margo Whiting, than there is with the other two victims killed by strangulation. But we can’t rule out the possibility that Ms. Whiting jumped to her death as she attempted to escape the suspect, or that he accidentally pushed her.”

“Same assumption—that something makes her different—regarding her eyes still being in her head?” Detective Olsen asked.

There was a murmur of laughter that dissipated quickly. “Yes. Same assumption. Although again, that could be circumstantial or accidental. If her death did not occur in the way the killer intended, it’s possible he wasn’t able to carry out the enucleation.”

The door opened and everyone in the room turned toward Zach Copeland. Reed smiled at him and waved him forward. “I’m sure you all know Lieutenant Copeland. I’ve asked him to come here today to talk about the profile of the person we’re looking for.”

Sergeant Valenti shook Zach’s hand quickly as he passed him, Sergeant Valenti leaving the room. Zach met Reed at the front and turned toward the other detectives, greeting them. He leaned back against the desk at the front and crossed his arms as Reed continued. “Lieutenant Copeland has a master’s in forensic science, and he was the lead detective on more than a hundred and fifty cases during his career, several of which dealt with serial killings.” Reed didn’t flinch as he said the words, though internally, his heart sped up. Everyone in the room was very aware of Zach and Reed’s connection, and he was sure they were all thinking about the fact that one of those serial killers was Reed’s birth father. “I think he’ll be able to help us understand who we’re looking for.”

“Thanks, Detective Davies,” Zach said, turning back to the other detectives. “I’ll get right to it. We’re working with a *highly* organized

suspect. The fact that he's been able to avoid leaving DNA, and evade cameras, even while placing his victims in specific locations, indicates his crimes are carefully planned and strategically mapped out. He's likely been working on this for months. He is of above average intelligence, employed, perhaps even in a technical field, well-educated, and very controlled." He paused, glancing around. "These criminals are usually friendly, even charming, and are in possession of social graces."

"Sounds like my entire list of Facebook friends," Detective Olson said.

Zach chuckled. "Yes, with the exception being that this particular person kills people and removes their eyes. But you make a good point, and that's why these suspects can be so difficult to find. They blend in. They're very careful about blending in, cunning even."

"That's the scary part," Detective Pagett said, shaking her head and making her braids dance, the beads on the ends clinking together.

Reed didn't disagree. His own birth mother had trusted his birth father before he'd abducted, raped, and tortured her. He'd been her friend.

"Now as far as the crimes themselves, from what we know now, the killer's MO may be different. However, in the two cases where he strangled the victims and removed their eyes, it would be necessary for him to have a private location in which to carry out this mutilation. If he's married or cohabitates with someone, this could be somewhere on his property only he

goes, or perhaps a work facility of some type.”

“So the brand is part of his MO, like the enucleation?” Detective Olson asked. “Any idea behind the reasons for those things?”

“Those are actually signatures,” Zach said. “While the killer might refine his MO if he determines something else works better, he will almost certainly not change his signature. The signature is part of the killer’s fantasy and it serves a deep emotional or psychological need. Fantasies develop slowly over time and begin long before the first killing.”

“What sort of fantasies might surround the removal of eyeballs?” Ransom asked, reaching forward and plucking one of the donuts from the box in the middle of the table and demolishing half of it in one bite.

Zach uncrossed his arms and put his hands down on the desk behind him. “Well, it’s more than that, though, right? Do you have a photograph of one of the enucleated victims? We should have as many visuals as possible up on the board.”

“I do,” Reed said, opening the case folder in front of him and handing a large eight by ten to Zach. Zach walked around the desk and attached the photo to the board. They all took in the gruesome photograph of Steven Sadowski’s eyeless face, black paint pooling in the sockets and dripping down his cheeks.

“Jesus,” Detective Olson muttered.

“This killer’s fantasy not only involves removal of the eyes.” Zach tapped on the photo. “This black paint signifies something important to him too.”

“Black tears,” Detective Olsen murmured.

Zach looked over at him. “Maybe. Whatever the case, this paint means something vital to this person. He’s telling you a story. You have to figure out what that story is.”

The room was silent for a few beats as they absorbed that. “This is definitely a *man* we’re looking for?” Detective Pagett asked, looking between Lieutenant Copeland, Reed, and Ransom.

“Almost certainly,” Reed said. “The strength necessary to strangle two grown men from behind would have to be considerable. While Sadowski was not a large man, Toby Resnick was. And with the addition of adrenalin, he would have been even stronger. Plus, both men were placed in specific locations, different than wherever they were murdered and enucleated. That would mean that the suspect had to carry or maneuver their deceased body at least some distance.”

“So he’s a big motherfucker,” Ransom noted.

Zach smiled. “I don’t mean you’re looking for Sasquatch. I just mean that if you came face to face with him, you’d be well-matched, Detective Carlyle.”

Ransom grinned, holding up one arm to showcase his biceps.

“Any more questions for me while I’m here?” There were a few murmurs but no one spoke up. “Okay. If you think of anything, feel free to contact me. I’m happy to brainstorm.”

They all thanked Zach, and Reed stood, walking him to the door. “Thanks a lot for making time to come down here,” he said, holding out his hand.

Zach took it, wrapping both hands around his as he smiled. “Anytime. I’m always available.”

“I appreciate it. More than you know.” He nodded at Zach and Zach turned, heading out the door.

“Are we saying anything to the media about this yet?” Olson asked as Reed walked back to the front of the room.

“Not yet,” Reed said. “We’re hoping we don’t have to, but if we do, we’d like to be able to give the public something more solid.”

“In terms of?” Olson asked as the door opened in the back and their sergeant walked in the room.

“In terms of what to look out for, who this guy is targeting, etcetera.”

“Unfortunately,” Sergeant Valenti said, as he moved quickly to the front of the room, “we may have to go public with this sooner rather than later.” He looked at Reed. “We just got a call. Another dead body in a parking

garage downtown, same MO as the two dead men on that board.”

“Shit,” Ransom said, standing, placing his notebook under his arm, and grabbing a napkin and two donuts. “I was really hoping I’d never have to look at another DOA fitting those descriptions again.”

“No such luck, my friend,” the sergeant said, his expression grim. “No such fucking luck.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The deceased was sitting upright against the concrete wall in a corner of the parking garage, black eye sockets trained straight toward Reed and Ransom.

“Goddamn,” Ransom muttered. “I’m getting real fucking sick of this shit.”

“I’m sure this guy shares your sentiment, Detective,” Lewis said, sparing a glance up at Ransom.

Reed and Ransom squatted down next to the criminalist.

Lewis glanced at them as he dropped what looked like a piece of lint into a paper evidence bag. He confirmed for them that the victim had been garroted just the same as the other two male victims, and there was a fresh brand on the back of his neck.

“If he’s like the first guy, the eyeballs are down his pants,” Ransom said as they stood. Lewis gave them a curious look. “Didn’t want you to be surprised,” Ransom explained, though Reed had never seen the guy anything other than as cool as a cucumber, even now as he leaned over an eyeless corpse.

“Wasn’t planning on checking, but thanks for the warning.”

The first officer on the scene was standing at the back of the vehicle in the space next to the body, and as Reed and Ransom approached him, he

nodded at them. “Detectives.”

“Brendan, good to see you.”

He fidgeted nervously with his hat held in his hand and shifted from one foot to the other. “That’s some sick shit, huh?” he asked, jerking his head backward to indicate the body.

“Yeah. It is. The owner of this vehicle found him?”

Brendan nodded. “She’s over there with Marsh and a few other guys who showed up after we did. They’re from a different district.” Reed peered over the red SUV to see a woman in her late twenties or early thirties in leggings and a long sweatshirt, sitting on a concrete half wall with mascara streaked down her cheeks. Several officers stood around her and she was nodding at something Marsh said.

A disturbance near the entrance of the garage caught their attention. Looked like news people arguing with the officers who had the area blocked off.

Reed looked back at Brendan. “Thanks. The coroner should be here soon to pick up the body.”

They walked over to the small group and Reed introduced himself to the woman who stood to shake his hand. Her grip was limp and she looked as though she was at risk of falling over. “Sabrina McPhee.”

“Go ahead and have a seat where you were, ma’am.” He turned to

Marsh. “Would you mind grabbing her a bottle of water from over there?” Ransom asked, pointing to a well-lit elevator bank with a couple of vending machines. He took a few dollar bills from his pocket and handed them to Marsh.

“Sure thing,” Marsh said, heading to the machines. The other two officers walked over to stand with Brendan.

“Can you tell us what happened this morning, ma’am?”

Marsh came back and handed her the bottle of water and she gave him a thin smile, twisting off the cap and taking a couple of big gulps. “Thank you,” she said to Marsh as he, too, went to join the other officers.

“Uh, sorry, um. Well, there’s not a lot to tell. I came down the elevator to leave for my studio like I do every morning. Same time. I’m a painter. I have an art studio about ten minutes from here. I’m self-employed but I try to be very regimented about when I work, otherwise”—she let out a small laugh that sounded a hint away from hysteria—“it’s too easy to let the day get away from me without getting any work done.” She looked between them and they nodded. “Anyway, I was holding a mug of coffee and a bag with some supplies. I walked around my car to the driver’s seat and that’s when I spotted . . . him.” She took another drink of the water. “Scared me half to death. I screamed and dropped my coffee.” She pointed to a spot near the back of her parked vehicle where there was still a large, dark stain on the

concrete. “I ran back to the elevators and called 911 from right over there.” She indicated the same spot where Marsh had just bought the bottle of water.

“Was there anyone else in the garage? Anything that seemed out of place?” Ransom asked.

“You mean other than the zombie corpse waiting for me next to my car?” She shuddered, her hands wrapping around the half-empty water bottle as if she was holding on to it like a lifeline. “No.”

Reed checked over his shoulder at her vehicle. “Is that an assigned spot?”

“Yes. All the spots on this floor are assigned to residents of the building. Visitors and delivery people park on the lower level.”

“I hate to ask you this, but did you take a really good look at the victim? You’re sure you didn’t recognize him?”

“I got a pretty good look. I sort of froze for a minute at first, you know? And no, I mean, his eyes . . . they . . .” She shook her head and for a minute Reed thought she might cry. But she pulled her shoulders up and continued. “With his eyes . . . missing, and the black stuff on his face, it’s hard to tell, but offhand, no, I didn’t recognize him. We have a guy who works in the garage doing maintenance and whatnot, but he’s an Indian man named Arjun.”

Reed could agree the man propped against the wall was not Indian. Still,

they'd have to come back with a photo from the coroner once the victim was cleaned up just to be safe, but he didn't tell Sabrina McPhee that right then.

“Have you seen anything strange in your building or the parking garage in the last few weeks that might stand out as suspicious now?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” Her eyes darted over to where the body was. “God, how will I ever come down here again? It's like someone left that body just for me. Who would do that, detectives?” She looked back and forth between them.

“Reed!”

Reed startled, turning when he saw Daphne Dumont jogging toward him, her heels click-clacking on the concrete. She looked behind her several times before she made it to him, as if checking to see if anyone was after her. She'd obviously *somehow* slipped past the officers guarding the entry.

Great.

“Daphne, you're not supposed to be in here. This is a crime scene.”

“I know, I know,” she said breathlessly, flipping her blonde hair back. Daphne Dumont was a newscaster for one of the local networks. She was tenacious and single-minded when it came to tracking a story, though not without morals. Reed liked her. He'd even dated her for a few months a year or so before but it hadn't gone anywhere. He'd found himself feeling more obligated than excited to call her and had broken it off. She'd been annoyed,

and—he knew—hurt, but they’d moved on and had a good rapport now. “I saw you and slipped around the barrier. I didn’t think you’d mind. Can you give me any information about what’s going on here? Rumor has it—”

“Excuse me,” he said to Sabrina McPhee as he led Daphne away and nodded at Ransom to wrap up the interview. When he had her a few feet away by a large, square column, he said, “This is a serious situation, Daphne. There’s been a murder, and we can’t have you compromising the crime scene.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Reed. You *know* me.” She craned her neck over his shoulder but he stepped to the side, blocking her view of where several criminalists now worked around the DOA. She shot him an irritated glance. “Rumor has it there might be a serial killer on the loose in Cincinnati.”

“Where’d you hear this *rumor*?”

She flipped her hair again, bringing her chin up. “I can’t reveal my sources. Suffice it to say, I have *other* connections in the CPD, Reed. More than one, in fact.” She narrowed her eyes slightly and smirked at him. Her expression and the way she said it made him suspect the statement had been meant to make him jealous, but the only thing Reed felt was annoyance.

“Listen, I don’t have a statement right now. All I can tell you is that there’s been a murder and we’re investigating. Now you’ll need to leave so I can get back to work.”

“Fine,” she mumbled, chewing at her glossy lip. She glanced off to the side and then back at him. “Listen, if you want to get a cup of coffee sometime, call me, okay? We were both really busy last year, and maybe the timing wasn’t right, but I feel like we had a good thing.”

Shit. “Listen . . . Daphne, I’m really up to my eyeballs in work right now.” He suppressed a grimace at his own inopportune wording. Also, *Christ*, there was a dead man lying a few feet from where they stood.

“You don’t even have time for a cup of coffee?”

He pressed his lips together. He didn’t want to be unkind, but he didn’t want to lead her on either. “No. I’m sorry.”

Her face fell slightly, but she nodded. “I get it. I’ll get out of your hair. Hey, if you do have a statement, call me first, okay?”

“I will. I promise.”

She smiled, that light-up-the-screen grin she was known for. “Great. See ya.”

Daphne turned and so did Reed, walking back to where Ransom was standing, writing in his notebook. He saw Sabrina McPhee heading away, toward the door that led back to her apartment. She moved sort of awkwardly, as though she had a sprained ankle or some old injury. Hell, maybe she’d tripped over her own feet when she’d unexpectedly come across a dead body. And who could blame her? “Did you get Sabrina McPhee’s

information?”

“Yup. What did Daphne want?”

“Information. She didn’t get it from me.” Reed checked but didn’t see her walking toward the exit like he thought he would. He frowned, glancing around, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“You ready to get out of here?” Ransom asked, removing a donut wrapped in a napkin from his pocket. He peeled the napkin aside and took a bite. “I think we have everything we’re going to get until we hear more from Dr. Westbrook.”

Reed eyed the donut. “Really?”

“What? Donuts are delicious.”

Reed shook his head. “You enjoy that. I have a quick call to make and then we’ll get going.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

Reed walked back to where he’d stood with Daphne, using the column for some privacy as he dialed Liza’s cell number.

“Hi, Detective.”

Reed smiled. He couldn’t help liking that she’d recognized his number. “How are you?”

“I’m okay. I haven’t taken a day off in longer than I can remember. I’m finding it hard to figure out what to do with myself.”

“Rest and relax. You had a stressful night.”

“I’m trying. I’m also having an alarm installed. I think I’ll take a few days off to camp out here and let room service feed me while that gets done.”

He smiled. “Good. Hey, I was calling to update you on what the criminalists found.” Reed had heard from the lab earlier but hadn’t had a chance to call Liza before they got called to the murder scene he was currently at.

“Oh. Anything?”

“Unfortunately, no. They fingerprinted several surfaces in your bedroom, the doorknob, and the windowsill in your office, including a few surfaces in there too. The only prints they found were your own.”

“So, he wore gloves?”

“Possibly.” Reed glanced toward the officers still standing near the body and away. “Listen . . . is there any chance that the man who broke in your apartment was a patient?”

Liza paused. “All my patients are residents of Lakeside.”

“But surely you have patients you saw there who have since been released? An address isn’t that hard to get on the Internet.”

“Yes, you’re right. But . . . what reason would one of them have to break in to my apartment and leave me a rose?”

“A crush?”

There was another momentary silence. “I mean, I suppose. It happens on occasion, but . . . I can’t think of anyone specific right now.”

“Okay, well, if you do, will you let me know? I wouldn’t mind following up with anyone you think of who might be a possibility.”

“Okay. Thank you again, Reed. I did . . . well . . .”

Her voice faded away and Reed angled his body even more away from the hubbub of the crime scene. “Liza? What is it?”

She sighed. “I did want to mention one thing to you regarding last night.”

“What is it?”

“My brother, ah, I told you about my brother, about his crime.”

Reed closed his eyes. *His crime*. She was referring to the brutal murder of her father and her sister, and the attempted murder on herself. “Yes,” he said quietly.

“I got a notification in the mail a week or so ago telling me he’s being considered for parole. I didn’t look at the date on the letter. I was surprised and . . . upset by the news and I didn’t check that. I’m obviously not there now to do so, but it’s a possibility it was forwarded. I moved recently from another place across town to be closer to the hospital.”

“Paroled? Have you had any contact with him over the years?”

“No. None. I guess it’s just procedure to notify the victims? Anyway, I

thought I should let you know about that.”

“What’s his name?”

“Julian James Nolan.”

“All right. Thanks, Liza. I’ll check into it, okay? Hopefully he’s still locked up and you can rest easily on that front.”

“Yeah, some rest would be nice . . .” Her words faded away and Reed leaned in again as if that would help him pick up some sound on the other end that would clarify her thoughts.

“Oh my God,” she muttered.

His spine went straight. “Liza, what is it?”

“Breaking news.” She was silent for another moment and he could hear the very soft drone of what sounded like a television in the background that she’d just turned up. “Reed, are you there? At the crime scene downtown?”

He stilled. He hadn’t intended on telling her about this third victim found in the same condition as her boss in the wake of what she’d gone through last night. *And* until they knew who the victim was and might have reason to question her about the crime that was obviously committed by the same man who’d killed Steven Sadowski. “Yeah.” He sighed, figuring the news was reporting based on what vehicles could be seen entering the scene. When a body bag got pulled out of an ambulance, it was a sure sign there was a dead body. Generally, though, a murder with no details didn’t make the

news. For all they knew, a homeless person had OD'd, not that that wasn't sad in and of itself, but it generally wasn't breaking news.

"My God, it's the same," she said. "Reed, they're showing a picture of the body. It . . . it has no eyes. The same person did this."

He was suddenly on alert, his jaw tight as he looked around at all the people in the garage. But none of them looked out of place. "Liza, are you telling me there's a picture on the news of a body that looks just like Steven Sadowski's did?"

"Yes," she said, and she sounded slightly breathless. He heard a click. "I turned it off. But, Reed, my God, again? This is the third victim. They're saying there's a serial killer on the loose in Cincinnati."

"That picture was not supposed to get out. I'm so sorry you saw that. Someone leaked it. Listen, I have to go, okay? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. You go."

He hung up, sticking his phone in his pocket, and swearing violently under his breath. *Fucking Daphne*. She'd somehow snuck a picture while she was down in the garage.

And it'd only taken her five minutes to upload it to her news station so they could broadcast it out to the city using whatever hysteria-inducing language they thought would bring the best ratings.

He felt like throttling her.

Now the CPD had a big fucking mess on its hands.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Reed closed his door behind him and engaged the lock, rotating his shoulders in an attempt to work out the tension. What a clusterfuck the day had been.

He'd tried to call Daphne so he could chew her out, but as expected, she wasn't answering his calls, or returning his messages. Which verified exactly what he'd known. She'd snapped a picture of the victim when she'd snuck into the crime scene, uploaded it along with her unconfirmed theories, and completely upended their investigation. He and his team had spent the remainder of the day attempting to get in front of the mess and making statements to the media. The investigation itself had had to take a backseat. And they couldn't afford that. Not when the older a murder got—even by hours—the more difficult it became to collect information.

The less likely it was to be solved.

They didn't even know who the fuck the victim *was* yet.

With another muttered curse, seemingly his hundredth that day, he tossed his badge, wallet, and phone onto the kitchen counter, removing his gun and holster and placing those beside the other items.

The contents of his refrigerator spoke to his current lifestyle—a bottle of ketchup, a half-eaten burger still in its take-out box, an almost-empty bag of coffee beans, a shriveled apple, and two bottles of Heineken. He grabbed one

of the beers and shut his refrigerator, using an opener to flip off the cap and taking a long drink.

Reed leaned against his counter and rolled the cold bottle over his forehead, and then stretched his neck one more time. *Better.*

His phone rang and he glanced back at it, the word *Mom* flashing on the screen. He picked it up. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetheart. How are you?”

“I’m good.”

She paused. “You sound tired.”

He breathed out a small smile. Leave it to his mom to hear his exhaustion in two words over a telephone line. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I am. Long day.” Long week. Long . . . *month* as a matter of fact.

“Your father and I saw that murder victim found downtown. It was awful.” It sounded like she let out a shudder as she said the last word. “That’s the case you’re working, isn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, Lord.” She paused. “Any suspects yet?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

She sighed. “I won’t ask if you’re okay. I know it’s your job. But, gosh, to see that in person, Reed. It must have been gruesome. I just . . . it’s a mom’s instinct to protect her kids from things like that, and here you are, a

grown man who's a protector himself."

He smiled. "I'm okay, Mom. Really."

"I know you are. Still though, it's hard for me not to want to put my hand over your eyes and shield them like I used to do when something inappropriate came on a TV show we were watching." He could hear the nostalgic smile in her voice. The love.

"I appreciate it," he said, meaning it. "And I know you worry. But really, I'm okay. Just eager to catch the son of a . . . the SOB who's committing these crimes."

"I have faith you will. Are you coming for dinner on Sunday?"

"Yup, I'll be there."

"Okay, good. Can't wait to hug you. I love you, Reed."

"I love you too, Mom. Tell Dad hey."

"I will. Bye, sweetheart."

"Bye."

He stood there for a minute, feeling a little more settled. Yeah, he was a grown man, but it was nice to feel cared for, to receive the small reminder that he was loved and that if the job got to be too much on any given day, he had lots of listening ears to turn to.

As Reed tossed his phone back on the counter, his stomach growled. *Christ, when was the last time I ate?* He vaguely remembered inhaling a

Snickers somewhere around noon, after he'd talked to Liza and the proverbial shit had hit the fan. *Liza*. He briefly considered calling her, asking her if he could take her to dinner, but she'd said she was going to take the week to get some R&R, order room service . . . hell, it was way past dinnertime anyway. She'd probably eaten hours ago.

He wondered though . . . who cared for Liza? Did she have people she turned to when the weight of life's challenges became too heavy to carry alone? Or was that when she headed out to pick up a random man in some bar? His gut rolled. *Jealousy*. He had no right to it.

After putting in an order for Chicken Makhani at the Indian restaurant close by, he took his beer and his laptop to the couch. He sat down, kicked his feet up on the coffee table, and set his laptop on his thighs before logging in. It took him about twenty minutes to find out that Julian James Nolan had been paroled three days before.

He lifted his eyes from the screen, grabbing his beer from the side table and taking a long sip. *Fuck*. How did that fit in with someone breaking in to Liza's apartment, if it did at all? It seemed . . . coincidental though, and Reed was leery of coincidence. His job had taught him that.

His doorbell rang, and he set his laptop aside, answering the door to hot Chicken Makhani. He wolfed it down at the counter, thanking the food gods for Uber Eats and ten minutes later he was back on the couch, laptop in place,

second beer cracked, body re-fueled.

He did some online digging but couldn't find any information about Julian Nolan's current whereabouts. It'd only been three days though. He'd have to make a call in the morning to find out who his parole officer was.

He took a slow drink of his beer, his fingers tapping the side of his laptop. He hesitated very briefly, feeling a hint of guilt, but telling himself it was in the interest of Liza's safety that he look up more information on the nature of her brother's crime. If he was going to make a determination about how likely it was that the man broke in to her apartment and left a white rose on her pillow, he needed to find out more about who he was.

Reed did a search for Julian's name and a series of hits came up, mostly news articles dating back fifteen years before when Julian Nolan had been arrested for murder and arson. He'd been seventeen years old. A minor.

Reed read through each article, the knot in his stomach growing tighter and tighter as he learned the horrific details of the things Liza Nolan had suffered. When he'd read through them all, he closed his eyes, his chest constricted, his fingers falling from the keyboard.

Jesus.

He sat there in the quiet of his apartment for a few minutes, digesting what he'd read.

A picture formed in his mind both based on the particulars he'd taken in,

and the things he could surmise using his experience as a homicide detective who had entered homes a hundred times over, similar to the one described in the news pieces.

A house of horrors.

His lungs tightened, making it hard to breathe.

His mind filtered through the information, breaking it down into emotionless facts in an attempt to process it without letting it break him.

Elizabeth Nolan had grown up on the outskirts of a small poverty-stricken town near Dayton, Ohio. Her mother left when she was seven, her brother was eleven, and her little sister, Madelyn was just three. Her father, a pipe fitter by trade, was out of work more often than he was employed, and the family most often subsisted on food stamps, and the small amount of disability benefits Madelyn Nolan received for an undisclosed illness.

In court, Julian described their father as a drunk who flew into frequent and violent rages, becoming physically abusive with his children, including his sister Elizabeth, who was also the target of sexual abuse.

The children, who were quiet and kept to themselves, had few friends, if any.

On a cold night in February, Amos Nolan came home drunk, beat his eldest daughter, and dragged her to the root cellar where he often left one of his children for days at a time when he became angry at some slight or

another.

On that night, Julian Nolan, retrieved a carving knife from the kitchen, walked to the root cellar, came up behind his father and slit his throat from ear to ear. With his father dead, he moved on to his sister, slitting her throat in the same manner and leaving them both dead in the root cellar, or so he thought.

He then used gasoline and matches from the shed out back to set the house on fire, with his disabled sister Madelyn still inside.

By the time distant neighbors reported the blaze on the isolated property, it was too late. When firefighters arrived, the house had burned to the ground, and thirteen-year-old Elizabeth Nolan was unconscious in what had been the front yard. She'd lost almost half of her blood, suffered smoke inhalation, and had second-degree burns over the entirety of her hands and arms.

They later found Julian walking down the dirt road toward town. He surrendered easily, and admitted to the crime immediately.

His attorney used the defense that the abuse had caused his client to snap, though Julian Nolan showed no emotion in court, even when his sister Elizabeth took the stand, a bandage across her throat, her voice not yet healed from the wound that, had it gone a millimeter farther, would have ended her life.

A seventeen-year-old Julian received life in prison for his crimes, but in

fact, as of three days before, only served fifteen years of that sentence. Evidently, he had been an exemplary prisoner.

The crime must have been reported on the news all those years ago, but if it was, Reed had been blissfully unaware. While Liza was lying in a hospital, broken and brutalized, Reed had been going about his happy-go-lucky teenage life, playing baseball for his school team, hanging with his buddies, and working up the nerve to kiss his first girlfriend.

He felt sick, shaken to his core. No wonder, God, no *wonder* Liza was still attempting to work through her past. How had she made it out? How in the world was she still standing? A mixture of awe and *respect* burst through him like fireworks exploding in a darkened sky. He thought of his birth mother, of her seemingly impossible strength to endure, and he realized Liza shared that strength. He wondered if she even knew and suspected she didn't. She saw her weaknesses, and she still felt the pain of things that were not her fault. But he doubted she celebrated her courage, her mere survival. Instead, she covered her scar with clothing, jewelry, or—when unclothed—the fall of her hair. He hadn't even noticed it until they were in the bright light of her office, where her hand fluttered to it and away as shame altered her features.

He closed his computer, tossing it onto the couch next to him. He hesitated only a moment before he stood up and grabbed his jacket and his keys.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Liza pulled the robe more tightly around her body as she tiptoed toward the hotel room door where a knock had just sounded. Peering through the peephole, she let out a silent breath of relief even while her heart gave a small jolt. *Reed.*

Why did she always have that reaction to him?

He was gorgeous, and she allowed herself to watch him unawares, struck by his male beauty the same way she'd been that first night. Only, then, she hadn't known that he wasn't merely easy on the eyes, he saw things, looked beneath the surface of people in a way few others did. If she had known that about him, she would have turned the other way when he approached the bar.

At the thought of their potential non-meeting, a zing of panic passed between her ribs and she did her best to dismiss it. It wasn't right. She couldn't let herself feel that way.

Liza shifted on her feet, careful not to make a sound, and his eyes shot up to the peephole, his head tilting as if he'd felt her presence somehow. Why did he look so intense, even through the blurry circle that was barely big enough to allow her to see him with one eye? *Of course he looks intense*, she thought, *considering the case he's working*. They'd found another body just

that morning. The news media was in a frenzy over it. A small shudder went down her spine when she thought back to seeing the picture on the television earlier of the man who looked almost identical to the way she'd discovered Steven Sadowski.

He raised his hand to knock again and she stepped back, unlocking the door and opening it so he could enter. "Hi." Her eyes washed over his tight expression, now recognizing the worry that was also in his eyes. She frowned. "Are you okay?"

He dropped his arm and then raised it again, running a hand through his hair and leaving it sort of messy, sticking up on one side. She smiled internally and ignored the desire to smooth it back down, to feel it under her hand. She smoothed her palm over her thigh as if that might wipe away the need to reach out and touch him. "I looked up your brother."

Liza closed the door, turning back to face him again. A trill of nervousness skittered over the nape of her neck. "And?"

"He's out, Liza. He got released three days ago. I wanted to come by in person and tell you."

Liza swallowed. "Oh," she said and the word emerged as little more than breath. "Are . . . are you sure?" She walked toward the armoire that held the mini fridge on legs that were suddenly shaky.

Reed followed. "Yes. I won't be able to find out more until I get a call

back from his parole officer.”

She opened the fridge and removed a bottle of liquor, holding it up to Reed with a raise of her brows. He shook his head. “No thanks.”

Liza opened the bottle and poured the liquid into a glass from the shelf over the fridge, grimacing as she forced herself to swallow it. She’d have preferred a glass of wine, but at the moment, she wasn’t going to be picky. Certain occasions demanded a cocktail, like the ones where you learned the brother who’d tried to savagely murder you was a free man. “You think it was him? You think he broke into my apartment?”

“I don’t have an answer for that. I . . . there weren’t any recent pictures online. Liza . . . you thought it was your father, but is it possible that your brother looks like him now? It’s been fifteen years.”

Liza stared at him. *It’s been fifteen years.* He knew. He’d looked up the story. Her stomach sank. Shame spiraled within her, a tornado of pain. She leaned against the armoire behind her and shut her eyes for a moment.

“You looked up the news articles on the case.”

He hesitated for only a moment, his eyes moving over her face. “Yes.”

“Why?” The word was a broken croak.

“I thought it would be helpful to understand the nature of the crime your brother committed. It’s my job, Liza.”

She knew that. She couldn’t be angry at him for it. But she also couldn’t

deny the anguish she felt. Her eyes held his for a moment. “Is that the only reason? You wanted to know about Julian?”

“No,” he admitted. “It’s also because . . . I want to know *you*, Liza. I want to understand . . .” His words faded away as though he didn’t know how to finish that sentence.

“That’s not getting to know me.” She placed the glass down on the desk next to the armoire and raised her hands and dropped them. “That’s going around me. That’s not my story you read. That’s someone else’s version.”

“You’re right. It’s not. Those were just words on a page. Someone else’s interpretation. I know that. I didn’t look it up to hurt you. I did it because I care. I care about you.”

She could see that. His eyes were filled with it and it gutted her, made her want to fall into him. But she couldn’t, and she knew exactly how to make that sweet concern of his fade to mist. *Do it, Liza. Even if it hurts. Do it.* “You want to know *my* version?” she asked, picking up the glass again and throwing the liquid back. It burned, but not enough.

“Someday,” he said softly. “Whenever you want to talk about it.” *Someday.* But there could be no someday for them.

“Why not now? You already know all the high points. Let me just fill you in on the details.”

“Liza—”

“No. No. Don’t stop me now. I’m ready to open up. I’m ready to talk.” God, she was being such a bitch. She knew it and yet this feeling of wild desperation was clutching her insides, telling her to push *push push* him away. Make him run. And she couldn’t stop herself. Not now. “Those articles, I’ve read them all too. I know what they say. They say the Nolan children were abused by their alcoholic father. I was raped by my father, Reed.” He flinched and she was glad. He should know this. It was better for him. “I still smell him sometimes,” she said, and wrapped her arms around her body. She was shaking now, that deep, familiar chill rushing through her blood as the phantom scent of liquor, dirty sweat, and tobacco met her nose.

“Liza, you don’t have to—”

“No, I do. I do. See, I’d like to say the rapes were the worst of it for me, but that’d be a lie.” She sucked in air. “What else, let’s see? The articles said we were loners, right? No friends? That’s true. But it wasn’t just that we kept to ourselves. The other kids, they thought we were weird. They avoided us, made fun of us, because we smelled bad. Like unwashed clothes and body odor. See, in my house we didn’t have things like soap and laundry detergent. I tried to do the best I could but—” Her shoulders sagged, and she forced them up. Reed was just watching her now, a look of sorrow so powerful on his face she knew it would be tattooed on her heart forever, whether she wanted that or not.

And she didn't. She didn't want that.

“My sister, Mady, she had muscular dystrophy. It caused a progressive loss of motor control and she was losing the ability to walk. She needed a wheelchair, but of course, my father didn't have the money for that because he spent it on liquor and gambling. I couldn't help her, the most I could do was keep him away from her.”

Liza took a deep shuddery breath, dropping her hands to her sides.

“Let's see. The root cellar. That was mentioned, wasn't it? It was one of his favorite forms of punishment for crimes we never committed. He'd leave us locked in there in the pitch-black for days at a time. *Days*. Alone. With monsters as big as our imaginations could conjure. The rapes were better than that.”

“I'm so sorry.” His voice was guttural, filled with sincerity. His heart was in his eyes, she could see it.

“Is this what you were looking for?” she asked, quietly, shaking her head in answer to her own question. “That night you met me, is this what you hoped you'd find in a woman? Was this the *more* you were referring to?”

“I don't know how to answer that.”

“No, of course you don't. It's not a fair question.” She shook her head, suddenly exhausted. Weary to her bones. “*I* don't want to deal with this—to live with it every day—much less ask someone else to.”

“It’s not all you are, Liza.”

She leaned back against the armoire again, letting her head fall to the wood for a second, her gaze focused on the ceiling. “The thing about monsters in the dark, Reed, is that if you can’t escape them, you have to let them in. They force you to.”

“Not you. You didn’t let the monsters in. And you didn’t retreat into yourself either. You focused on Mady. You turned your mind to her, down there in the dark, didn’t you? You focused on your love for her. You get to own that.”

“Did I?” she murmured. “Not when it mattered. Not that night.” She brought her head forward, eyes locking on Reed’s soulful, pain-filled gaze. “The fire . . . I went inside for her but . . .” A shiver made her body convulse. “I didn’t even get badly burned. The flames were too hot. I turned *back*, Reed. I don’t even have scars.”

“Yes, you do. You do have scars.”

“This one?” she asked, bringing her hand to her throat. He started to shake his head but she went on. “This one doesn’t count. I can’t take credit. No”—she gave her own head a shake—“if I’d been brave, if I’d been *good*, I would have walked into the fire, no matter how hot. I left her there.”

“You don’t believe that, Liza. That’s your guilt talking. Your sister was most likely already dead of smoke inhalation,” he said very carefully. Very

gently. “You would have died too. If you’d have gone any farther into the fire, you’d be dead now.”

“Good!” she choked.

Reed took a step forward, his expression so incredibly pained. “No. That’s not true.” He let out a deep breath, his chest rising and falling.

“It is true. And now you get it.”

“Get what exactly?”

“Why I can’t manage a relationship with anyone, not even something casual. You’re a good man. You deserve someone without so much baggage.” She attempted a small smile, but it felt more like a grimace. “Think of all those sacrifices your birth mother made so you could live a normal life. A *good* life. I’m the last type of woman she’d have in mind for you. Don’t you see that?”

“No.”

“Oh, Reed, you’re—”

“You’ve had your say, Liza. Your story is heartbreaking. *Enraging*. And I am sorry to the depths of my soul that that happened to you. But let me speak now.”

She felt a moment of confusion. It was not the reaction she’d expected. She’d expected him to be out the door by now. He *should* be out the door, and here he was, standing in front of her, his gaze latched on to hers,

unblinking. “You think that story you just told is your weakness and your shame, but maybe it’s your greatest strength. My birth mother, Josie, figured out how to take control of her story, and she’d be cheering you on to do that too.” He reached out and took her fingers in his. His grip was warm, strong. Safe. “I’m cheering you on,” he finished quietly.

“Oh, Reed,” she said, a wash of tenderness making her feel even weaker. He was a natural savior. But she didn’t *want* this. Had no clue how to navigate this uncharted territory. “You’d have saved me if you could have, back then. I know that. You’d have saved your mother if you could have too. But it doesn’t work that way. We’re dealing with *now*.”

He tilted his head as if conceding her words. “No, it doesn’t work that way. And you’re right. I *would* have saved you if I could have. I would have flung that cellar door open and dragged you out of the dark. I would have done something for my mother if given the chance too. But I didn’t need to. Josie saved herself. And I see you trying to do the same. *That’s* what I see.”

Liza felt tears burn the backs of her eyes. Reed went on. “Don’t deny your past, Liza. It’s not your shame to carry. Grieve it, and then use it to strengthen others. You made it. You’re here, and I have no idea how, but you are. That’s the story I really want to hear. Maybe someday you’ll tell it to me, because I’d like to believe monsters don’t get the final say.”

Oh God. Pain welled in her chest, flowing through her blood, her bones,

down to her very marrow. She *hurt*. Everywhere. Fifteen years, three unimpressive foster homes later, a college diploma, a psychology degree, she still hurt. Still *feared*. Still *suffered*. God, she wished she could rise above it. *Be free*. But she wasn't, and sometimes she wondered if she ever truly would be.

"I can't," she said brokenly. "I'm sorry. You'll never know how much." She shook her head, closing her eyes against the empathy she saw in his. She didn't deserve it. "Go home, Reed."

Her heart beat hollowly in her chest as she heard him let out a quiet sigh. He didn't move for several moments and Liza got the sense he was waging some internal battle. But when she opened her eyes, Reed was walking away. She tried to tell herself she was relieved, but Liza had never been a liar, not even to herself.

Reed opened the door, paused as if he might look back, might give her some parting words. But in the end, he didn't. He walked through the door and let it close quietly behind him.

Liza walked to the bed, sinking down on it, and wrapping her arms around herself. She didn't want Reed's words to repeat in her head, but she couldn't shut them out, nor could she erase the way his eyes had looked as she recounted her story, not with the disgust she'd expected, but with some version of . . . love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Did the tech guys say what they’d found?” Ransom asked, approaching Reed where he was waiting for him in the hall at the Cincinnati Emergency Operations Center.

“No. Only that it was in regard to Steven Sadowski’s computer.”

Ransom glanced at him sideways as they walked toward the office on the floor where the computer technician working on Steven Sadowski’s computer had asked them to meet. “I hope it’s something good.”

Good would be relative in this case, but Reed hoped it was at the very least something useful.

“Detectives Carlyle and Davies here to see Micah Dorn,” Ransom said to the secretary at the front desk.

“He’s expecting you. Go on back.”

They thanked her and walked to the lab down the short hall. When they entered, Micah glanced back, standing to greet them. “Hey, Reed. Ransom.”

“Micah. How’s it going?” Ransom asked of the tall guy who looked more like a surfer dude than a computer geek with his curly, streaked blond hair, tanned skin, and wide shoulders.

“Good. You?”

“Not bad. What you got?”

He sat down and indicated two rolling chairs that Reed and Ransom pushed over to either side of Micah, taking a seat next to him. He had Steven Sadowski's laptop on the surface in front of him and moved a wireless mouse to click it on.

“Yeah, so we're a little backed up down here, but I got to Sadowski's computer yesterday. I looked in the obvious places last night, checking in the default photo directories and didn't find anything. This morning, after scouring the hard drive more closely, I found them. He'd obfuscated the photos by changing the extension, but it was the size of the files that caught my attention. When I changed it to .jpeg, *voila*. A whole slew of photos came up. He actually hid them fairly well for someone who presumably doesn't know computers.”

No shit. Reed leaned forward. “Kudos to him. What are they of?” he asked, though he was pretty damn sure he already knew.

“Naked women. It appears that the subjects are unaware of being photographed. Most of them are in what look like locker rooms and bathrooms. Some might be underage, it's hard to tell.” He opened a folder, clicking on the first photo of a young woman, naked, about to enter a shower stall. Micah used the arrow keys to scroll quickly through the rest of the photos, all of women in various stages of undress, clearly oblivious to being watched, much less photographed.

“Sick fuck,” Ransom muttered. “Those are hospital-issued towels. See the logo?” He pointed at the screen. “He *was* taking lewd pictures of psych ward patients without their knowledge.” He shook his head. “Thanks, Micah. Can you transfer those to a flash drive for us?”

Micah picked one up sitting near the back of his desk, handing it to Ransom. “Already did.”

“You’re the man,” Ransom said as they both stood.

“I’m still going through his Internet history and email accounts, referencing the case information you sent,” Micah went on. “If I find anything, I’ll give you a call.”

“Great. Thanks again.”

When they walked back into the hall, Reed looked at his phone. “We’ve got a meeting with the team in twenty minutes. Let’s talk about this new info when we get there.”

“Sounds good.”

Fifteen minutes later, Reed sat alone waiting for the other detectives to arrive, including Ransom who, if he knew his partner, had probably stopped along the way for some fast food. He took a sip from his coffee, hoping the caffeine would help his focus. His mind insisted on circling and re-circling the night before, the things he’d learned about Liza, the information she’d thrown at him. And that was exactly what she’d done—lobbed horrifying

personal details, expecting him to duck and run.

Part of him questioned whether he should. He didn't know her, not really. Sure, he felt a pull toward Liza that went beyond the physical. But that might be explained away by the job he'd chosen, and the reasons why. She hadn't been wrong when she'd said it was important to him to be noble, to protect, to rescue, to be a force of good in the world in whatever ways he could.

He needed to be careful, though. Not just in guarding his own heart, but in the effort to do what was best for her as well. Perhaps the last thing she needed was the pressure of him pursuing more from her than she was ready or willing to give.

Or maybe it was exactly what she needed. Maybe he needed to be bold enough to take the lead, because Liza never would.

Fuck.

He could understand her resentment at him for looking up her story. She'd tried to manage it herself. Tried to dole out the least information she could while still being truthful. She wanted to be in charge of what he learned and what he didn't. And how could he blame her for that? Not only was it her information to offer, but she didn't need to be comfortable telling anyone what she'd gone through. She owed him nothing and was embarrassed that he knew her most private horror anyway.

Reed scrubbed a hand down his face. He'd have to think about all that later. He had a job to do. And new evidence that could help them figure out their next move. Victims that deserved justice, and people, yet unknown to Reed, who might very well be in danger right that moment. Just as the thought crossed his mind, the door opened and Sergeant Valenti and Detective Pagett walked in, coffee cups in their hands as they greeted Reed and took a seat.

Ransom caught the door before it'd closed and entered as well, a Wendy's coffee cup in his hand, taking the seat next to Reed.

In light of everything that had happened in the past couple of days, they'd moved to a bigger room where they could display the information and evidence they'd obtained so far, and also keep a rolling whiteboard of pertinent media information.

Reed first updated the team about their visit to Micah that morning and what had been found on Steven Sadowski's computer.

"No way," Jennifer said. "What a dirtbag."

"No argument here," Reed said.

"Think the whole *peeping Tom*," Jennifer said, making air quotes, "deal has anything to do with the fact that the dude lost the eyeballs he did the peeping with?"

Reed shrugged. "Some sicko's idea of poetic justice? Anything's

possible. And if he was the only victim, I might say, likely. But it's just not clear how the others fit in."

"This is good," Sergeant Valenti said, tossing a file folder on the desk. "Because it's not the only piece of new information. We have the name of the victim found yesterday in the parking garage."

Reed sat up straight. "That came in last night?" he asked Jennifer, knowing she was the only one in the room who'd been on duty after the rest of them left the night before.

"Yeah," Jennifer said, taking a sip of her coffee. "I've been out this morning interviewing witnesses. I didn't know you'd be up so early. I figured I'd let you boys get your beauty sleep and update you when you came in. I'm beautiful enough as it is."

Reed smiled. "Thanks for that. Fill us in."

Jennifer walked to the front of the room where Steven Sadowski's and Toby Resnick's photos were hung, along with the information they had on each man. She drew a line, making a column for the victim they'd found in the parking garage the day before, and then removed a photo from the file she'd brought with her, taping it at the top. Three sets of sightless eyes stared into the room of CPD detectives who were attempting to bring them justice. On the board next to the one where Jennifer had just hung the photo, a picture of Margo Whiting, the prostitute with the same brand as the other three men,

but who'd died from a fall, hung by itself, separated because of the difference in MO.

"Clifford Schlomer," Jennifer said as she wrote the name under the man's photo. "Known as Cliff to friends and acquaintances, the former of which he seemed to have few. He ran a check-cashing slash payday loan business in Camp Washington."

"Camp Washington?" Ransom asked. "That's nowhere near the parking garage downtown where he was found."

"No, and he only lived three blocks from his business."

"Huh," Ransom muttered as he unwrapped a breakfast biscuit sandwich and took a bite. "Okay, what else?" he asked around the food, a smear of melted cheese gracing his upper lip.

"Dude, what is this? Animal House? Chew with your mouth closed, you heathen."

"Welcome to my world," Reed muttered.

Jennifer gave Reed a sympathetic look before turning and leaning against the edge of the table at the front. "His business received lots of ethics complaints. Nothing stuck. The last complaint filed was five months ago by Ted and Nellie Bradford. I paid them a visit this morning and then came straight here."

"Were they able to tell you anything?" Sergeant Valenti asked.

“Yeah. It turns out their thirty-year-old daughter, LuAnn, suffers from a mental illness. She’s usually pretty functional, even manages to work somewhat consistently. But she got involved with drugs a few years back, and it’s been a monkey on her back ever since. She lives in that halfway house on Spring Grove Avenue. New Hope?” She looked at Reed and Ransom for confirmation.

“Yeah. I know it,” Reed said as Ransom nodded.

“Anyway,” Jennifer went on, “her parents say they’ve offered to let her live with them, but she doesn’t care for the rules they insist upon. They’d noticed that things they had in their name for her—a phone, and some streaming accounts—went past due, and when they asked LuAnn about it, she told them about using the check cashing service several times when she needed an advance on her paycheck. They took fifty percent, and after going back a second time, she was quickly behind on her bills, and having to borrow money for food from the folks.”

“Yeah, sucks, but that’s how those places operate,” Sergeant Valenti said.

“The Bradfords—and from what I can tell from many of the other ethics complaints—charge that Cliff Schlomer takes advantage, specifically of the clientele at that halfway house. People say there’s always a line on the first of the month when disability checks come in. He not only takes fifty percent,

but he skims a little more off the top and if they notice, tells them it's some surcharge or another. They call the cops and when someone arrives, the complainant is yelling, practically incoherent, paranoid . . . you get the drift, and old Cliff"—she placed her hand over her heart—"is just a man trying to run an honest business. Terms are all up front, he says. It's not *his* fault if people don't read the fine print."

"Okay, yeah, we get the picture," Ransom said. "He was a bastard who took advantage of other people's weaknesses for profit."

Reed sat up straighter. "Similar to Toby Resnick, who apparently sold prescription medication originally prescribed to those with mental health disorders. Has anyone been able to track down the patients those prescriptions were made out to?"

"Not yet," Sergeant Valenti said. "Olson is working on that today. Unfortunately, the names are pretty common so not a lot to work with."

Reed tipped back slightly in his chair. "Okay, with the proof that Steven Sadowski was taking pornographic photos of female patients, we could have a connection between the three victims," he said, a clutching in his chest, the excitement that came with a possible breakthrough in a case, one that might lead to another breakthrough and another until the whole mystery unraveled. He set his chair upright with a small jolt, looking around at his fellow detectives and sergeant. "This killer is targeting those who targeted the

mentally ill.”

Reed’s mind was whirling, threads weaving together in some semblance of a pattern. But not one he could make out yet. They needed more.

“Okay, okay,” Ransom said. “It can’t be general, though, can it?”

“Meaning?” Sergeant Valenti asked.

“Meaning,” Jennifer answered, her gaze going between Reed and Ransom, “the killer *knew* about these three people somehow, became aware of what they were doing. How? Could *he* be one of the ones taken advantage of?”

“We need to gather as many names as possible of people who came into contact with these three, specifically those they victimized and start cross-referencing,” Reed said.

“On it,” Jennifer said, jotting a note in her notebook.

“And how does Whiting fit in? It doesn’t appear she lived a life where she’d have much opportunity to take advantage of *anyone*, nor had any reason to regularly interact with the mentally ill. If anything, she lived a life where she was more likely to be a victim.”

“We’ll keep gathering information on her,” Ransom said. “Maybe something will come up.” *Maybe*. Reed’s least favorite word.

Reed began collecting his things, glad they’d gathered a few more crumbs toward the case. But if what they were thinking was true, that those

preying on the disabled were being targeted, the perpetrator had a story to tell. And it may have only just begun. *But why? How were they linked?* A feeling of doom expanded in his chest that he had no way to explain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Reed and Ransom walked toward their car in the corner of the front lot at Lakeside Hospital. “Sophia Miller,” Ransom said, reading the name off the piece of paper holding the name and address of the girl who had filed the complaint against Steven Sadowski three years before when he’d worked at Valley Children’s Hospital, a mental health facility in nearby Kentucky, serving the needs of three to seventeen-year-olds.

“Have you ever been to Valley Hospital?” Reed asked, clicking the key fob and unlocking the doors of the city car.

Ransom shook his head. “No, but how much do you want to bet there’s no goddamned *valley* in sight?” He opened the car door, looking at Reed over the roof and tapping his index finger to his head. “They’re messing with people. It’s not right. I say we do an exposé on this. Blow the story wide open.”

Reed let out a small snort as he opened the driver side door and slid inside. “Before we dig in deep on that one, let’s go see what Sophia Miller has to say.” The car grumbled to life and Reed pulled out of the lot, sparing a glance up at the floor where Liza worked. He wondered if she’d come back to work today, or if she was still holed up in that hotel room. He forced his mind away. It wasn’t his business. He’d even resisted the urge to stop by her office

since he was at Lakeside requesting Steven Sadowski's personnel file.

Although he *had* made a call to a buddy who worked uniform patrol in the district where Liza lived and asked that he drive by her apartment during his shift and make sure he didn't spot anything unusual.

But that was just part of his job. At least that was what he was telling himself. And it was mostly true, so he decided to let himself slide.

"So, as it turns out, Sophia Miller wasn't lying about catching peeping Sadowski. I wonder why she recanted," Ransom mused.

Reed shook his head. "Maybe Sadowski pressured her to? If she was at the Children's Hospital, the most she could have been was seventeen. Maybe she just got scared. She was only a kid."

"Didn't the report say, she said she was angry because he confiscated her cigarettes? Even if she was seventeen, she wasn't old enough to *have* cigarettes."

"Thank God no one ever breaks laws, Detective Carlyle. Or we'd have a job or something."

"Point taken, smart-ass."

Reed pulled onto the highway heading toward the Brent Spence Bridge that crossed over into Kentucky where Sophia Miller lived. And coincidentally, close to where Reed had grown up in a quiet residential neighborhood at the end of a cul-de-sac.

“If Sadowski was twisted enough to take nude photos of underage patients, I can’t imagine he’d be above threatening one of them in some way if they threatened to expose him. No pun intended.”

“Is it wrong that I’m beginning to understand why someone would have a motive to strangle that dude?” Ransom asked.

Ransom said it sarcastically and off the cuff, but it was the age-old question all law enforcement grappled with at some point. Did people sometimes *deserve* the crimes committed against them? Was it wrong to pass that sort of judgment on a victim? Even a victim who’d perpetrated appalling acts? A victim who’d victimized others?

Law enforcement officers were only human. They couldn’t approach crime and victimhood as emotionless robots who felt nothing. Still, their job was to be as impartial as possible, gather the facts, and hand the decision-making over to a judge and jury.

Charles Hartsman had made the choice to be a *one-man* judge, jury, and executioner. On some level, Ransom’s question scared Reed, because it forced him to wade into waters his father had drowned in.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of a single-level family home in a quiet neighborhood in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. They walked to the door, Ransom pressing on the doorbell. They heard the chime ring within, and a minute later, footsteps could be heard approaching the door. When it

opened, a forty-something woman with blonde hair streaked with gray and pulled up in a bun opened the door, her expression morphing into confusion when she saw them.

“Ma’am, I’m Detective Ransom Carlyle, and this is my partner Detective Reed Davies. We’re here to ask Sophia Miller a few questions.”

The woman blinked at them, bringing her hand to her chest as she swallowed. “I’m Sophia’s mother, detectives.” She looked back and forth between them. “But my daughter, she’s deceased. What is this about?”

“Deceased? Oh, I’m sorry.” Ransom glanced at Reed. “Ma’am, may we come inside?”

The woman stepped back. “Uh, sure. Yes. Please.” She closed the door after they’d entered and then led them to a living room right off the small front foyer. The furniture looked new, but the room was obviously lived-in, made homey with throw pillows, knickknacks, and photographs adorning the cabinet that held the television. A high school graduation photo of a smiling girl with long blonde hair caught Reed’s eye, and he wondered if it was Sophia, but didn’t ask, not yet.

“I’m Arleen Miller, by the way,” she said as she sat in a chair across from the small couch where they each took a seat.

“I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us,” Ransom said. “And I’m sorry I was unaware of your daughter’s passing.”

“Thank you. Yes, Sophia passed a little over eight months ago.” She looked back over her shoulder at the photo of the girl in the cap and gown, confirming for Reed that it was in fact her daughter. “An overdose,” Arleen Miller said softly. She sighed, glancing at her nails for a moment, a frown lining her brow. “She’d had problems with drugs in the past, but she was getting her life back on track. She had a good job, seemed happy about the new man she was dating. And then, I came home from work one day and found her unconscious in her room. She’d overdosed.” She looked between Reed and Ransom. “I’ll never know if she meant to do it, or if it was an accident. Maybe in the end, it doesn’t matter.”

“Either way, it’s a terrible loss,” Reed said. She nodded sadly and he gave her a moment before asking, “Ma’am, your daughter had lodged a complaint against a staff member at Valley Children’s Hospital?”

Ms. Miller looked surprised for a moment. “Yes. That was years ago, though.” She looked behind them for a moment, her brow creasing again. “Sophia had . . . issues, detectives. She’d been sexually assaulted by a coach when she was in middle school. She’d never told anyone because he told her no one would believe her. A few other girls ended up reporting him and Sophia admitted she’d been one of his victims too. He got jail time, but Sophia was never the same after that. We tried counseling, even some medications to help her anxiety. Some of it worked, but only for a while.

When she was seventeen, she almost overdosed and I checked her into Valley Hospital.” Sadness took over her expression. “I did it to help her, and I came to regret that decision deeply.”

“Did she tell you about this staff member?” Ransom asked, his tone gentle.

Ms. Miller nodded. “She told me she’d caught him in the women’s showers snapping pictures with his phone. She told me she was going to turn him in.” She shook her head. “She wasn’t taken seriously by the hospital. I’m ashamed to say that even I questioned whether she was lying or just being paranoid. Sophia had whittled my trust down by that point, detectives. She lied when it suited her needs, she . . . twisted things. She was ill.” Ms. Miller’s shoulders dropped. “Anyway, my suspicions were confirmed when she later dropped the charges.”

“We don’t think she was lying, Ms. Miller.”

Her eyes widened as she tilted her head. “What?”

“One of the victims of a recent homicide was the man your daughter accused. There was a collection of photos found on his computer.”

Ms. Miller stared at them for several beats before she sank back into her chair. “Oh my God.” She appeared to digest that information before looking up. “Then why did she recant it?”

“We don’t have the answer to that.”

“No one believed her,” Ms. Miller muttered. “Again.” She closed her eyes for a moment, shaking her head.

Reed regarded Ms. Miller with sympathy. It appeared as though she’d tried her best to help her daughter. And now she lived with the regret of the decisions she’d made that might have played a part in her child’s demise. But Sophia had made her choices too.

“The boyfriend you mentioned, ma’am,” Ransom said. “What was his name?”

She frowned in thought for a moment. “I don’t remember. I only met him once. She just seemed happy. Maybe she was. I like to think so.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The early morning sky stretched before Liza, pearlescent and glowing above the charred remains of what once had been her family home. A juxtaposition of heaven, shining and gold-tinged, spanning far and wide over the desecrated lair of a long-dead demon.

She didn't think she was being overly dramatic. True evil had resided there. Who knew that better than she did?

She got out of her car, closing the door and leaning against it as her eyes roamed over the blackened shell. Grief swelled in her chest, an expanding balloon that moved up her throat, causing her to gasp out a breath. She could *feel* it, standing there—her old life. Her old *self*. The scared and traumatized girl who had once walked those floors, surviving, and not much more, day after day after day. It *hurt*. God, the memories hurt.

And she could feel her sister. A piece of Mady remained as well. So while these ruins spoke of horror and pain, this was also hallowed ground.

“You can do it, Liza,” Mady said. “Go look at it. You don't live there anymore.”

“You're not really here, Mady,” she murmured. “I wish you were.”

“Oh, but I am.” And Liza swore she heard her sister's laughter, a sound that existed outside the darkened recesses of her mind.

Although she knew it was only the wind that gusted over the hard-packed earth, swirling into the copse of trees beyond, it was the memory of Mady's laughter that allowed Liza to take in a full breath, convincing her feet to move forward.

It was only a forty-minute drive, but she felt like she was worlds away. She'd never traveled there before, and she wasn't sure what had compelled her to do it that morning, other than that she'd checked out of the hotel but wasn't quite ready to go back to her apartment. Then again, maybe she did know. Maybe it was Reed's words repeating in her head: *Don't deny your past. It's not your shame to carry. Grieve it and then use it to strengthen others.*

She wanted to do that. She did. But how? She'd diagnosed herself a thousand times over. She was well aware of the fallout her traumatic past had caused. It was the *moving forward* part that kept eluding her.

Monsters don't get the final say.

But don't they? Don't they always?

Her eyes followed the line of the brick chimney, still standing despite the blaze that had practically leveled the rest of the house. She squinted around at the overgrown bushes, practically as tall as the trees at each corner of the property.

She wasn't surprised that the land had remained empty. There was little

in the area to attract buyers. The once thriving small town in the Rust Belt had been decimated by deindustrialization and any remaining life was quickly being killed by the opioid epidemic.

Grief and ruin hung heavy in the air, even regardless of what had occurred on the Nolan land fifteen years before.

You made it, Liza. You're here, and I have no idea how, but you are. That's the story I really want to hear. Maybe someday you'll tell it to me.

A bird began to trill in one of the trees behind the house and the broken silence spurred Liza forward, to the front door where she'd once stood, her hand pressed to her throat, blood flowing between her fingers as a blazing inferno raged between her and the only person she'd ever truly loved.

She put her hand on the blackened frame, hanging her head as pain gripped her heart, seeming to penetrate clear through to her bones. She *ached*. God, she ached. "Oh, Mady," she breathed. "Please forgive me."

Liza stood there for a moment, listening to the sound of the wind. It brushed past her cheek, a caress, and she opened her eyes, this deep sense of inexplicable peace washing through her. She felt it. Mady was there. But not in the burnt-out husk that had once served as her coffin. No, *everywhere*, all around. *Free. She was perfect now. No longer chained by the circumstances of her birth and her cruel disease.*

With a deep intake of breath, she pushed off the blackened piece of

timber, walking slowly around the side of the foundation, overgrown with weeds and vines, toward the hole in the ground that had once served as her personal hell. She'd climbed out of it that night, but in some ways, she still resided there. In some ways, maybe part of her always would.

You didn't let the monsters in. And you didn't retreat into yourself either. You focused on Mady. You turned your mind to her, down there in the dark, didn't you? You focused on your love for her.

Did she? Was that true? She'd never thought of it that way but . . . maybe.

As she rounded the corner, a glint of metal in the trees caught her eye and she looked up, frowning when she saw a small silver trailer situated between two tall buckeyes, obscured from the front by the trees and the parts of the house still standing.

As she stood staring at it in confusion, the door swung open and a man appeared.

No, no, it can't be. A moan came up her throat. Don't hurt me.

Liza stepped back, almost tripping over her own feet. *Her father, it was her father.* She picked up a stick lying on the ground and began backing away.

He put his hands up, his eyes seemingly as wide with alarm as her own. "Wait, stop, I won't hurt you, Liza. Don't go."

Julian?

Oh God, it was her *brother*. The surprise of that realization caused her to halt.

He was moving toward her, only a few feet away now, and she saw that while the man Julian had become resembled their father, it was also clearly *not* him. But that didn't mean this man wasn't dangerous.

Liza waved the stick, calculating her chances of running back to her car and making it inside if he took chase. "Don't come any closer."

Julian stopped, putting his hands in his pockets. He was wiry and tall, just like their father, but Julian didn't appear to have the same strength their father had had. She could see his ribs beneath the white T-shirt he wore, and his cheekbones were starkly defined, causing shadows, and making him appear much older than his thirty-two years. He lowered his head, looking up at her with raised eyes. "I won't hurt you," he repeated.

"You broke into my home," she said, because she knew now it had been him. There was no doubt.

He dug his hands further into his pockets. "I didn't think you'd agree to see me. I just . . ." His words faded away as he raised his head, squinting up at the sky for a minute. "I feel her here. Do you?" He looked at her. "Mady."

Anger ratcheted through Liza and she stood straight. "Don't you dare say her name," she hissed. She used the stick to indicate what used to be their

home behind them. “You left her there to burn to death!” The last word emerged on a choke.

Julian shook his head. “I smothered her first. With a pillow. She was already dead when I set the fire.”

Liza shook her head, her brow knitting together. “What? No, you never said that at the trial.”

Julian shrugged. “Didn’t matter.”

Liza regarded him. He appeared small. Broken. *Old*. His eyes had that look that she recognized sometimes in her patients. He wasn’t all there.

Didn’t matter, he’d said. And maybe it *didn’t* matter. He had killed Mady, regardless. Taken the one person Liza had loved—an innocent child. He’d left Liza for dead.

She didn’t necessarily want it to, but her anger began to drain, and along with it, her fear. Still, she kept her distance, and she didn’t drop her makeshift weapon. “Why did you leave me the rose, Julian? And in my *house*? You scared me to death.”

He licked his chapped lips, chewed at them for a second. “I didn’t want to scare you. I just wanted to see you. To know you . . . survived.”

Her mouth fell open slightly. She didn’t even know what to say.

“I left you that rose because I wanted to say I was sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*?”

He lowered his gaze again. “Yeah. I shouldn’t have done it that way, all those years ago . . . that night. It wasn’t right. I get that now.”

“Why did you do it?” she whispered. “Just tell me that.”

He tilted his head, a line forming between his eyes. Eyes so much like their father’s, and yet so different too. Her father’s had been filled with malice, Julian’s were empty. Lost. He’d served time in that hole in the ground too. But he’d given in to the monsters. He’d let them lead him away. “To set you free,” he said. “I wanted to set you free.”

Liza stared, transfixed, barely able to breathe.

“I heard the things he did to you,” he said. “I saw your blood. You bled a lot.”

Liza’s stomach seized. Yes, she had bled, especially that first time. Her father had beaten her the next day, made her clean it up. She’d bled sometimes after that too, but only when he was especially angry. Especially violent. Her heart felt like it was shriveling. God, the memories were *ugly*. Brutal and graphic. What she’d lived through was so incredibly unspeakable. She’d told Reed some of it, but she knew, she *knew* that there would be small pieces she’d never share with another living soul. Because some of the things she’d done just to survive were so abhorrent and personal, they would never leave her lips. She wouldn’t even have the words. It was a kind of loneliness she’d carry all her days. Liza wasn’t certain of much, but she was certain of

that.

“He would have done it to Mady eventually,” he said. “You know it’s true.”

No, she thought. Not if I could have helped it. Never.

“Why didn’t you just kill *him* then, Julian?” she choked. “Why not kill our father and let us live?”

He squinted off in the distance for a moment. “He ruined you. And me. He was going to ruin her too. It was better that I set you free.”

He ruined you. Yes. He had, hadn’t he?

Ruined.

And there was no coming back from ruined. It was vile, and filthy, and *permanent*.

How could she ever have a normal relationship? How could anyone see her sexually after knowing the way she’d been victimized? *Picturing* it? How could she ever make herself worthy of someone’s love? Wouldn’t her filth rub off in a hundred different ways, leaving him defiled too? And how could she ask someone to make such a sacrifice?

That, that was what ruined meant.

Julian met her eyes again. “I’m not going to hurt you again, Liza. I see things differently now. I see that what I did hurt you too. That’s what I was trying to tell you with the rose.” He glanced at the burnt-out husk of a house.

“It was like this place . . . infected me. And then I got away and I wasn’t infected anymore.”

“But now you’re back,” she said. “Why?”

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Her gaze moved away from him, to the trailer in the grove of trees.

“You’re living there?”

“Yeah. You own this land, you know.” He dug his boot-clad toe into the dirt. “Suppose you could kick me off.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “You can have it. It’s all yours.”

“Yeah, well . . .”

When he didn’t take that thought anywhere, she cleared her throat.

“What will you do?”

Julian shrugged again. “Try to get some work. Hope people in this area will give me a chance.”

Liza was doubtful of that. The area was already struggling. And he was a felon. But Julian’s biggest obstacle was going to be his name. Small towns remembered things like that. “This probably isn’t the place for second chances, Julian. You should move away. Start somewhere new.”

“I can’t. Like I said, nowhere else to go.”

Liza thought about that, thought about the turns her own life had taken since that horrifying night, and a seed of something fragile and tenuous

sprouted inside of her. Thankfulness, maybe, though that didn't feel quite like the right word, not in the midst of all she'd lost. Maybe the best word was *recognition*. Recognition that he'd been a victim too. Recognition that he'd made a choice he'd believed would set his sisters free. *And now?* Recognition that in his very broken way, Julian had given her a future. *A chance to start again.*

"I'd better go."

Julian met her eyes. "Okay. It's good to see you, Liza. You grew up real beautiful." His eyes shifted away as though the words had shamed him.

She nodded once and then turned, tossing the stick to the side. She hesitated for a moment, turning back to her brother. "Hey, Julian? You did."

"Did what?"

"Set me free." She nodded at him. "You did do that."

His lips turned up ever so slightly.

And then Liza turned and walked away, leaving that scorched place behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Freya Gagnon raised her hand, rapping twice on the hotel suite door. She shifted on her feet, wiping a finger under her lip to make sure her gloss was perfectly in place. The escort company she worked for had made it clear this client had paid well for her company, and she was to make sure all his needs were met.

As she stood there waiting, she felt . . . *watched*. She shifted again, clutching the small purse she'd brought in both hands. Her eyes moved to the tiny peephole in the door and she got this feeling that the man who'd hired her was standing there now, studying her, maybe deciding whether she was up to par.

The chain inside fell with a small clink, and then the door began to open. Freya let out a breath of relief. She'd obviously been judged worthy. She pulled her shoulders back, adjusting her face into a wide smile.

A man stood there, older, but . . . *wow*. Her mouth almost fell open. This man did not represent her usual clientele. Her *usual* clientele had a soft middle and a receding hairline.

“Come in.” He smiled, sending a small jolt to her belly, standing back to let her enter. Freya did, giving him a coy smile as she passed, tossing her purse on the foyer table and stepping into the large open area, a stunning

view of Toronto laid out before her.

She turned, laughing when she found that he was much closer than she'd thought he'd be. She held out her hand. "Freya."

He smiled that dazzling smile again. "John."

John. Unlikely.

"What brings you to Canada, John?"

"I've always wanted to see Niagara Falls."

"It's amazing. You'll love it," she said, smiling.

"So I hear."

She glanced down at his hand for the telltale tan line on his ring finger and was surprised not to find one. When she met his eyes again, he was looking at her knowingly. "I don't like cheaters, Freya."

Okay. She gave him an uncomfortable smile and walked deeper into the room, turning toward him again and leaning back against the desk. She decided to cut straight to the chase. "What's on your palate tonight, *John?*"

He walked to where she was standing, keeping eye contact as he leaned toward her. Her breath came short, nipples hardening as he brushed his body against hers, opening the drawer next to where she stood and removing something. He leaned back and her eyes went to the object dangling from his index finger. *Handcuffs.*

Ah.

One of those.

“Am I the one being handcuffed, or am I the one doing the handcuffing?” she purred.

“Oh, I’m definitely the one doing the handcuffing,” he said, moving a finger over her cheek, reaching down and cupping her between her legs. Wow, okay, this guy didn’t waste any time.

Freya moaned, leaning her head back and giving him access to her neck. He leaned in, licking up her throat, taking her wrist in his hand and sliding the cold metal handcuff around it, clicking it into place.

“Ow,” she whispered. He leaned back, his eyes dark as he smiled at her. A strange tremble moved up her spine.

“Ready for some fun?” he asked, his voice velvety. Smooth. Hypnotic.

Freya shivered as she nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Freya slipped out of bed, glancing back at John, his shirt still on and a small piece of sheet covering his groin. It was too bad he’d never gotten fully undressed. She could see his body was honed under the thin material of his T-shirt. His arms were bent back over his head, the handcuffs looped around his wrists and attached to the heavy, ornate wooden bed.

She'd woken first and taken the opportunity to use his toy on him while he continued to sleep. Apparently she'd done a good job wearing him out the night before. He hadn't even stirred.

Freya allowed herself a moment to admire him. In his sleep he looked almost boyish. Sweet. Not the aloof man with the closed-off eyes she'd spent the night with. She wondered who he was and why he'd ordered *her*, when he could have brought home any number of women for free. Then again, men liked no-string nights like the one she'd provided him, and lucky for her they did, because she made a damn good living doing just that.

Freya used the bathroom, smiling to see that John was still in the same position he'd been in when she'd left the bed, and then walked to the desk where the room service menu was. She stood perusing it for a few minutes, her stomach growling. He'd given her quite the workout the night before, he owed her some sustenance now along with her payment.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said smoothly, causing her to jump and drop the room service menu, a small scream escaping her lips.

She turned to find him directly behind her. She laughed, putting a hand over her rapidly beating heart. She glanced over his shoulder at the bed where he'd just been, the silver cuffs hanging open on the bedpost. "What are you, Houdini?"

He smiled slowly, moving a piece of hair away from her face.

“Something like that. I don’t like being restrained, Freya.”

She suddenly felt nervous, scared, an unseen tension expanding in the air around them. “Sorry.” She gave him her most contrite expression, the one meant to soothe men with control issues. “I was just playing around.”

“I know you were.” He looked down at the room service menu and then back at her. There was something in his eyes, something that looked . . . barely controlled. Something that stirred up her fight or flight response. *Stay still, don’t move.* As quickly as it’d appeared, the tension dissipated. John flicked the menu, startling her. “Order yourself some breakfast and charge it to the room. I’ll pay on my way out. I have to get going.” He glanced out the window. Freya swallowed. He’d be on his way then . . . to Niagara Falls had he said?

She’d always liked Niagara Falls, liked that you could look right over those wondrous falls and see the United States.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Reed smeared a drop of peppermint oil beneath his nose, handing the bottle to Ransom as they walked toward the medical examiner's lab.

"Thanks for coming," Dr. Westbrook said, looking up from his work as they walked through the door. He put the instruments he was using on a small rolling table behind him and brought the sheet up over the cadaver. Reed kept his eyes on the doctor, preferring not to glance at the prone body on the table in front of him.

"Of course," Reed said. Dr. Westbrook had called them at the office just a half hour before, telling them he might have some information, but needed to show them first. "You said it might be pertaining to the recent murders?"

"It might. Hold on." Dr. Westbrook took off the gloves he was wearing and walked to the back of the lab, stopping at the large stainless steel sink to wash his hands. As he was drying them, he walked to a door that Reed knew led to a tiny office that held a desk and a few filing cabinets. When the doctor emerged a few seconds later, he was holding a file folder. He placed it on the empty gurney Reed and Ransom were standing in front of and flipped it open. Inside was the photograph of an obviously dead man, his head caved in on one side, his facial skin mostly missing on the other.

"Meet Mr. Doe," Dr. Westbrook said.

“Ouch. How’d that happen?” Ransom asked.

“He jumped to his death a few months ago,” Dr. Westbrook said. “Or fell, though I’m not sure how someone would accidentally fall from the edge of an overpass. He landed on the highway below and got run over by a couple of vehicles before traffic came to a halt and it was called in. I ruled it a suicide.”

“What makes you think this might be connected to the other murders?”

Dr. Westbrook picked up the close-up photograph of the man’s face, laying it aside. Underneath that was another photo and Reed and Ransom both leaned forward to determine what it was. To Reed, it looked like a blob of meaty flesh with some hair growing from it. “Is that . . . the back of his neck?” Reed asked, looking up at the doctor.

“Yes. Look closer.”

Reed did, his eyes lighting on a small portion of smooth skin amidst the carnage. “A brand,” he breathed.

“I thought something about the leaf brand looked familiar,” Dr. Westbrook said. “I couldn’t place it last week when you were here and I showed you the brand on the other victim’s neck, but it finally hit me this morning, so I looked up the pictures from this case. What do you think?” He pulled another picture from beneath the folder and handed it to Reed. It was the picture of the leaf brand on Steven Sadowski’s neck.

Reed held both photos up next to each other and they took a moment to look back and forth between the two. There was only an edge that could be seen clearly on the neck of the jumper, but the longer Reed compared the two, the more certain he became.

“I think they’re the same,” he said, glancing at Ransom for his take.

“Agreed. Shame we can’t identify him.”

Dr. Westbrook shook his head. “Unfortunately, his hands were so mutilated, I couldn’t even get prints. And no one reported him missing. At the time I figured he was most likely homeless. But it was hard to tell from his clothing after what happened to him. His clothes didn’t fare much better than his body did on that highway.”

“The brand had to be premortem,” Reed mused aloud. “An officer would have been on scene in minutes for a call like that.”

“The only thing I can say for sure is that it was new,” Dr. Westbrook said. “His skin hadn’t begun healing when he died.”

Reed studied the photo for another moment, but nothing else struck him. “Can we get a copy of this?” he asked, holding up the photograph of John Doe’s neck area.

Dr. Westbrook pulled an identical photo out of the file. “I figured you’d want one.” He handed the copy to Reed. “Let me know if you come up with any questions.”

“All right,” Ransom said, pinning the picture of the unnamed jumper up on the board next to the photograph of Margo Whiting. “For now, we’re separating these three victims”—he pointed to the board holding the photographs of the eyeless men—“with these two.” He tapped the board holding John Doe and Margo Whiting’s photos. “However, all five of them share the same leaf brand.”

Reed tapped his pen to his pad. Out of the team members currently working the case, they were the only ones in the office. They’d have to update the others about their visit to Dr. Westbrook later. “So, they’re two distinct groups, under some sort of umbrella,” he said, his eyes focused on the board and all the information they’d collected so far.

“They have to be, right?” Ransom asked.

“Maybe,” Reed answered. “Unless the two victims who died from a fall were mistakes. Maybe they ran from the suspect and fell, or maybe they ran from him and jumped before he had a chance to kill them and remove their eyes in the same manner as the others. We have to save that as a possibility. But it now seems more likely to me that their deaths were purposeful.”

“Why?” Ransom asked.

Reed looked at him. “Because there are two of them now. Two victims, same manner of death, same brand. Speaking of the brand, it had to be done beforehand. Dr. Westbrook could only say that it was new. But there’s no possibility the suspect had a chance to do it after John Doe’s fall.”

“True,” Ransom said. “So he brands these people when they’re alive, and then kills them in one of two ways afterward, either by pushing them to their death, or strangling them with a wire. And then the ones he strangles, he removes their eyes, sprays black paint into the sockets, and positions them.”

“Yes,” Reed answered. “The other question is, why brand these people when they’re alive?” When his partner furrowed his brow, he went on. “I mean, I see why with the victims who fell. There wasn’t opportunity to brand their body after death. But with these three”—he pointed to the three men with empty eye sockets—“it would have been easier to brand them at the same time he performed the enucleations. As it was, he’d have to have abducted them somehow—possibly at gunpoint—and then held them somewhere where he then branded them, and eventually strangled them to death.”

“So the strangulation wasn’t a surprise.”

“It might have been. But they were already being held somewhere. He branded them before they were killed.”

“Which means what?” Ransom asked.

Reed put his hands in his pockets, jangling the loose change he'd dropped in there after buying lunch, as he considered Ransom's question. "That he wanted them to know they were being marked. He wanted them to know what it meant before they died. And why."

"If only the dead could talk," Ransom muttered.

"If only," Reed agreed.

"Hey, Zach," Reed said, poking his head into his office.

Zach tossed the file he was looking through aside and smiled as Reed entered. "This is a surprise. What brings you to District Five?"

Reed sat down in the chair in front of Zach's desk. "You're not in the middle of something, are you?"

"Nothing that can't wait."

"I'm following up some leads in the area and thought I'd stop in and give you an update on the case."

"Ah. Great, yeah. I'd love to hear what you have so far."

Reed updated Zach on the new information, their theories so far, and what the team was working on at the moment. Normally, he wouldn't update a lieutenant in another district, but as he'd made Zach aware of the details of

the case and asked him to do a profile, if there was anything that might allow him to update that original picture, or perhaps expand upon it, he wanted to make sure that happened.

They discussed the particulars for a little while, but mostly went around the same circles he and Ransom had. They needed more, plain and simple.

And that tore Reed up, because he knew very well that “more” might be the discovery of another corpse.

At the thought, Reed pictured Liza as she’d looked in the video after making her way up the stairs in the dark and laid eyes on her boss’s eyeless body.

Zach cleared his throat, bringing Reed from his wandering thoughts. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, I know how distracted I am when I’m working a case.” He gave Reed a long look, leaning back in his chair. “I get the feeling the case isn’t the only reason you’re here.” He raised one dark brow.

Reed smiled. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I know you and because you’re Josie’s son. You both do this thing when there’s something you’re not saying . . .” He waved his hand around the general eye area, indicating *what*, Reed wasn’t sure. “Must be genetic.”

Reed chuckled. “Shit. I have a tell?”

“Probably only to a handful of people.”

They shared a smile. Reed tilted his head, conceding. “Okay, yeah.”

The older man remained quiet, giving Reed room to compose his thoughts. After a minute, he looked up at Zach and asked, “When you first met Josie, she was still suffering from the trauma of what happened to her.”

What my biological father did.

Zach studied Reed. “She was. It had been almost ten years though. She had a handle on it.”

Reed nodded, pressing his lips together. This was hard. They’d never discussed this before. “I assume though, that you had reservations? About getting involved with someone with her . . . issues.” *A victim of untold abuse and pain.*

Zach ran a finger over his bottom lip for a moment, considering Reed. “At first, yes. I was honest with myself about what I was getting into. But once I got to know her, once I had firsthand knowledge of her strength, I knew I’d be damn lucky if I got a front-row seat to experiencing it—experiencing *her*—every day for the rest of my life. I knew she’d bring that same fight to everything she did. Her marriage, her children, *life*. And she has. Your mother’s a born fighter, Reed. It just took a little while for her to see that in herself.”

Wow. Okay. He nodded, overcome, because he knew he’d been part of

that fight too. She'd fought for him, and then she'd continued fighting for him . . . even if it had been from afar.

Zach looked out the small window, appearing thoughtful. "Throughout the most horrific moments of her life, she followed the instinct to love. To protect. To save." He looked at Reed. "It kept her human. It anchored her heart, maybe even her mind, though I don't pretend to understand how a mind is lost."

Reed's throat felt clogged, and he didn't trust himself to speak.

"Some people are warriors," Zach went on. "Soul warriors. There's something stronger, less . . . breakable about them than others. You can knock them over, but they'll just keep getting up. Again and again." He looked back at Reed, his gaze intense. "I don't know what that ingredient is exactly or why some have it and others do not. But I know I've seen it. And I'm sure you have too."

Reed nodded. Yeah. Yeah, he had. He knew exactly what Zach was talking about. He knew victims. He worked with them every day. He saw the ones who were irreparably broken, and he saw the ones who were badly bent but still had fight in their eyes, dim though it may be.

He saw that same fight in Liza whether she recognized it about herself or not. Reed let out a sound that was half laugh, but mostly groan. "God, this woman, one look and she . . . flattens me."

Zach grimaced, though there was amusement in his eyes. “Shit,” he said, the grimace fading. “Yeah.” He said that as though he knew exactly what Reed was talking about, and Reed supposed he did. He shook his head, a look of understanding taking over his expression. “Basically, kid, you’re done for. I wish I had better news.”

Reed let out another pained chuckle that faded quickly. “What if I’m not . . .” Reed expelled a breath, looking down as he ran a hand through his hair. He looked back up at Zach. “What if I’m not up to the challenge?” *What if I’m not the right person for her? The man she needs?*

“Who better than you?” Zach asked softly, solemnly, a world of depth in his dark gaze.

Reed took in his meaning, felt it settle inside him. *Who better? Who better than the son of a woman who had shown him firsthand exactly what it meant to overcome? A woman who’d convinced him anything was possible, because she was a living example of the will of the human spirit to rise. Who better to recognize that same spirit in another and help her see it in herself?*

“I will say this, though,” Zach added. “Whoever this woman is, whatever her fight and whatever she faces it with, you’ll have to let her come to you. She’ll need that, and you will too, Reed. You can fight *with* her, but you can’t fight *for* her.”

Reed blew out a breath. Yeah, he’d had an instinct about that. And Zach

had confirmed it. It was the reason he'd left her hotel room when she'd told him to go. He'd thought an awful lot about Liza and what might be best for her, but from a purely selfish standpoint, he acknowledged that if anything was going to happen between them, he'd need to know it was her decision as well as his. He'd *need* that. A weight lifted, not because anything had been solved necessarily, but because he'd done what he could as far as he and Liza went. If anything was going to progress, she needed to make that move. It was out of his hands. "Thanks, Zach," he said, and he hoped the simple words conveyed how much.

"Anytime."

Reed stood up, moving toward the door when Zach called, "Hey, I almost forgot, did you see WLWT's morning news?"

Reed turned, his stomach sinking with the feeling he was not going to like what Zach was about to tell him. "Why?" He'd been trying to *avoid* the news for the past few days, the constant calls, the reporters hanging around outside the building where the city's detectives worked. They'd inspired hundreds of calls and tips from the public, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing if it amounted to something. But so far, all it'd accomplished was detectives being taken off the case so they could go on wild goose chases. It'd slowed them down to a significant degree, and they couldn't afford that right now.

Zach tapped the computer on the side of his desk, indicating the website of the popular local news station, Reed assumed. “They’re dubbing our guy, The Hollow-Eyed Killer.”

The Hollow-Eyed Killer? Great. Nice and spooky. Just the kind of press a sicko with delusions of grandeur would appreciate. “Awesome,” Reed sighed.

Zach’s chuckle was short-lived. “Yeah, I thought you’d like that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Liza turned the corner, coming up short as she almost collided into someone, jerking her coffee back and barely maneuvering her body so the coffee in her hand didn't slosh onto her pale gray sweater. "Oh, I'm so sorry—" Her words cut off when she saw who it was. *Chad.*

Liza stepped around him, continuing toward her office.

"Liza, wait," Chad said, hurrying to catch up to her. "Listen—"

"Stay away from me, Dr. Headley," she said quietly but with her teeth gritted as she picked up her pace.

"You're mad. I can understand why, but you have to see—"

She halted, turning toward him as he, too, came up short. "You had no right. *No* right to share my personal information with anyone. I trusted you, and you betrayed that trust."

To his benefit, he appeared at least mildly ashamed. "I was concerned about you and let it get the better of me. It won't happen again."

"No," Liza said. "It won't." She turned and walked the few steps to her office, closing the door behind her. She saw his shadow through the frosted portion of her upper door, and he appeared to deliberate knocking, but in the end, turned and walked away. Liza's shoulders relaxed as she sat down at her desk and opened her computer to look at the day's schedule. Three

appointments that morning, and two after lunch, followed by a group session. A full day.

Perfect. It was exactly what she needed.

In preparation, Liza pulled the files of the patients she'd be seeing, glancing through them quickly to make sure she was up to date, and that nothing had changed in the few days she'd been out of the office.

As Liza sipped her coffee, she went through the emails she'd missed, mostly concerning non-pressing administrative topics, answering the few that did need to be immediately addressed. When she was done with that, she began to put her computer to sleep, when she moved the cursor away from that command, opening up the web browser, and going to the front page of a local news station.

The lead story was about the man the media was now dubbing The Hollow-Eyed Killer. Liza felt her face do a strange sort of eye-rolling grimace. She wondered what Reed thought of that. She wasn't an expert on serial killers, preferring to work with the traumatized over the psychopathic, but she did know psychopaths would lap up that sort of attention. Even worse, it might inspire other psychopaths looking for similar attention. Notoriety.

Certainly the media knew that too. Apparently, they didn't care. Ratings always trumped integrity.

Liza scrolled down past the article, stopping at a photograph of the chief of police giving a news conference. Her gaze immediately went to the man in the suit to his right, standing with his hands linked in front of him, his expression grave. *Reed*. Her heart picked up its pace. Unconsciously she reached out, her fingers dropping before they touched the screen. She sighed. *Why are you doing this to yourself, Liza?* Still, she gave herself another moment to admire the handsome detective with the intelligent gaze. One of the good guys.

She needed to call Reed about her brother. She owed him—and the Cincinnati Police Department that had come to her aid when she'd called—an update on the break-in.

She clicked off the website and put her computer to sleep. Picking up her phone, she prepared to call Reed, almost *hoping* she'd receive his voicemail, but she startled as the sound of an alarm clanged in the hall outside her door. She stood quickly, flinging her office door open and looking out into the hallway where two security guards rushed past, followed by a couple of staff members who looked stricken.

What the heck?

Emergencies at the hospital weren't unheard of, but rarely did alarm bells sound on the administrative floors. This was something more serious than a patient who'd sharpened a straw and was threatening to stab a fellow

patient. Liza followed, catching up to a female nurse. “Do you know what’s going on?”

The woman gave Liza a quick glance. “A patient managed to grab one of the security officer’s guns in one of the common areas. He’s holding it to his head near the infirmary.”

Oh God.

“Any idea who it is?”

“I think it’s one of your patients, Dr. Nolan.”

“Mine? Do you . . .?”

Her question was answered when they rounded the corner and saw Simon Mullner sitting at the end of the hallway next to the door that led to the infirmary, a gun held to his head, tears streaking down his face.

Dr. Headley was standing a few feet in front of him, his hands held out as he apparently tried to talk to the crying man.

Liza’s heart lurched, her feet moving toward Chad before she’d really made the determination to do so. “Dr. Nolan,” the security guard standing against the wall hissed under his breath. “Not a good idea.”

Liza hesitated, but kept moving forward anyway. Chad must have heard the soft click of her heels on the floor because he glanced back, and when he saw her, his eyes opened wide, and he made a quick movement with his head indicating she should move back.

Liza gave Chad a small shake of her head. She felt his fingertips graze her arm as she moved around him, but she pulled away, moving toward Simon.

“Liza,” Chad said behind her, through what she could hear were clenched teeth. “Stay back. Liza.” He raised his voice slightly as he said her name again, his demand clear.

“Simon,” she said softly.

The man looked up at her through red, swollen eyes. “Don’t come near me,” he said, tapping the gun barrel against his scalp. “I’ll blow my brains out right here.”

Liza stopped, putting her hands up, showing submission. “Please don’t do that, Simon,” she said. “I just want to talk to you. I want to find out what made you so upset.” She took a step closer.

Simon let out a mucous-laden laugh, devoid of humor, using the hand not holding the gun to wipe his sleeve across his face. He made eye contact with her, and she could see that if he was medicated, it was not heavily. She hoped she could get through to him, and she didn’t have time to ask if his medication had been tweaked or changed while she was out. But if he was lucid enough to get that close to a security guard and remove his weapon, he might be lucid enough to reason with. Something had triggered this episode, and she was determined to find out what. But at the moment, she didn’t have

time for diagnostics. Here, in this moment, she only had her instincts to work with.

“What made me so upset?” Simon repeated. He tilted his head, watching her where she stood. “At least you know my name,” he said. He wiped his nose again, the gun jostling with his movement. Liza held her breath for a moment. “I appreciate that.” He removed the gun, looking behind her to where the other staff stood and waving it at them.

There was a general intake of fearful breath behind her and her stomach clenched again.

“None of them do,” he said. “None of them know my name.” He placed the gun back to his temple and looked at Liza again. “It’s because I’m nobody. I’m nobody at all.”

“That isn’t true, Simon.” She took a step closer, and then another. “Your name is Simon Thomas Mullner. You’re nineteen years old, and you were born here in Cincinnati, Ohio.” His gaze narrowed. She took another step, and then another until she was only a few feet from him. “May I sit down next to you, Simon?”

Simon glanced behind her again and shook his head, the movement of the gun making Liza want to cringe. *Breathe. Breathe.* From this close, she could see his hand shaking. If he got more agitated, squeezed that trigger, even accidentally, she was never going to be able to forgive herself. Liza took

a deep breath, suppressing her own trembling as well as she could, trying to appear in control for him. “You grew up with your mother after your father died in an auto accident.”

Simon let out a small sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob, swiping at his dripping nose again. Liza took another step toward him, going down on her knees. She heard Chad say her name again behind her and ignored him. Simon was talking to her, responding to her, and she was not going to leave him now.

“They don’t think you should be getting near me,” Simon said. “They’re right. You shouldn’t.”

Liza shook her head. “I don’t think they’re right,” she said. “I think they’re wrong. I don’t think you’re going to hurt me, Simon, and I don’t think you’re going to hurt yourself.”

His face screwed up for a moment and several new tears dripped down his cheeks. “You don’t know what I’m going to do. Sometimes even I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

She nodded. “I know what you mean. I do. It feels like other people have this idea of the world that doesn’t line up with your own. It makes you feel like an outsider. Almost like . . . almost like you’re an alien from another planet and you don’t belong.”

Simon sniffled, regarding her for a moment. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s it. Who

told you that? Did you read it in a book?" His eyes darted behind her. When she glanced back, she saw that Chad had taken a few steps forward. Simon waved the gun at him and as he did so, his arm flew in front of Liza too. Her skin prickled. "Stay back I said!" he yelled.

Damn it, she'd just started to get somewhere with him. She looked over her shoulder. "Go on, Dr. Headley. Leave us alone to talk please."

Chad's gaze whipped to Liza and then back to Simon. "No way."

"The guards are here," she said, moving her eyes to the guards standing down the hall. "They'll help us if we need it." She inclined her head back toward them. "Go on."

Chad paused for a moment, his lips pressed together so tightly, they almost disappeared in his face. After a weighted silence, he turned and walked back down the hall, his shoulders held stiffly. She saw him stop and whisper something to one of the guards, and then she turned back to Simon as his footsteps faded away behind her.

"You said *us*," he murmured, his head falling to the wall behind him. "But there's no *us*, there's just me. There's always been just me, and I'm so alone. I'll always be alone."

Liza licked her lips, thinking about what Simon had said the last time they'd been alone together in a session. *You don't see, you don't see*, he'd asserted. But she did see. Liza knew the feelings he was expressing because

she'd felt them too. The otherness, the deep loneliness, the aching hopelessness, and she suspected, the shame.

Liza would bet the whole farm that Simon's mother had been *less* than motherly to him. But like she'd told Reed about her own situation, knowing the basic outline of a story, and learning the details was a much different thing. *Much different.*

She sighed, scooting so close to him that her knees touched the toes of his feet. And for the first time in Liza's career, new though it still was, she didn't bring to mind a textbook, or someone else's theory, or some professor's talking points. She looked at the man in front of her, really looked, really *saw*, and she recalled what Reed had said to her: *Don't deny your past, Liza. It's not your shame to carry. Grieve it, and then use it to strengthen others.*

She had credibility, she realized suddenly. By virtue of what she'd experienced, she understood pain like only those who had been broken by it and learned to stand. She reached out and took Simon's hand not holding the gun. "I do see, Simon. I do. I know what it's like to feel pain so deep, you shut out reality, and create one of your own. I think your mother was unkind to you. My father was the one who hurt me. Can I tell you what it was like for me?"

"What it was like for . . . you?" he repeated.

Liza nodded. His eyes latched on to hers and she began to tell him her story.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Liza's lips curved into a smile as she got out of her car, staring at the apartment building where Reed lived. The building she'd been in *that night*, the one that now seemed like a lifetime ago. The one she'd run from, scared and confused about her feelings for the man who'd looked in her eyes and *seen* her though she'd done everything in her power to hide from him.

A shiver of nerves raced down her spine and she was tempted to jump back in her car and drive away, but she steeled herself and walked to the front entrance. She still wasn't sure this was the best idea, but she was determined not to overthink it. She was determined not to let fear rule her. Not today when she'd experienced such a victory, not just for herself, but for one of her patients too.

She saw it again in her mind, the moment Simon had put down the gun and allowed her to help him up and lead him back to his room. There'd been something in his eyes and she dared to believe it was *hope*. Hope that she'd put there. Hope that he was *wrong* about what his life could and could not be based solely on where he'd come from and the things others had done.

Reed had given Liza a renewed sense of hope too, and she wanted to share what had happened with him. She hadn't even gone home. She'd left work and driven straight there before she lost her nerve, thankful she'd taken

note of Reed's address when she'd Ubered it home all those weeks ago.

She rode the elevator to Reed's floor and then walked down the hall to the door she knew to be his, raising her hand and knocking, her heart beating swiftly in her chest.

She heard footsteps and the door opened and as Liza looked up, her heart dropped and her smile faded. In front of her stood a gorgeous woman wearing nothing but a towel. Liza took a small step backward, a buzz picking up in her brain.

Oh God. Stupid, stupid. You can't just drop by Reed's apartment. He's a single guy who obviously has a life that includes . . . gorgeous women who take showers after . . . no, she wouldn't let her mind go there.

The woman was looking at her curiously.

"Uh, hi," Liza managed. "Sorry. I must have the wrong address." God, she sounded like an idiot. And she knew very well she didn't have the wrong address. The name Davies was spelled out right below the number on the front door. She just needed to turn and leave.

"Are you here to see Reed?"

"Well . . . yes, but I should have called. It's uh, about a case," she mumbled. "Sorry, just . . . I'll call him later."

Liza turned to slink away when the woman called, "Wait. My brother should be home any second, do you want to wait?"

Brother? Liza didn't exactly want to acknowledge the unbidden joy that rose in her chest, but it was too intense to ignore. "You're his sister," she said, barely managing to contain the sigh of relief that threatened to follow the words.

The girl grinned. "Yeah. I'm Arryn." She pulled her towel higher. "Sorry about this. I was playing my music a little loud. I figured it was crotchety old Mrs. Prentice next door coming to tell me to turn it down."

Liza shook her head. "Sorry, I didn't ring the downstairs bell because I ___"

"You knew which apartment was his," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. She stepped back. "Come on in. I'm going to run and put some clothes on."

Arryn shut the door and Liza entered Reed's apartment. "I really can't stay," she lied. She'd been temporarily distracted by her happiness that the half-naked beauty at Reed's door was his sister, but now she felt insecure about dropping by again. "Maybe I could leave him a note," she said as she glanced around at what she'd barely noticed before.

The foyer area where she was standing was small, and to the left was a kitchen. She could only see the edge of a refrigerator and a gray tiled floor. To the right was a living room that looked comfortable and modern, with a huge television on one wall.

“Just for a few minutes?” Arryn asked, stepping out of the room across the hall from what Liza knew to be Reed’s bedroom. She was now dressed in a pair of yoga pants and a tank top, and was twisting her dark, curly hair up into a bun on top of her head. Arryn smiled, turning toward the kitchen and nodded her head in that direction. “Something to drink?”

“Sure,” Liza said. “Just a few minutes though.” If Reed was out, he was probably still at work, and he’d be tired when he got home. She’d told herself not to overthink dropping by his apartment, but really, thinking it through for a *minute* would have been the polite thing to do.

Liza entered the kitchen that was a decent size for a downtown loft apartment. There was even a small round table in the center with a couple of chairs. Arryn had the fridge door open and was bent inside but stood straight as Liza pulled out a chair and sat down. “Pitiful,” Arryn said, rolling her eyes. “Boys.” She turned to Liza. “Water?” she asked on a laugh.

Liza grinned back. “Water’s great.”

Arryn grabbed two glasses from the cabinet and filled them from the filtered water on the front of Reed’s refrigerator, bringing them to the table, where she handed one to Liza and sat down. “So how do you know my brother?”

Liza took a sip of the water, stalling. “I, um, met him on a case, actually.”

Arryn's eyes opened wide. "One of the murders from the Hollow-Eyed Killer case?"

Liza grimaced slightly like she'd done the first time she'd heard the name. "Yeah. One occurred at the hospital where I work."

"Whoa. Sorry to hear that." Arryn eyed her over the glass as she took a sip of her water. "So that's how you started dating Reed?"

Liza let out a nervous laugh. Wow, this girl was forward. "No, no, we're not dating. We're only friends. Not even really . . . I mean, sort of. But . . ." She took a long sip of water hoping Arryn would move on. But when she glanced at her, there was deep interest in her eyes.

Arryn tilted her head and squinted her eyes slightly. "But you've been to his apartment before. In a . . . friendly capacity?"

Liza felt the heat move up her cheeks. "Yes. Well . . . mm-hmm." But Liza saw Arryn's eyes narrow slightly and knew she knew Liza was lying.

Arryn sat back in her chair, her smile growing. "Hmm," she hummed, raising one perfectly arched brow. Liza wanted to laugh. There was something mischievous about Reed's sister, but in a sweet, charming way.

Arryn leaned forward suddenly. "I don't believe you." She grinned. "I think you like my brother. And I get a good feeling about you. So, now's your chance."

"My chance?"

Arryn nodded, lacing her hands on the table in front of her. “Ask me all about him. I’ll tell you anything.”

Liza laughed and shook her head. “No, I couldn’t.” She didn’t even know what to ask. But she couldn’t deny that it felt good to feel immediately accepted by this girl who clearly knew Reed better than anyone.

This is what it had felt like to have a sister, Liza thought with a small pang in her chest. She’d been closer to Mady, obviously, and the trauma of their home life was a constant weight that colored every aspect of their lives, but this brought to mind the sweet parts of sisterhood. The laughter that could only be shared between girls, the female camaraderie . . . *God, I miss you, Mady. I miss all that we would have shared, all our lives.* And the thought brought sadness, but not the overwhelming pain that such a thought would have had in the past.

“Okay, well if you won’t ask about him, I’ll tell you the important stuff.” Arryn paused, tapping her finger on her lip. “He’s loyal. Like, not just *sorta* loyal, like if he considers you one of his own, he’ll *lay down on train tracks and die for you* loyal.”

Liza’s chest felt tight. Yes, she could see that about him. And she realized that while Arryn was confiding in her, and hopefully because she’d been honest about her good feelings about Liza, what she was *really* doing was warning her. *My brother’s a great person who deserves the best*, she was

saying. *If you're not here to treat him that way, you should leave.*

Liza liked her even more.

“He’s sensitive. He’d probably hate it if he heard me say that, but it’s true. And I don’t mean sensitive in a weak way, I mean sensitive in a way where you’ll never get away with not telling him something because he’ll read it on your face.”

Yes, Liza had already learned that one.

“Tears slay him,” Arryn went on. “He gets all wide-eyed and fidgety and will do anything if it means you’ll stop crying.” A glint came into her dark, almond-shaped eyes. “Use that one if you need to. But for good, not for evil.” She winked at her and Liza laughed.

“Arryn?” Both women whipped their heads around and saw Reed standing in the doorway, looking between them with a confused look on his face. They hadn’t heard him enter over the sound of their own laughter.

Liza stood quickly, smoothing her skirt.

“Liza,” he said, and she heard the confusion in his tone, but she also heard the warmth. The happy surprise. And she felt an answering rush of affection.

“Hi. Hey,” she said.

“Hi.” He let his eyes linger on her a moment. “Are you okay?”

She bobbed her head. “Yes. I’m fine. Good. I dropped by to see you and

Arryn was here.”

He turned his head to his sister. “Yeah? What’s that about?”

Arryn stood and picked up a key sitting on the counter. “I borrowed the extra one you leave at the farmhouse.”

“That’s for emergencies.”

Arryn rolled her eyes. “This *is* an emergency. Mom and Dad are driving me crazy.” She dragged out the last word.

“So you ran away?”

“I didn’t *run* away. I’m nineteen. I left them a note. I just decided to take a short vacation.”

“At my apartment?”

“Well, I’m a little low on funds,” she said, pressing her thumb and index finger together. “But I used the gym downstairs, hung out in the sauna for a while. I mean, I could go somewhere else if you want to loan me—”

“Why don’t you wait in the guest room while I talk to Liza?” he said, his tone terse, gaze direct.

“Fine. I need to dry my hair anyway.” She turned to Liza. “It was very nice meeting you. I hope I see you again soon.” She turned to leave and then turned back. “Oh, one last thing. Don’t play Monopoly with him. Ever. He doesn’t even cheat. He’s just naturally evil and unethical.”

“Out,” Reed said, obviously holding back a smile.

Arryn ducked past her brother, but not before getting up on her tiptoes, throwing her arms around his neck, and kissing him on the cheek. “Hi, Reed.”

At that, he chuckled, kissed her on the forehead, and shook his head, rolling his eyes. “Go,” he said with a smile that made Liza’s heart melt just a little more. *He really is a good man.*

Reed stepped forward. “This is a surprise,” he said. “Are you sure everything’s okay?”

Liza heard the sound of the hair dryer turning on down the hall. “Yeah. I’m sorry to just drop by unannounced.”

“You’re welcome to drop by anytime, Liza,” he said, his expression filled with sincerity.

She let out a breath. “Thanks. Um. I actually had a couple of things to tell you.” She cleared her throat, suddenly nervous.

“Okay,” he said, stepping closer.

“First, it was my brother who broke into my apartment.”

His expression registered shock. “What? How do you know?”

“I drove out to the land where I grew up. It’s . . . it belonged to my grandfather and his father before him. When my father died and my brother went to prison, it went to me.” She waved her hand in the air. “Anyway, I went out there to . . . I don’t know, just to see it, I guess.” *To confront some*

ghosts.

“Your brother was there.”

“Yes.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday.”

He blew out a breath, running his hand through his hair. “Jesus, Liza, why are you just telling me about this now? And how do you know it was him who broke in?”

She licked her lips, her eyes going behind him for a moment, picturing her brother as he’d looked standing there in the midst of what she’d once considered hell and now just looked like a barren plot of earth. “He told me it was him. And I didn’t tell you yesterday because I don’t want him arrested.”

“You don’t want him arrested? Liza—”

“No, please, Reed. What he did scared me and it was wrong, but I’m not afraid of him. For the first time since that night, I don’t fear Julian. He’s . . . broken.” She didn’t quite know how to put her feelings for her brother into words. All these years she’d thought of him as a monster, maybe even on par with her father. “I don’t want to make excuses for what he did, but I’d also never considered how our upbringing had affected who he was. How it had warped him into a person he wouldn’t have otherwise been.” He was a victim of their father’s abuse too.

“He might be broken, Liza, but that doesn’t mean he shouldn’t be punished for what he did.”

“Maybe.” *Maybe not.* She didn’t have all the answers, but all she knew was what felt right to her, and what felt wrong. “I don’t know, but I’m not pressing charges, so there’s nothing to be done.”

“I can press charges without you.”

“But you won’t.” Their gazes clashed for a moment and then Reed let out a sigh, breaking eye contact.

Down the hall the sound of the hair dryer stopped. “Do you want to take a walk?” Reed asked. “I don’t have anything in the house and there’s this coffee shop down the street.”

Liza nodded. “Sure. That’d be great.”

Reed smiled as though he’d been expecting her to say no. “Yeah? Okay. Let me just go tell Arryn we’re leaving. And I’m going to text Zach and tell him I’m sending his runaway daughter home.”

Ten minutes later they were stepping outside Reed’s building and walking toward the coffee shop Liza could already see on the corner.

“You said first earlier,” Reed said, glancing at her.

“Huh?”

“When you told me about your brother, you said first. What’s second?”

“Oh.” Liza smiled and then took a deep breath. “Something pretty great

happened today, and partly, it was because of you. I came to say thank you.”

“Yeah?” Reed smiled. “I can’t wait to hear about it.” He looked over, caught her eye, his expression going serious. “You deserve great, Liza.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The latte Liza ordered was extra frothy, just the way she liked it. When she brought her cup away from her mouth with a satisfied sigh, Reed smiled and reached over, wiping what must have been a bit of foam off her upper lip.

Liza let out a small embarrassed laugh, following his finger with her own to make sure it was all gone. His finger dropped from her mouth and their eyes locked, the air between them vibrating. Reed looked away first, reaching for his coffee and taking a sip. “So, tell me about today,” he said.

So Liza did. She told him about Simon, about how he’d stolen a gun from the security guard and threatened his own life and the lives of those who might stop him, though Liza had gambled on her belief that he was bluffing. He wouldn’t have hurt anyone.

“Even so,” Reed said, worry etching his brow, “accidents happen when someone emotional is waving a gun around.”

“I know. It was a risk. I do know that. But . . .” She looked away, collecting her thoughts. “I don’t think anyone had ever gone to bat for him, Reed. No one. So I did, and I think it mattered to him. I know it did, because it would have mattered to me.” Her shoulders rose and fell as she inhaled a big breath. “I connected with him in a way I haven’t connected with a patient before. I felt it.” She gave her head a small shake. “I don’t know that I’ll

always share my own past with my patients or if that will be appropriate, but I felt like it *was* in that circumstance, and I wouldn't have had the bravery without your words in my head." She felt shy suddenly, her eyes lowering as she fiddled with an empty sugar packet on the table.

Reed reached over and put his hand on top of hers. The warmth of it—the *intimacy*—caused a flush of happiness to glitter through Liza. She felt like a schoolgirl whose crush had just noticed her, and she had the insane urge to giggle. And Liza was many things, but she was *not* a giggler. A small laugh emerged nonetheless and she smiled up at Reed. "Anyway, I got written up and earned a week off without pay."

"What?"

"Yeah. The woman who's standing in as director wasn't pleased that I broke protocol. Chad was happy to recommend disciplinary action too." Liza hoped doing so had helped smooth his fragile ego after she'd rejected him, and they could move on. "Anyway, I've been disciplined to the full extent of Lakeside law."

He grimaced, squinting at her. "Are you remorseful?"

"Not in the least."

Reed laughed, his eyes twinkling. "Well then . . ."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Well then."

Their eyes met again for a beat, two, and they both laughed, looking

away. “Do you wanna walk for a little bit?” Liza asked. “It’s such a nice night.” And she thought it’d be easier to talk to him about the other things on her mind if she was moving, working off her nervous energy.

“Sure.”

They stood, tossed their drinks in the trash near the front, and emerged into the mild evening air. Liza put her hands in the pockets of her light coat, enjoying the feel of the breeze on her face.

For a few minutes, they simply walked, a comfortable silence settling between them, the lights of the city glimmering all around. “I’d like to tell you about it,” Liza said quietly, haltingly. She hadn’t planned to do so, but maybe that’s why it felt right. “What happened after the fire.”

“I’d love to hear it,” Reed said, some emotion in his voice she wasn’t sure she could identify. Happiness mixed with something else. And somehow, that was enough to spur her on.

She took a deep breath. “After . . . the fire, I went into foster care. I was in several homes, but all of them were good. Nice houses. Clean. Decent people. I can’t say I became overly close with any of them. We still keep in touch at Christmas and things like that. But the foster care homes provided the first stable home environment I’d known, which I suppose is sad, considering foster care is never exactly *stable*.” She paused, thinking. “Foster care gets a bad rap a lot of the time, and granted, there are horror stories.”

She glanced at Reed. He had a strange expression on his face that was there one second and gone the next, a flash that made her question whether she'd seen it at all.

“But you didn't have one of those,” he said. “You were lucky.”

She realized that Reed, working in law enforcement, must see sad stories involving foster kids all the time. It was probably something that affected him regularly. “Yes,” she said. “I was lucky in that respect. I wasn't hungry anymore. There was soap and toilet paper, things that weren't available at our house.” She glanced at Reed to gauge his reaction to that bit of awfulness, but to his credit, he kept his expression neutral. “I was grieving, but I felt mostly safe. I wasn't constantly afraid . . .” After a brief pause, she said, “A little while after I'd been released from the hospital, I was sent to this camp as part of a state funded program while my foster care placement was being finalized. It was meant as a reprieve. Camp Joy,” she said shooting him a smile.

“Oh yeah,” he said, “I know Camp Joy. The CPD uses it for team building during the academy.” His face screwed up. “The name though . . . it was probably the last thing you were feeling.”

“True,” she breathed. “But, in a roundabout way, it ended up inspiring just that. The other kids and I zip-lined and played games. We got to be kids. And one of the things they did at Camp Joy was an interactive play about the

Underground Railroad. The staff members were the conductors and the campers were the runaway slaves. They took us about a mile through the woods where we met an abolitionist, and a plantation owner . . . a bounty hunter.”

“And this was helpful for kids who’d just experienced trauma?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Liza let out a short laugh. “I know it sounds questionable, but they made us feel very safe. They made us feel like a *team*. And it was . . . inspiring. In a way it *was* scary, to learn what these people had experienced on their journey to freedom. To know the lengths they had gone through, the suffering, but also learn of those who willingly assisted them along the way . . . this covert network of good people who wanted to help and put their very lives—their *own* freedom—on the line. We learned that Cincinnati played a significant role in the Underground Railroad as thousands of slaves crossed the Ohio River from southern states. There are still rooms and passageways that were once safehouses and hiding places. There’s a now-abandoned house near the river where freedom seekers hid in this below-ground storage area that had a water runoff tunnel leading from it that let out on the shore.” She paused for just a moment. “I imagined those scared people gathered there, crawling into that darkness, and then running through the woods in the pitch-black of night, the only light cast by a sliver of moon. The bravery that would have taken,

the terror that must have been in their hearts, but they did it anyway, running toward a world that would not embrace them because they decided that *freedom* was *bigger* and far more powerful than their fear. Their stories—though vastly different—made me want to be brave too.” Liza took a deep breath, realizing that she’d gotten lost in her own story, the deep interest she’d once had on the topic of those who escaped brutality to find freedom. But when she glanced at Reed, he looked so interested in what she was saying, that the embarrassment that had begun to rise within her, receded.

“Anyway,” she went on, “it had affected me so much, that when I was placed in my first home, I went to the library and checked out every book I could. I’d learned about slavery in school, of course, but not in a way that made it real to me. Camp Joy did that. And what it showed me was that people had made it through things even worse than what I’d experienced. They’d survived, some had even thrived, and maybe, therefore, I could too.” She glanced at him. “I became deeply interested in history, in wars, even genocides. I checked out books. I immersed myself in it.” She let out a small laugh that turned into a grimace. “I know it sounds morbid.”

“No,” Reed said. “It sounds like hope. You were looking for hope. You weren’t interested in the suffering so much as you were interested in the survival that followed.”

She gazed at him. “Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, I guess it was.” *Hope*. That

had been what she'd been so desperate to find. He'd listened to her whole story, and pulled that one word from it. And that was it, that was exactly it. She'd been searching for hope, and she'd first found it there.

She'd never put her thoughts into words the way she just had. Never explained to anyone how she'd first begun lifting herself from the mires of trauma. One slow inch at a time, hanging by her fingernails some years, and she still had a long way to go, she recognized that, but that's where it had begun, that first small ray of . . . yes, *hope*.

They came to a bench in a small grassy area off the sidewalk and Reed gestured to it questioningly. She nodded and they both walked to where it was and sat. "Tell me more," he said.

She smiled. She didn't think she'd talked this long to one person in her entire life. Much of her job was about listening and Liza was good at that. But being listened *to*, she realized, was a gift no one had given her in quite this way.

"I liked immersing myself in other subjects," she said. "School became my sole focus. Now that my basic needs were being met, I could throw all my energy into that. I excelled. My high school counselor took me under her wing. She believed in me and helped me apply to colleges. I got a full academic scholarship to UC and when I took my first psychology class, it explained things I hadn't had words for before. Post-traumatic stress, cycles

of abuse . . .” She paused for a moment. “There are still things I struggle with, you know that.” She looked off behind him for a moment, the city lights sparkling and wavering as dusk turned to night. “So much.” She met Reed’s gaze again. “Parts of me are damaged, Reed. But it helps to name them. It helps to know I’m not the only one who’s felt those things. And maybe someday, if I work hard enough, if I confront my fears, I’ll overcome them, whatever that looks like.”

“I believe that.”

She tilted her head, taking in his earnest expression. “You do, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I think you’re a damn good bet, Dr. Nolan,” he said quietly, his gaze not straying from hers.

Warmth rushed through her and she was suddenly breathless. She let out a small nervous laugh that quickly died, her expression going serious. She wasn’t used to this. None of it. And she was out of her element, defenseless, and yet so happy too. *Seen*. It was sort of like the feeling she’d had when her high school counselor had expressed such pride in her, but *more*. This was Reed and her feelings for him were deep and confusing. Good and bad and all over the map. He made her feel alive and terrified, like running away and flinging herself into his arms. She broke eye contact, looking away for a moment as she got her bearings. “I’ve talked a lot. Tell me a little about you.”

He gave her a sweet smile, leaning back on the bench and looking out at the sidewalk for a moment where a few people walked by quickly, their hands in their pockets, eyes straight ahead. “What do you want to know?”

She thought about what he’d told her about his upbringing, how he’d found out at fourteen that his father was a serial killer. An evil man who’d victimized Reed’s birth mother. She had so many questions. Personal ones, but . . . maybe she’d somewhat earned a few personal answers. She hoped so, because she wanted so much to know about him. “You said your birth mother gave up rights to you so you could stay with the parents who had adopted you. But you didn’t meet her until you were eighteen. Did you ever resent her for not being a part of your life growing up? She could have decided that, right? To sort of . . . share you?”

Reed put his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. “I’ve thought about that and honestly? No. What she did . . . it was the best thing for me. Once I learned the truth, I was old enough to have a really solid sense of myself, you know? I think finding out earlier would have been extremely confusing, might even have shaped me in ways it didn’t have a chance to.” He shook his head. “No, what Josie did was the most selfless thing she could have done, and I’m grateful. She wrote me a letter, explaining how she knew the best way to love me was to love from afar. And I didn’t know what that truly meant until I was in her farmhouse the first time. I was eighteen, ready

to go to college, when I went to meet her. Arryn, funny enough, was the one who held *my* hand and took me inside. There were photos, Liza. Photos my mom had sent Josie every year. They could have been tucked away in a photo album, but they weren't. They were on her walls, as if to say to anyone who entered her home that she had four children she loved, not three." That brought a hitch to Liza's breath.

Reed looked over at her, his gaze level, expression so serious that everything inside her stilled. "Love *heals*, Liza. Those aren't just words. And I think acting in love doesn't just heal others. It heals yourself. Josie healed me before I even had a chance to be damaged. Because of her, I never suffered one moment of trauma. And I believe that her choice—for *me*—helped her heal as well. It showed her that what my biological father did to her took away a lot, but he didn't take her ability to love and to act with pure grace and selflessness."

"Wow," Liza said, overwhelmed at the passion in his voice, the beautiful words he spoke for the woman who obviously meant so much to him. And it inspired her. She wanted to be like Josie. She wanted to believe that her father had *taken a lot*, but not the best of her. *Maybe*.

"You should meet her," Reed said, eyeing her, a smile tilting his lips.

"I'd love that."

Reed's smile grew wider and he raised one brow. "You know what I'd

love?”

Liza laughed. “What?”

“To take you to dinner.” His smile slipped a bit. “Can I take you to dinner, Liza? I heard you might have some time on your hands this week.”

Liza laughed. “Ouch. Low blow.” But she couldn’t help the smile that lit her face. “I’d love to go to dinner with you, Detective.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ransom tapped the blown-up picture of the leaf brand hanging on the board at the front of the incident room. He went over with the team what he and Reed had discussed a couple of days before, and why they'd separated the two groups of victims.

"I did a Google search on marijuana yesterday, and what using it as a symbol might mean," Jennifer said. "Suffice it to say, I didn't come up with anything useful, but man, did I go down some rabbit holes. Who knew there were so many types of weed?"

"I'd like to plead the fifth," Ransom said.

"Olsen, what have you got?" Reed asked of the detective who had entered the room a minute before and was still taking files from his briefcase.

"I tracked down two of the individuals on those prescription bottles." He looked at his notes. "Both of them admit to selling their prescribed medications to Toby Resnick for cash. And get this—*both* of them previously lived at the halfway house where the girl, LuAnn Bradford, who filed charges against the payday loan dude"—Olsen pointed to the picture of Clifford Schlomer on the board—"lived as well."

Holy shit. "Okay," Reed said, a spark of excitement lighting in his gut. "Okay. That's a connection. Great work, Olsen." He walked to the boards

and made a new category for the halfway house, and listed the names of the three people who had lived there. “That can’t be a coincidence. We need to get a list of past residents. See if any other names stand out.”

“On it,” Jennifer said, making a note on the notepad in front of her. “Going back how many years do you think?”

“Let’s ask for five,” Reed said.

“Will we need a warrant?” she asked.

“Let’s hope not,” Ransom answered, unwrapping a stick of beef jerky. Reed nodded in agreement. They could get one if they needed to, but it would slow them down.

“How do you not weigh five hundred pounds?” Jennifer asked Ransom.

Ransom took a bite of the jerky. “All my constant brain activity burns a shitload of calories,” he answered, finishing off the stick of processed meat.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s it,” she said.

The door opened and Reed looked up. Detective Duffy peeked in. “Phone message for Olsen.”

Olsen stood, heading for the door to take the call.

“Go Bucks,” Duffy said, nodding to the board.

Reed frowned, following his gaze. “What are you talking about, Duffy?”

“The leaf. It’s a buckeye, right? OSU?”

“OSU . . .” Jennifer repeated, bringing her phone up and typing

something in. She looked up. “The buckeye leaf does look a hell of a lot like a marijuana leaf.”

“Man, what kind of Ohioans are you anyway? It’s the state tree.” Duffy blew a puff of air out of his lips, turned, and walked out the door.

Well, shit.

Reed squinted at the picture of the brand on the board. It still looked like a marijuana leaf to him, but that was the problem with making an assumption and sticking to it. Sometimes it took a fresh pair of eyes to see something new in old information or evidence. “All right,” Reed said, taking the phone Jennifer was passing around and looking at the picture of a buckeye leaf she’d found. He looked from the phone to the board and back again, comparing. “It could be,” he admitted. “But even so, what the hell does that mean?”

“That our killer has hometown pride?” Ransom asked. They all ignored him.

“It seems even more random than a marijuana leaf,” Jennifer noted, and Reed didn’t disagree. It *still* seemed more probable that it was a marijuana leaf, as there was already drug—albeit prescription medications—connections to the murder victims. But Duffy had been an important reminder not to get too attached to an assumption.

Reed approached the board and wrote the names of the two types of

leaves under the picture of the brand.

He turned back to Jennifer and Ransom. “Okay, what else?”

Jennifer turned a page in her notebook. “You asked me to get the information on the person who called in Toby Resnick’s murder.”

“Right,” Reed said, picturing the man who’d been positioned on the pile of rancid trash in the alleyway.

“It was a sanitation worker,” Jennifer said. “He just showed up on his regular shift to pick up the trash in the alley.” She flipped the page. “He didn’t recognize the victim. He called it in and left the scene as it was.”

“Do you have his name and address?” He looked over at his partner. “It might be worth paying him a visit and interviewing him ourselves. Get as much information as possible.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ransom said.

Jennifer ripped a sheet of paper from her pad and handed it to Reed with the name Milo Ortiz and an address below that.

The door opened and their sergeant entered the room. His expression was grim. Reed’s heart sank. “Don’t tell me—”

“Another victim,” he said, nodding. “This one isn’t dead though.”

The three detectives looked back and forth between each other quickly. “Is he talking?” Ransom asked.

The sergeant shook his head. “The doctors are saying it doesn’t look

good. The guy went splat from the top of the building that houses the adult parole offices.” Reed flinched, picturing the tall, gray-stone building on Broadway Street.

“Christ Almighty,” he murmured under his breath. Another falling victim? “He’s got the same brand?”

“Yup,” the sergeant said, pointing at the picture of the brand stuck on the board. “That one.”

“Which hospital?”

“UC Medical.”

“Any ID?”

“Not yet, but the guy had the name of a parole officer in the building in his pocket, so the officers first on scene were headed to see him when I got the call.”

Reed and Ransom started gathering their things. “I’ll start in on this,” Jennifer said, holding up her pad with the notes she’d taken on it. “Update me with anything.”

“Ditto,” Ransom said as he and Reed headed for the door, Reed saying a silent prayer that this guy, whoever he was, would pull through and help them catch this bastard.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Liza's heels clicked on the tile floor as she speed-walked toward the nurses' desk. Just before she reached it, the door on the other side opened. Her heart leapt. "Reed," she said as he stepped through. She headed toward him. "What's going on?"

When he'd called her half an hour before, he'd told her only that he needed her to meet him at UC Hospital and he'd tell her more when she arrived. She couldn't imagine what it was about, but she had a sinking feeling it wasn't good.

Reed took her gently by her arm and led her down the hall in the other direction from which she'd come. When they were several feet away from the nurses' station, he stopped, looking into her eyes. His forehead furrowed as he glanced down the hall and then back to her. "We got a call a little while ago about another victim. Someone apparently jumped or was pushed off the top of a building downtown."

Oh God. "Like the other victims on the news," she said, blinking at him.

"Yes, like the other victims. These victims have a . . . mark on them. It hasn't been released to the public, but today's victim bears the same mark. Liza, it's your brother."

For a second, her world turned sideways, and she backed up a step until

her back was against the wall. “I don’t . . . I don’t understand. Julian? No, I just saw Julian. He was . . . on the land that—”

“He had a parole officer—Anderson. The guy hadn’t called me back yet. I know he was staying on your family’s land, but we found out that he actually used your address here in Cincinnati. Maybe he didn’t know where he was going when he first got out. I’m not sure. But he had gone to the Office of Adult Parole downtown to see Anderson today. Apparently, someone interrupted him, forced him to the roof in some manner, marked him, and either made him jump or pushed him. Liza, we have no idea how he fits in to this.”

What? “He’s dead?”

“He’s alive, but I met with his doctor before you arrived, and there’s no brain activity. He won’t recover.” He was watching her so closely, as if trying to catch the barest flinch of her features that might clue him in to how she was taking this.

“Okay. Okay.” Truthfully, she didn’t *know* what she felt. Shocked, yes. Scared, definitely. But other than those two emotions, she felt mostly numb. But she had this sense that other, more complex feelings were bubbling under the surface, ones that she didn’t want to think about at the moment. She sucked in a breath, tamping them down. For now.

“Can I . . . see him?”

“Yes. Of course. He’s on a ventilator. It’s breathing for him right now. I don’t want to rush you, but you have some decisions to make.”

Decisions. She licked her lips, nodding. He paused for a moment, that grim look returning to his features and then he led her down the hall again until they reached a hospital room. He held the door open for her and when she crossed the threshold, he began to turn back toward the hall. “Wait,” she said, putting her hand on his arm. “Will you come in with me? I mean, if you don’t have work to do. If I’m not keeping you from something else?”

“Of course I will.”

Reed followed her into the room and stood behind her as she walked slowly to the bed where her brother lay, his head and half of his face wrapped in gauze, tubes running from his body, a machine beeping methodically next to him. He looked small, smaller than he’d looked as she’d spoken to him on their family land a couple of days before. Small and . . . helpless. It felt like something was expanding in her chest, filling it, making it difficult for her to catch her breath. She walked forward, sitting in the chair next to him. She looked at her brother, no longer the monster of her nightmares, but a flesh and blood human trapped inside a broken body, the same way, she realized now, he’d been trapped inside a broken mind. She thought of the times she’d looked to him for help as a child, and how each time he’d turned away, or looked through her. It had *hurt*.

But . . . she knew now, trauma had caused Julian to retreat inside himself. She'd tiptoed through those dark corridors too; she knew the allure of that internal refuge. But she'd also suspected—even in her deepest despair—that if she traveled too far inside, she'd never find her way back. Or if she did, it would never be the whole of her. Some part would always remain there, safe, but *gone*.

As she looked at her broken brother, all she felt was sadness. *Who would you have been, she wondered, if you weren't born in hell?*

She turned her head sideways, addressing Reed. “They’re sure?” she asked. “That he won’t recover?”

His voice came from behind her. “They’re sure.”

She looked back at Julian, and reached out, taking his limp hand in hers, blood beneath his fingernails. His own she imagined. The internal damage to his body must be extreme. “His organs . . .”

Reed paused. “Yes. Not everything. There’s considerable damage,” he said haltingly as though choosing his words. “But, yes.” *His heart?* she wondered, her gaze rising to the machine that beeped steadily next to him. Maybe someone else could use that organ in a way her brother never had.

Liza squeezed his hand. She'd never held Julian's hand before, not even when they were young. A pang of sadness hit her, for the little boy he never was, for the man he had never become. The brother he'd not known how to

be. And yet, something inside him had wanted desperately to free her and Mady from the violence. From evil. There had been some good inside the man in front of her. Warped, but *there*.

You've suffered enough now. “You’re going to be free, Julian,” she whispered. *Free. Free.* Something that her brother had never experienced, not a day in his life. “Be at peace,” she said, her voice gritty. She laid his hand back down on the white sheet, and then Liza stood, and with Reed beside her she left the room.

“Here you go,” Reed said, and Liza turned her head as he entered the room carrying a glass of wine. She took the glass from him and brought it to her nose, inhaling the smooth red with a warm hint of cherry.

“Thanks,” she said. He joined her on the couch in his living room, having met him at his apartment after leaving the hospital.

He’d picked up sushi on the way and they’d sat at his kitchen table eating. They hadn’t talked a lot, but Liza had appreciated that as she’d needed the time to both decompress, and put her thoughts and some of her emotions in order.

“That sushi was not what I meant by dinner, by the way,” he said. “I’m

still going to take you somewhere where we don't have to eat out of plastic containers, but I thought you could use something less public tonight."

She smiled at him. "Yes, I appreciate it. And the sushi was great. Thanks."

He studied her as she took another sip of wine, enjoying the richness as it slid down her throat and warmed her belly. "Are you really okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. I am." She paused for a moment. "I don't feel a loss. I . . . never really knew my brother, and I never had a relationship with him. For all my adult life, I was *afraid* of him. That . . . changed the other day. But I still wouldn't have had a relationship with Julian." She sighed. "I guess I'm just . . . sad about who he might have been if he hadn't been born in that house." A small shiver went through her as the vision of the place of her nightmares rose before her. "He never stood a chance," she murmured. "What he did, that night, was horrible and violent, but . . . he was a victim too, Reed." She set her wine on the table, turning more fully to him. "Mostly though, I want to know why. Why was he targeted? Why *him*?"

"I wish I could tell you," Reed said with a frustrated huff of breath. "The only thing I can come up with is that by finding this killer's first victim, you somehow . . . God, I don't know, caught his attention? Maybe he looked into you, or . . ." He shook his head, his jaw tight. "I don't know, Liza. But the

two things have got to be connected. I just can't figure out why or how." He paused for a moment. "We have a few witnesses who saw your brother being led up the stairwell by a tall man they described as brawny. None of them got a glimpse of his face, just his size, but in retrospect, they think he might have been holding a weapon on your brother."

"Oh God." She closed her eyes, shaking her head.

He watched her. "This is the first crime by this suspect where we have witness testimony. It makes this particular crime feel more . . . unplanned than the others."

Liza chewed on the inside of her cheek for a moment. "It would've had to have been, right? Julian was only recently released from prison."

"Yes, exactly. But we'll have to look into him further—who his friends were on the inside, whether he made any enemies." He rubbed at his eye. He looked angry, and frustrated, and bone-tired, and a burst of tenderness lit inside Liza.

She nodded, stifling a yawn of her own. God, it'd been a long day. A long, emotional, confusing, tiring day and she was exhausted too. "I should go."

Reed pulled himself straight. "Stay here."

Liza's heart picked up speed and her lips parted to say . . . what, she wasn't sure. But he beat her to it. "Arryn's back home with Josie and Zach."

He rolled his eyes, but smiled indulgently. “Stay in the guest room. I’ve got an extra toothbrush. You don’t need to be alone, not after today. Pack a bag tomorrow and stay here for a couple of days until I have a chance to follow some leads that might shed light on your brother’s connection to this case. For safety’s sake.”

She felt a strange thump in her stomach as though a small bubble had burst. That was ridiculous. Anything else her mind had immediately conjured at the idea of staying the night at Reed’s would be a very bad idea, especially in the present moment. And she could admit that it also scared her senseless, but in a way that felt . . . new. A different kind of fear that she couldn’t sort through at the moment, not when she was so incredibly tired. And not with him staring at her with those beautifully sensitive eyes.

There was also something in his gaze that made her think he was worried for her, that her brother’s—what did she call it at this point?—*attempted murder* not only meant a connection to the killer, but that it likely meant the killer was connected to her as well. *Stay here. For safety’s sake.* Was she in danger? She *had* found the first victim. What did it all mean? Anxiety trembled through her and she realized that, though she felt relaxed at the moment, she didn’t relish the idea of getting in her car and driving home to her empty apartment.

She gave him a wry tilt of her lips. “I’ll be putting your sister out of a

vacation hotspot.”

Reed rolled his eyes. “Good.”

She went serious, her nerves tingling. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Reed smiled. “No, I wouldn’t mind. I’d like it.” He reached out and took her hand. “Stay, please, Liza.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Reed pulled out Liza's chair and she slid in, smiling at him over her shoulder and making his knees feel weak. He took the seat across from her and the waiter put two menus in front of them. "You look beautiful," he told her, gazing across the table. Liza was wearing a black long-sleeved dress that dipped between her breasts and her blonde hair was down, swept away from her face on one side in a sparkly clip. She reminded him of the way she'd looked the night he'd met her, the dark colors of her clothing highlighting her pale hair and creamy skin—making her glow. *You took my breath away, Liza, the first time I saw your face.* Only tonight her eyes looked different to him—not wary and closed off as they'd looked that night, but shining with something that looked damn near like happiness. And, he noticed, she wasn't wearing anything to cover her scar.

"Thank you," she said. "You look great too." She took a sip of her water. "This is the first time I've seen you out of work clothes." Her eyes widened and a blush colored her cheeks. "I mean except . . ." She took another sip of her water, cringing slightly and looking around as if hoping the waiter would choose that moment to take their drink order.

Except the night I saw you naked.

Reed suppressed a smile, his own body flushing with heat from the

images that filled his head. “Except the night we met. In the bar. When I was wearing . . . let’s see . . . jeans from what I remember.”

Liza laughed, giving a nod and placing her water down. “Right. That’s what I was about to say.”

Reed chuckled, picking up his menu as the waiter approached their table.

They ordered a bottle of wine, and then their entrées, making small talk. When their food had been delivered to the table, and they’d both dug in, Reed asked Liza if she’d heard from the hospital. Liza nodded, putting her fork down. “Yes. They called to let me know it was time. I . . . drove over and sat with him as they turned off the machines. It was very quick.”

Shit. “I’m so sorry, Liza.” He hadn’t realized she’d been there. He’d been so buried under the case earlier that day, he hadn’t even called her. He watched her expression, trying to gauge how watching her brother die had affected her. “Are you all right?” He reached across the table and laid his hand on hers.

Her gaze went to their hands and she turned hers over, squeezing him. Her hand was warm and slender and Jesus, he loved touching her. *You flatten me, Liza. That’s all it takes.* She sighed as she pulled her hand back. “Yes. I’m fine. They were able to donate his heart and his eyes. I guess it’s sort of . . . oh, I don’t know. I almost hate to think about it. But then again”—she met

Reed's gaze—"that heart of his never beat with happiness and now maybe it will. Maybe his eyes will see love in someone else's." Her expression was so sad suddenly and it killed Reed to see it. But he also saw a note of conflict drift over her face.

"I know he was murdered, and justice has to be served. But other than that, you don't have to feel sorry for him."

"I don't . . . exactly. It's so hard, Reed. Confusing." She gave him a wobbly smile and picked up her fork, turning her attention back to her food. He stared at her for a moment. She thought she was damaged, weak. She had no idea how strong she truly was. How unbelievably loving. She'd walked out of hell with love still in her heart. How miraculous was that?

After a few minutes, she asked, "Any new leads or ideas today about how me finding Sadowski might possibly be linked to my brother's murder? Or if it is at all?"

He shook his head. No new leads, but it'd needled at him all day. *Still* needled him. "No," he sighed, taking a drink of his wine. "Nothing yet, but we have made several connections in the case. It's like I feel it"—he brought his hand up and rubbed his fingers together—"like it's right there, but just out of reach." He let out a frustrated puff of breath, dropping his hand.

Liza was quiet for a moment, staring through him. "My brother said he did it to set me free," she murmured.

“What?”

Her eyes refocused. “He tried to kill me to set me free. It seems demented because his mind was already warped. Those monsters in the dark . . . he let them in. In part, he became them. The person committing these murders, their mind is warped too. It has to be.”

“Agreed. There’s no doubt about that.”

She sat up straight, seeming suddenly buoyed. He smiled. This was her passion. It lit her up. “*He’s* different, so you have to look at it a different way. Don’t use your rationale or your empathy. He doesn’t think like you. He’s twisted. You have to try to think like him.”

He rubbed at his eye. “I don’t know if I can do that.” How did you twist your brain up into a ball of knotted string, where anything was possible and even the demented made sense?

She eyed him. “I think you can.”

His body stilled as her implication became clear. “My biological father was a psychopath, Liza. I’m not.”

“Of course you’re not. I wasn’t suggesting that. I wouldn’t be here having dinner with you if I thought so.”

His lip quirked. “Fair enough.”

She paused, eyeing him as she took a sip of wine, her gaze hinting at nervousness. “But I’m not convinced your father was a psychopath.”

His forehead bunched. “Why do you say that?” He wasn’t angry, merely dubious, and curious about how she’d come to that conclusion.

“I’ve worked with patients who have psychopathic minds. I don’t have nearly the same experience with the psychopathic as I do with the traumatized. But I fill in for doctors on the fifth floor sometimes. I prefer not to.” She moved her eyes away, considering. “There are physical differences in the structure and function of their brains. They don’t feel empathy, or fear, or anxiety like the rest of us do. As a homicide detective, you probably know all this.” She looked away momentarily as if in thought. “I’ve seen what’s under the mask, like the flash of a serpent revealing itself in their eyes. They’re good at hiding it. Some do it well, others even better. There’s no treating those people. The most you can do is try to understand them, study the things that make them tick.”

“Yes,” he said. “And there’s a hereditary component to psychopathy.”

Her eyes moved over his face. She knew exactly why he’d mentioned it, probably understood that he’d thought about it with regard to himself. But he’d let that go a long time ago. He knew his own mind. He knew what he was, and what he was not.

“Yes,” she agreed. “There . . . might be.” She took a sip of wine. “You said your father found a home for you, that he wanted you to be raised by good and loving people. Psychopaths don’t act out of empathy or goodwill.”

She paused. “It can sometimes appear that way, but they’re really just doing something that benefits their ego, or makes them *appear* empathetic. They’re very manipulative.” She furrowed her brow. “But I can’t see how putting forth the effort to find you a good home would benefit him. I would expect someone with a psychopathic mind to rid himself of what would be more of a problem for him than anything.” She delivered the last sentence hesitantly, as though gauging his reaction.

“You’re not wrong,” he said. “My biological father suffered a traumatic background, not unlike what you experienced.” He held her gaze for a moment. “But does it matter? Is it some sort of solace to his victims’ families that he was really, really *sad*, and that’s why he took their daughter, or sister, or friend away from them as he went on a sadistic killing spree?”

“No, of course not. Just like what you said to me about my brother, I’m not saying you need to feel sympathy for him, or anyone who victimizes others. I’m just saying that in trying to solve a crime, it will be helpful to understand his motivation. And I imagine that you’ve spent some time studying your own father, trying to understand why he did what he did.”

“There’s no understanding what he did.”

“That’s what I’m saying though. Not to you. But to him, there was a very clear and logical reason. He was twisted, but what he did made perfect sense in his mind. It *drove* him. It gave him meaning and purpose. Control.

Just like this killer.”

Reed ran his finger over his bottom lip as he studied her, his brow knitted. “Okay. You’re right. I don’t know this killer, but I do know my biological father. I’ve studied him, even tried to follow his sadistic reasoning. I *have* empathized with him, and I’ve never said that to another living soul.”

“Because you’re an empathetic person,” she said softly.

He considered how much he’d thought about Hartsman’s crimes, about who exactly the man who shared his DNA was, even who he *might* have been if not for his past, which frustrated Reed to no end because it was an exercise in futility. “All right,” he said. “Yes, I’ve waded into my father’s mind.”

“So, wade into this killer’s mind too. Use your father for reference. You’re not him, but you’ve already set foot into his psyche. You’ve examined the twists and turns his mind made, the choices that resulted.”

“Use my connection to Charles Hartsman for good,” he murmured.

“Yes. Just like you encouraged me to do with my patients. Use it for good.”

Reed sighed, letting his mind drift, trying to make connections that weren’t there logically. Attempting to *reason* this person out.

“Okay,” he said, relaxing back in his chair. “This killer. He’s telling a story. There’s a whole cast of characters and they’re all playing roles for him.” He paused, thinking, letting his gut lead him. “From the considerable

effort he's putting into removing the eyes of some victims, and using death by falling for others . . . the black paint, the brand . . . it all means something. It all makes perfect sense to him. It's . . . justice. Depraved justice, but justice nonetheless."

"Justice for whom?"

"For himself?" Reed wondered. "Or maybe for a collective group—the mentally ill who are so often taken advantage of."

Liza shook her head. "It might be collective," she said. "But I'd bet that it's mostly specific. Personal."

"Which means that one person could be at the center of all of this," Reed said. "That's what we have to figure out. Who connects all these people."

"I agree," Liza said, her eyes bright, expression full of purpose, and as he watched her, he couldn't help the smile that tugged at his mouth.

"We're discussing serial killers on our first date," he noted.

She grimaced, shaking her head as she leaned back. "I'm sorry. This is probably the *last* thing you want to talk about after thinking about it all day."

Reed smiled. "Actually, no. It's good to get a different perspective. And I appreciate your insight. I was just sort of hoping to romance you a little."

Liza let out a small laugh on a breath, color blossoming in her cheeks. "The night is young," she said softly. There was meaning in her voice, even though nervousness skittered quickly across her face. If Reed had blinked he

would have missed it.

And yet, when their eyes met, chemistry sparked to life between them despite the apprehension he'd caught—and despite the grim nature of their dinner conversation. Reed wanted to groan aloud. He wanted to take her back to his apartment and head directly for the bedroom. He wanted her naked beneath him. Plain and simple. Only it wasn't, because he wanted more than just her body. He wanted her heart, and he didn't know if she was ready to offer him that.

Frankly, he didn't know if she was ready to offer him her body again either. Now that he knew what sex was for her, how could he treat it with anything other than an extreme sense of gravitas? He'd been ignorant the first time, but he couldn't use that excuse again.

The waiter showed up, interrupting the moment and clearing their plates. "Dessert?" he asked, and Reed looked at Liza. She shook her head, using her napkin to dab at the corner of her mouth.

"Not for me, thank you. I'm stuffed."

Reed paid the bill and they left the restaurant, Liza pulling her coat around her as they walked. Reed reached down and took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. Her hand stiffened for a moment but then relaxed and she glanced at him, giving him a shy smile that made his stomach clench.

She was still such a conundrum. A woman passionate and confident—at

least for the most part—about her career as a doctor, and almost a . . . girlishness about her when it came to flirting, to dating, to the smallest of touches. She'd put on a façade for him that first night they'd met but it'd quickly dissolved into a sort of skittishness that he believed spoke honestly of her feelings regarding physical touch. He wondered if she'd ever had a normal relationship, but didn't feel like it was the right time to bring that up. For now, he'd follow his gut and his gut was telling him to take baby steps.

“I'm glad you agreed to stay at my place for a couple days.”

She nodded, biting her lip. “I hope I'm not taking advantage. I know you have a life.”

He made a small sound in the back of his throat. “Yeah, my life is this case right now.” He squeezed her hand gently. “And like I said, I'm glad you're staying with me.”

They walked in silence for a block before she said, “Can I be honest?” She glanced at him and he nodded.

“I appreciate the fact that I feel so safe at your place. But it's also . . .” She sighed as if she were having trouble finding the right words. “I'm almost dreading going back to my apartment. I feel this deep sense of . . . loss when I think about it.” She gave him another small glance and he sensed embarrassment in it. Hesitancy. “It's where I allowed myself to talk to Mady.” She was quiet for a minute and he waited as she gathered her

thoughts. “I’ve used talking to her as a coping mechanism, but also . . . it’s been a way to keep from forgetting her.” Her throat moved as she swallowed. “I don’t have any photos of her, Reed, no one else who loved her to reminisce with.” She took a moment before continuing. “I’ve avoided letting go in all the ways I should have because I wanted so badly to keep her with me,” she said, bringing her hand to her heart and tapping lightly. “I’ve . . . held on and I know I need to let go. But it’s going to be so . . .”

“Painful. Yes, I understand, Liza. I do.” Sadness made his heart feel heavy. He halted and she did too as he turned toward her. “I hope you’ll consider my place a refuge for as long as you need it.”

Her eyes searched his and she gave him a grateful smile, nodding almost shyly. “Thank you.”

They walked the remainder of the block in silence, turning into the main entrance of his building, and stepping onto the elevator together. Despite the heaviness of their recent conversation, tension built in the small enclosed space where they had once kissed and groped as it rose toward his apartment. He knew they were both remembering together by the way their gazes clashed and her pulse thumped steadily at her throat.

When the doors opened, they both moved toward the exit at the same time, laughing as they collided in front of the door. “After you,” he said.

He opened the apartment door and they went inside, Reed punching in

the alarm code before they both hung their jackets on the hooks by his door. The tension swirled, thickened, coalesced. He felt it as a tangible thing and yet he didn't want to acknowledge it because he'd promised himself he'd go slow. Give her time, even if the tension building between them demanded *now*. He turned back to Liza who had two high points of color on her cheeks. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked. "There's still half a bottle—"

She stepped toward him, taking his face in her hands, and bringing her lips to his. *Soft. Full. Lips that were made to be kissed*, he thought as their mouths met and they both groaned. Their tongues tangled and he tasted her sweetness, familiar yet so new, something he wanted to explore for hours. He wrapped his arms around her, letting them trail down her spine, his fingers finding each vertebra, wanting to know every small part that formed her. She shivered, pressing her body to his, molding her soft contours to his hard lines. *God, I could lose myself in you. It would be so easy.*

She grappled with his belt as they kissed, a small sound of impatience emanating from her throat as she pulled him forward a few steps until her back hit the wall, and then broke her lips from his, turning so she was facing away from him. She looked back over her shoulder, bringing her hands up and bracing them on the wall. She pressed her ass back against him, an invitation and he grasped the hem of her dress, beginning to raise it, while simultaneously unzipping his jeans. She let out a moan, glancing over her

shoulder again, anticipation clear in her expression, even though he could only see her profile.

Quick and dirty, that's how she wanted it. Reed paused, his mind clearing ever so slightly. Quick and dirty . . . *just like the first time.*

He held himself in his hand, so hard he ached, his breath coming fast and sharp in lust-filled pants as he grappled for control. She looked over her shoulder again, confused now. "What's wrong?"

Reed released a shudder of breath. He placed his lips on the side of her exposed throat and kissed her as he lowered her dress. "Not like this," he whispered, tucking himself back into his pants.

Her body stilled, and for a moment she didn't move. When she did finally turn, she looked uncertain, embarrassed. They stared at each other for an awkward moment. Liza looked down. "I'm sorry, I—"

"You don't have anything to be sorry for." He pushed away from her, zipping his pants. He needed space if he had any chance of holding on to the tenuous control he'd managed to grasp. He took another deep breath, running his hand through his hair. It didn't matter how far away he ran. She was in his nostrils, under his skin, in his heart, though he wasn't completely certain he wanted to consider how much just yet. And she looked so damned rejected, so *wounded*, and yet somehow resigned, that he almost took her into his arms again just to comfort her.

“Is it because of what you know about me? I understand if it’s hard to want to touch me after—”

“God, no. It’s hard *not* to touch you. I want this, Liza. I want you. Christ”—he looked off to the side—“you have no idea how much.” He looked back, straight into her eyes. “But not like this. I want to take it slow. I want to look in your eyes. I want to watch your face so I know what you like and what you don’t. I want to enjoy it, but mostly, I want you to enjoy it too.” He might be an idiot. Because God knew he needed a release. Needed it so badly he felt like he might crack. But he wanted more from her than just a quick fuck against his apartment wall. He wanted more than she’d given other strangers she’d met in bars, more than just an exercise in power that she managed to get through to prove to herself she *could*.

Zach had said she would need to come to him, but this was not her doing that. This was her playing a role, going through the motions of an exercise she believed would help heal her. It wasn’t about him. It wasn’t even really about her. It was only about her horrific and violent past. It was as though she switched *off* as soon as things became sexual. Reed had felt it. Her body was there, but she’d looked away, retreated into herself. He couldn’t blame her. God, how could he? But he also couldn’t use her body, when her soul was missing. “I can wait,” he said. “Until you’re ready.”

She frowned, beginning to open her mouth as if to argue the point, but

then closing it as her eyes moved away. Her shoulders rose and fell on a breath and Liza shifted on her feet. Her lashes fluttered down and then she looked back up at him. Her eyes held so much seriousness, that his heart twisted. “I don’t know how to do anything else, Reed,” she said, so softly that if he hadn’t been standing directly in front of her, he wouldn’t have been able to make out the words. “I’m walking through the dark alone.”

He shook his head, reaching out for her hand. She gave it to him and he grasped it tightly in his own. “No,” he said. “You’re not.” He led her toward the living room and switched the TV on to a music station. The low strains of some eighties love song came on. *Journey*.

“Oh God, you’re not going to sing, are you?” she asked. “I think I’ve been brutalized enough.”

Reed let out a small surprised laugh but his brow followed that into a frown. Gallows humor. Damn if she didn’t have every right to it. Liza gave him a teary smile. “No,” he said. “I’m not going to sing. Not tonight anyway.” He stepped close, taking her in his arms. She was stiff and a minute later when he caught a glimpse of her face reflected in the window, her eyes were wide, expression unsure. Tenderness blossomed inside him. She was so beautiful and so afraid, and a protectiveness he’d never experienced before gripped his insides. He began swaying slowly and she moved with him awkwardly, breathing out a small embarrassed laugh when she stepped on his

toes. "Sorry. I don't really know how to dance."

"It's easy," he said. "Just follow me."

She pressed into him, wrapping her arms around his neck, her breath warm against his skin and to Reed, the moment felt tender, intimate. New.

"He ruined me," she whispered. "Sometimes that's how I feel."

He turned his head very slightly. "No other person can ruin you. It's not possible."

She leaned back, looking in his eyes. "Do you believe that?"

"Yeah," he answered with all the conviction in his heart. "I do."

She stared at him for another moment as though looking for the truth of his statement in his eyes. Apparently convinced of it, she put her head on his shoulder, allowing him to hold her. "I just . . ." She looked up at him again. "I don't want you to feel like you have to take part in fixing what's broken in me."

He shook his head. "No, I can't do that. It sounds like a big job and frankly, I'm kind of busy at the moment."

She paused and then laughed, shaking her head. "I'm serious."

He met her eyes. "You have to do that work, Liza. You already are. All I'm saying is that if you need to climb stairs in the dark, then you do that. And if you'll let me, I'll be waiting for you on the other side, and I'll be cheering you on."

A small burst of breath escaped her mouth and she nodded, the movement jerky. She put her head back on his shoulder as they continued to sway together. *Baby steps. I can do that with her. Hold her. Comfort her. Help her learn how strong she is.* Because, as it turned out, when it came to dancing, she was a natural. She'd just never tried before. And in that moment, Reed knew that he wanted to be there with her—for her—whenever she would allow it.

I'm all in, Liza. All in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Reed pulled onto the street where Milo Ortiz, the sanitation worker who'd found the body of Toby Resnick, lived in an older neighborhood in Delhi. The houses on the street were well maintained for the most part, though many of them showed signs of their age, and the fact that that particular neighborhood was right on the edge of a high-crime area. Reed hoped something could be done to stop it from spilling over onto this quiet, tree-lined street, but he wasn't optimistic.

He pulled up to the curb and got out of his vehicle, walking up the concrete path to the front door of the address Jennifer Pagett had written down for him. He heard some shuffling on the other side of the door and waited a minute before the door was pulled open, and a man who looked to be in his mid to late twenties stood before him in a white T-shirt and track pants, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy as if he'd just been woken from a long sleep. Reed had assumed the man would be Hispanic considering his last name, but Milo Ortiz appeared to be half black. "Yeah?"

Reed unclipped his badge and flashed it at the man. "Milo Ortiz?"

His eyes shot to the badge. "Uh-huh," he said haltingly.

"Detective Reed Davies. You called in finding a body on your shift several days ago?"

Milo's shoulders seemed to relax slightly. "Yeah. That's right." He scrubbed at his face. "I thought I was being pranked for a minute, you know? It didn't look real. But I walked right up to it and it was real, all right. I went back to my truck and used my cell to call it in."

Reed nodded. "Can we chat inside for a minute?"

"Oh, yeah sure." Milo stepped back allowing Reed entrance and he walked into the ranch style house, turning as Milo closed the door behind him. "That way," he said, gesturing his hand down a short hall that looked to open up into a living room.

As they walked past the open doorway of a kitchen, Reed glanced in, spotting a couple of marijuana plants growing on the windowsill.

"Shit," he heard Milo say softly from his right.

"I'm not here for that," Reed assured him.

Milo let out a nervous laugh. "Cool. Thanks, man. Uh, Detective. In here," he said. Reed followed him into the living room that featured army-green shag carpeting, a couple of plaid couches, and an easy chair with large patches of leather rubbed off the arms and headrest. Despite the furniture that clearly belonged to another decade and had seen its share of use, the room was neat and tidy.

A cat was sleeping at the end of the couch and Reed sat down next to it, careful not to jostle the animal. It opened one eye, took him in, and,

apparently unimpressed, went back to sleep.

“Any suspects yet?” Milo asked, sitting down in the easy chair. “I’ve been following The Hollow-Eyed Killer case on the news.” He shook his head. “I still can’t believe I found one of his victims.”

“No, no suspects yet, unfortunately. I know you gave a statement to the officers who first arrived on the scene of the crime. I’m one of the detectives working the case, and I wanted to talk to you in person, make sure there was nothing you might have forgotten, or considered later that you didn’t think about at the time.”

Milo shook his head. “No. What I told you at the door, and what I first told the officers, is pretty much exactly like it happened. I would have stuck around, but I was working a shift.”

“I understand. You told the officers you didn’t recognize the victim, but being that it was almost dark and his face was . . . mutilated, would you mind looking at a photograph to confirm you’ve never seen him before?”

Milo looked dubious. “It’s of the guy alive, right? I don’t have to look at another picture of his dead corpse?”

“No. The victim is alive in this photo.” It was, in fact, his license photo from the BMV. Reed reached in the file folder he’d set down on the edge of the coffee table in front of him and handed it to Milo. Milo took a moment to study it, squinting before he shook his head, handing it back. “No. I don’t

think so.”

I don't think so. Reed slipped it back in the folder and removed the ones beneath it. “Okay, thank you, Mr. Ortiz. Do you mind looking at the photos of the other victims as well? We haven't released all the names to the news yet, and I'd like to rule out any possibility that you recognize these people.”

“Is there any reason I would?”

“Not unless you're mistaken about not knowing the victim you found in that alley. We believe the other victims are connected in some way, and maybe seeing photos of them will jog your memory.”

Milo shrugged. “Uh, sure, right.” He nodded down to the photographs in Reed's hand. “Yeah, I can do that. You know, the newscasters keep speculating on what the connections between the victims might be.”

Oh, Reed knew. He knew it well. He got no less than twenty calls a day asking him if he could give them details on the other victims after it'd been leaked that the ones who'd been named hadn't been the only targets of The Hollow-Eyed Killer. The CPD was keeping the names of the falling victims out of the news for the moment though, hoping to hold on to some information only the killer would know.

He handed Milo the photos and he looked through them, shaking his head non-committedly, but when he came to the last one, he flinched, dropping it on the coffee table. “Is this a joke?”

Reed frowned. “You know her?”

“That’s my fucking mother.”

Reed stared at Milo for a minute and then glanced down at the photo of Margo Whiting, the prostitute who took a dive off the balcony of her apartment building. “Your mother?”

“Not that she deserves the title,” Milo said. He appeared agitated suddenly, his knee bouncing rapidly as he ran his palms over his thighs. “How’d she die?”

Reed’s mind was buzzing, whirring. “Margo Whiting fell to her death,” Reed said. “We have evidence that she was targeted and killed by The Hollow-Eyed Killer.”

Milo’s face did a number of strange tics before settling into a deep frown. He rubbed a hand over his close-cropped hair. “I have nothing to do with her. I haven’t seen Margo in over a decade.”

“Why?” he asked. “She was your—”

“That woman was never a mother.” He let out a small humorless laugh.

Reed frowned, leaning back on the couch. “Can you tell me about your relationship with her?”

Milo blew out a long breath as though he needed time to come up with the right words. “My mother was a whore, Detective. And not the *Pretty Woman* type, you know . . . good-hearted girl, down on her luck. Margo was

a heroin addict who tricked for money and let her john's do things to her in front of me I'll never erase from my brain. If they offered enough cash and they were interested in me too, she tricked me out as well."

Reed flinched. "I'm sorry."

Milo shrugged. "Nothing for you to be sorry about. It is what it is. I'm not there anymore." He leaned forward. "Child Protective Services eventually took me away because a neighbor complained about Margo leaving me alone in the house while she went out for days at a time." He let out a humorless laugh. "That was the funniest part of all. I got taken away from her because she left me alone in the house. And the true joke? Those were the only times I had any peace."

Jesus. "What happened after that?"

Milo sat back. "Margo had had a relationship with some loser for a couple months, so miracle of miracles, she knew who my sperm donor was. Some deadbeat I saw around the neighborhood here and there. But he'd had a daughter who was ten years older than me, married, living a decent life, and she took me in."

"That's why you have a different last name?"

"Yeah. Even though my sister, Yolanda, was really just my legal guardian, in essence she and her husband, Troy, adopted me. I took his last name."

Reed nodded. “Did you ever see Margo after that?”

He shrugged. “She tried to come around for money sometimes. Yolanda told her to fuck off.”

Good, Reed thought. Christ, the lives people had to live. Sometimes he felt so fucking sad about the state of the world, it felt like it was eating away his insides. And all *he* was doing was taking in the information. This man had *lived* it. “Your life got better,” he said. “Living with your half-sister.”

Milo nodded, swallowed. “Yeah. There was no *half* about it. Yolanda and Troy saved me. I made a life for myself because of them, outran my demons.” He paused, meeting Reed’s eyes. “I realize Margo was murdered by a psycho, but I can tell you this, I’m not at all sorry that bitch is dead. I hope she’s burning in hell.”

Reed couldn’t blame him. Not at all. He thanked Milo for his time and walked back down the path toward his car.

Margo Whiting was Milo Ortiz’s *mother*. This absolutely could *not* be a coincidence. Reed felt antsy with the excitement of another connection that might lead them forward. He wished he was at the office right that moment and could stand before the board and look at the information all at once.

When he got to the curb, he noticed Milo’s trash was sitting out waiting for the garbage men. He took a moment to lean his head around the cans and saw the recycling bin, filled to the top with empty alcohol bottles.

He wondered if the man had recently had a party. But Reed had a feeling it was something else. He had a feeling Milo was still outrunning those demons he'd mentioned.

But not by much.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Reed looked up as Jennifer slid the chair out on the other side of the table where he was sitting and sat down with a short huff.

“Hey. Thanks for meeting me here.”

“We do have to eat once in a while,” she said, smiling.

He pushed his empty plate aside. “Sorry I didn’t wait, but I was starved.” That was true, but he’d also needed to get out of that office. He felt like he’d been living there the past few days, arriving early, and staying far too late.

“Nah, you’re good. I didn’t know how long I’d be.” She removed her jacket and twisted around, hanging it on the back of her chair. “There’s so much cross-referencing to do. The few names we have from the halfway house, plus now family members of the victims. I still can’t find anything that connects our eyeless victims except that they were dirtbags, may they rest in peace.” She raised her eyebrows and shook her head. “I’m tied to the computer too. Plus, they have me running around checking out information coming in from tipsters, even the ones that are obviously phony. I wish they’d bring charges on those fools. Wasting our time that way.”

“Me too,” Reed agreed. “Usually there’s no way to prove they’re making shit up though.”

Jennifer sighed. “Yep.”

Ransom had had a family gathering that he’d taken the day off for. He’d offered to skip the function and come in anyway, but Reed had urged him not to. Eating, sleeping, and breathing the case wasn’t helpful for anyone. He had to remind himself of that too, but Ransom had a wife who deserved to see her husband now and again.

The server showed up and took Jennifer’s order, refilling Reed’s coffee cup and pouring Jennifer a cup as well.

“It feels weird,” Jennifer noted, adding sugar to her coffee. “A cluster of killings, and now almost a week with . . . nada.” She picked up her spoon and stirred her coffee. “I’m not complaining, but it feels off. These guys, they don’t just stop.”

Reed had been thinking the same thing and he nodded in agreement. Although he couldn’t help thinking of his own father. In essence, he *had* just . . . stopped. *Bellum finivit*. The words flashed in his mind, causing his stomach to roll. *The war is over*. He’d waged his final battle, and from all accounts, ended the war for good.

“Although,” Jennifer went on, “I suppose it does happen. Remember that rash of female sex workers who were going missing over a ten-year period, starting twenty years ago or so? I was just a *kid* and I remember it.” She took a sip of her coffee, setting it down and bringing her hands up, and

splaying her fingers in a poof movement. “Then, nothing. That guy apparently moved on. Or died. Who knows.”

“It does happen, but I have a feeling we’re not going to get that lucky.”

“You and me both.” Jennifer drummed her fingers on the table. “I’ve been looking into that dude who jumped off the overpass. The possibly homeless one? Without an ID, it’s a dead end. No pun intended.” She drummed her fingers again. “But I don’t know, I’ve got this feeling that if we could figure out his identity, a few more things might fall into place. Maybe some kind of plan or”—she looked off to the side as if searching for the right word—“reason . . . would become clear.”

“Playbook?”

She tipped her head. “Yeah, I guess that’s a good word. There’s some specific order that I can’t figure out. But if we *could*, I think we could get a jump on this guy.” Her face contorted. “God, the puns just write themselves,” she muttered. “What I mean is, maybe we could save somebody’s eyeballs, and their life.”

Reed gave her a wry grimace. “We do have a few connections to work with now though,” he said, thinking. They had it all laid out on the boards in the incident room and he’d stared at them for what felt like hours on end, but sometimes it was good to get away from that, away from the room where the same ideas had been gone over and over with no real results. Sometimes a

fresh environment brought fresh ideas.

“Milo Ortiz, the man who found Toby Resnick, has no connection to him that we can ascertain. But he does have a connection to another victim, Margo Whiting, who fell to her death. Elizabeth Nolan does have a connection to Steven Sadowski who she works with, and also to a falling victim, her brother, Julian Nolan. It’s like there are all these connections, but none of them have any *meaning*.”

The server approached their table, breaking Reed’s concentration for a moment. She slid Jennifer’s club sandwich in front of her, asked if they needed anything else, and when they replied no, turned and left. Jennifer took the toothpick out of her sandwich and picked up half, nodding at Reed to go on. “Sadowski was left in the hospital where he worked. Toby Resnick was left in an alleyway in the same neighborhood where he lived and conducted his shady business dealings. But the third eyeless victim, Clifford Schlomer who ran the payday loan business was left in a location nowhere near where he lived or worked.”

Jennifer nodded, wiping her mouth before she spoke. “The parking garage downtown.”

Reed nodded, picturing the man slumped in the corner behind the painter’s car. What was her name? *Sabrina McPhee*.

It’s like he was left there just for me.

“What do we have on Sabrina McPhee?” he asked.

Jennifer paused. “The painter who found Clifford Schlomer, the payday loan dude, in that garage?” She looked to the side, thinking. “I did a basic check. She owns an art studio near her apartment. Relatively successful. Was married and divorced once. Seemed like an amicable enough split from what I saw on paper. No shared property, no kids. She has good credit, no record. Nothing stood out.”

Reed felt a small buzz of something rise from his gut to his chest. “Okay. Think about this. Steven Sadowski was left in a location where Elizabeth Nolan was the likeliest one to find him. She reported that she takes that stairway every morning at the same time, and the body was placed there directly before she arrived. Same with Milo Ortiz. He was on his regular *work* route. The body of Toby Resnick was left in a location where he was the likeliest to find him.”

Jennifer nodded, bringing her sandwich from her mouth where she’d been about to take a bite and lowering it to her plate. “But Elizabeth Nolan knew Steven Sadowski, and Milo Ortiz did not know Toby Resnick.”

Reed brought his top teeth over his bottom lip as he glanced away for a moment. “Okay. Let’s assume for the moment that Elizabeth Nolan knowing Steven Sadowski is a coincidence or . . . happenstance based on where they both worked.”

Jennifer looked dubious. “Okay.”

“Just for now,” Reed said. “And then Clifford Schlomer who was found in the parking garage, was left in a location, and at a time, where the likeliest one to find him was Sabrina McPhee. So,” he went on, “if those three victims were not left in random locations, they were left in places where those *specific* people would find them first. They were placed *strategically*—”

“Which would mean,” Jennifer said excitedly, “that it’s not only the *victims* who are important to this guy, but the ones who find them as well.” She sat back in her chair. “Holy shit,” she said. “The *discoverers* of the bodies are *not* random. Okay, maybe, yeah.”

“But why?” Reed murmured. His heart rate had increased and his skin felt sort of prickly from underneath. If they were on the right track, it meant Liza was important to this killer. He’d already questioned that based on her brother’s murder, but not to this extent. He’d assumed the killer had targeted her brother based on Liza’s random role in the crime. She’d somehow . . . come under his sick scrutiny. But perhaps her role in the crime was not random at all. Just like it didn’t appear Milo Ortiz’s role was random either.

Reed looked off behind Jennifer for a moment. “There’s another victim attached to two of the discoverers: Milo, whose mom was a falling victim, and Liza, whose brother suffered the same fate.”

Jennifer nodded. “Might it stand to reason then, that the John Doe with

the brand who fell from the overpass is connected somehow to the third discoverer, Sabrina McPhee?”

“Bingo,” Reed said quietly. “Which is why we need to get all the information we can on Sabrina.”

“It’s all twisted together somehow. Did the killer *pose* the victims *for* them? As some sort of sign or . . . message or . . . whatever? Did he kill people who’d caused them to suffer? And if so, *why*? What’s in it for him?”

Reed shook his head, at a loss. “Both Elizabeth Nolan and Milo Ortiz had really bad childhoods,” he said. “That’s a link between them. Although, the people who caused them some of their suffering are the ones pushed to their deaths.” He’d shown Liza a picture of the enucleated victims, similar to Sadowski, the one she’d discovered, in an attempt to find a link there, but she hadn’t recognized either of them. He hadn’t shown her a photo of Milo Ortiz or Sabrina McPhee because their role had appeared to be nothing but chance at the time. But now . . . he needed to get their photographs in front of her.

“I’ll look more into Sabrina McPhee’s background,” Jennifer said. “See if I can find some more specific links or similarities. See if there’s anyone from her past who caused her pain or suffering. Maybe that will help identify John Doe.”

Reed nodded. “Her studio’s pretty close by. I’ll stop by after I leave here and question her further and show her some photos.”

“Great.”

“I’ll give Milo Ortiz a call, too,” Reed said, “and question him about Elizabeth and Sabrina.”

“Sounds good.” Jennifer took a big bite of her sandwich, and Reed finished off the last of his cold coffee. He picked up the check and started gathering his things. “Thanks again for meeting me here.”

She nodded up at him. “I’ll call you later.”

As Reed walked back to the office to pick up his car, he went back over what he and Jennifer had talked about. He had this feeling they’d just had a breakthrough, but goddamn it, there were still too many missing pieces.

His cell phone rang, breaking him from his thoughts and he took his phone from his pocket, glancing at the screen but not recognizing the number. “Hello?”

“Detective Davies?”

Reed stepped to the side of the sidewalk, using his finger to press on his other ear to better block out the city traffic. He recognized the voice but couldn’t place it. “Yes?”

“This is Gordon Draper. We met several weeks ago at my home—”

“Ah, yes. Hello, Mr. Draper. How are you?” Reed asked, recalling his meeting with the wheelchair-bound former Lakeside director.

“Very well, thank you.” He paused. “I’ve been watching your case on the news. It’s all very disturbing, isn’t it? This Hollow-Eyed Killer?”

“Very,” he agreed, wondering what the old man was calling about.

“I saw the photograph of the victim that was in the news. Dreadful, of course. I was afraid I’d have nightmares after I saw it. I don’t know why those news people think it’s okay to splash that sort of thing all over the television.” He paused. “Anyway, something about the image was familiar and I couldn’t put my finger on it right away, but this morning, I did, and I hope you don’t mind me calling you. It might be nothing, of course—”

“I don’t mind you calling at all, Mr. Draper,” Reed said, trying to be patient. “I appreciate it. What was familiar to you?”

“Well, funny enough, the image of that man . . . the black, dripping eyes, it made me think of a comic book.”

“A comic book?” Down the street a car horn blared and he turned briefly in that direction.

“Yes. My grandson Everett loved comics. I . . . donated his things, so I don’t have any of that particular one around here anymore, but I remember it. I remember that image.”

A comic book? Reed wasn’t sure what to think. “Do you remember the

name?”

“Yes, it’s a series called Tribulation. If I once knew the storyline, I’m afraid I can’t recall it now.” He let out a brief chuckle. “Lucky thing I remembered the title. There are a few comic book stores in the city that might sell copies if you think it’s worth looking into.”

“Thank you, Mr. Draper. I’ll definitely do that.”

“Good, yes. Again, it might be nothing more than the flawed memory of an old man but . . . you never know.”

Reed said his goodbyes, thanking Mr. Draper again. He wasn’t sure what to make of the call but he’d check it out right after he visited Sabrina McPhee.

Tribulation. Interesting. Reed walked the two remaining blocks to his office building, retrieving his car from the lot and googling the address of the art gallery. It only took him ten minutes to drive there, and find a parking space a block away.

He walked toward the building on the corner that had Sabrina’s name in black block print on the glass front door. Once in front of it, though, he saw that the lights were off. Frowning, he leaned forward, shielding the light over his eyes so he could see inside better. The door opened up into what was essentially a walkway, with two large white walls on either side. Canvases hung on those walls and as Reed’s gaze moved over the art, a chill raced

under his skin. The first word that came to Reed's mind was *hellish*. They each featured different color iterations of a similar topic: hands reaching up from the depths of a fiery pit, into an empty sky. As he looked more closely at the pit, he could see screaming faces barely discernible through the smoke and ash.

“So that's creepy,” he murmured, leaning away. Jennifer had mentioned Sabrina McPhee was moderately successful. And the fact that she paid rent on her own studio spoke of that. He hadn't known there was a market for stills of horror movies. Then again, was he really surprised? Despite his own lack of appreciation for the subject, he could admit she was talented. Maybe this wasn't all she painted. He couldn't see around any of the corners inside.

It appeared that the studio was closed, but he knocked anyway, waiting for a minute, and then turning away. When he got back to his car, he got her number from his case file, and dialed it, leaving a message on her voicemail when she didn't answer.

Reed sat there for a minute, allowing his mind to swirl, but when that produced nothing except a deeper throb of a headache, he breathed out a frustrated sigh, and dialed Milo Ortiz's number. He, too, didn't answer, and Reed left a message for him as well.

He was about to start up his car, when he remembered Gordon Draper's call. He glanced at the time on his radio. Six fifteen. Probably too late to

drive over to a comic book store. Still . . . something pricked at him, telling him it was worthwhile to at least look into it.

He pulled up his phone and did a search for *Tribulation*, and found information about the writer of the comic—now deceased—and a few lines that talked about how the plot loosely referenced the biblical Great Tribulation, a summary of the events leading to the end of days, but overall, there seemed to be a limited amount of information online.

Reed exited out of the page he was on, and looked up comic book stores nearby, calling the closest one on the list. To his surprise, a man picked up the phone. “Avalon Comics and Cards.”

Reed explained what he was looking for.

“Tribulation?” he repeated. “Yeah, it’s obscure. I might have a few editions, but not the full set. You’d have to go online for that. They’re out of print and not cheap.”

“Any chance I could drive over and take a look at what you have? I could be there in ten.”

“Not tonight, sorry. I’ve got the whole place shut down, and I’m just about to lock up. Also, it would take me a little time to dig around for them. What about in the morning, after nine?”

Reed sighed, feeling like he was striking out everywhere. But, fuck, he was tired, and he needed to rest his mind if he was going to be sharp

tomorrow. “That works,” Reed said. “I’ll be by after nine. My name’s Detective Reed Davies.”

“Sounds good. I’ll pull what I have first thing. See you then.”

Reed hung up and started his car, pulling away from the curb.

The only thing that was going to resurrect this shitstorm of a day was that he was going home to Liza.

Just don’t get too used to it, he warned himself. It isn’t permanent.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Liza startled as a car backfired somewhere down the street and broke her from her wandering thoughts. She switched the three grocery bags she was carrying to her other hand and turned the corner onto Reed's street.

The man was intelligent and competent, but he couldn't keep house to save his life. She'd vowed never, ever, *ever* to cook or clean for any man again, but she found that she *wanted* to care for Reed, to grab groceries, even make a meal, straighten a few things that he'd left messy on his way out the door before she'd gotten out of bed . . .

Because he doesn't expect it, she told herself. Yes, and because of that, it didn't bring up memories of running her childhood household so fearfully and desperately for so much of her young life.

A chill danced across her skin and the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She suddenly felt . . . *watched*. She glanced over her shoulder, frowning as she increased her pace. The sun had long since set, and the moon was high in the sky, but the downtown streets were well lit, and plenty of people were out and about, walking home from work, or stepping out for dinner.

Still, that chill turned into a cold lump in her belly and she picked up her pace, tempted to run the last half block to Reed's building.

When she made it to the door, she scooted quickly inside, letting out a relieved exhale as she stepped into the brightly lit lobby. As she stood waiting for the elevator, she glanced over her shoulder at the front door where a man was walking past. She only saw his profile, but for a second she thought it was Reed. The man kept walking though, head down, hands in pockets, and Liza turned forward again as the elevator dinged and a car opened up. She gave herself an internal head shake. *You can't get him off your mind, can you?*

As she rode up to Reed's floor, the lights in the elevator buzzed once and blinked, the elevator giving a jolt. Liza's gaze flew to the fluorescent bulbs overhead. "Don't even," she said, as a twist of terror swirled dizzily through her. But the elevator gods apparently weren't listening, because the car gave another small jolt and shuddered to a halt. The lights buzzed again and blinked out. Liza let out a strangled sound of terror as her pulse skyrocketed. *Oh God, no. No, no.* A sob moved up her throat. She brushed against something in the dark and she squealed, jumping back.

"Shh," Mady said. "You're fine. Liza, listen to me. That was just the wall. You're fine."

"Stop it," she said in a strangled whisper. "You're not here. I'm not fine."

"You are. You're in the elevator in Reed's building. There are four walls

surrounding you. You're safe. The lights will come back on in a minute."

"No, no, they won't." There was something there, in the dark. She could *feel* it. *Move, move!* she tried to command herself. But she couldn't. She was frozen, just like then. Terror vibrated beneath her skin, causing her to break out in a cold sweat.

I'm so cold. Has he forgotten I'm here? It's so dark. Please, please, Dad, please let me out.

"You're okay," Mady said, her voice soothing. "Remember all those stairs you climbed in the dark? You did that, Liza. And you can do it again. *Move*. Do it, just to prove you can."

But there had been a destination to head toward then. Here, she just had to wait. "I can't. I'll be stuck here in the dark—"

The lights blinked back on and the elevator continued its ascent with another small shudder. Relief flooded Liza, so intense, she let out a gasp, sniffing and almost breaking into laughter. *Oh God, I'm a mess. Still such a mess*. Shame sizzled through her. She felt like a failure, such a miserable failure.

When the elevator opened, Liza practically jumped free of the car, taking in a deep breath and letting it sweep through her body. *You're okay now. You're okay*. She took a moment to try to regain some calm, brushing the sweat from her brow before stepping forward. But as she made the walk

down the hall, that chill vibrated inside her again. The stairwell was to her right and Liza heard footsteps ascending toward her. Her heart beat more swiftly as she clutched the plastic handles of her grocery bags, the ones she'd somehow held on to despite her fear. Or maybe because of it. *You're just spooked. It's just a resident. Other people do live in this building, you know.* Still, her fast walk turned into a jog as she turned the corner to where Reed's door was and collided with someone turning from the opposite direction. She let out a small squeal, her heart thundering, jumping back, her gaze flying up to . . . Reed.

"Hey," he said, stepping forward and reaching for her upper arms, steadying her. "I heard the elevator and was coming out to meet you. Are you okay?"

Liza let out a small, somewhat hysterical-sounding laugh, feeling utterly ridiculous, and still shaky. "Yes, I'm fine." She shook her head, holding up the grocery bags. "I went to the grocery store and then the elevator stopped and went dark for a minute. I . . . I sort of panicked."

He frowned, taking her in, his gaze moving from her damp brow, to the bags in her hand that were shaking along with the tremors moving through her body.

He took the groceries from her and her shoulders shifted with the lack of weight. "That fucking elevator," Reed swore. "Liza, I'm so sorry. I'll put in a

call to maintenance. These old buildings are full of character but have far too many glitches.”

“No, it’s okay, really. I . . . survived.” *Barely*. A final tremble moved through her. She looked behind her into the hallway from which she’d come. “I thought I heard someone in the stairwell though,” she said, realizing no one had emerged.

Reed’s gaze moved over her face quickly and then he walked around her to the stairwell door, opening it and looking down and then up. He turned back, walking toward her. “No one. They must have been going to a different floor.”

She nodded and blew out a breath, trying to appear calm as Reed led her inside his apartment, where they went to the kitchen and he set the bags down. “I got ingredients to make stir-fry,” she said. “I hope you like that.”

He nodded, giving her the ghost of a smile as his gaze moved over her again as though assessing if she was really okay. “I do. Let me wash up and I’ll help.”

He came back in the room a few minutes later, his shirtsleeves rolled up and holding a folder in his hands, which he set on the counter. Work, she figured.

A feeling of well-being descended as Liza asked him about his day as they chopped vegetables and went about making dinner together, and she told

him about hers. She'd gone to the gym where she was a member and swam laps in the pool and then had taken advantage of the sauna. Then she'd come back and treated herself to an afternoon of Netflix. She tried to sound cheery as she talked about it, but Reed smiled at her knowingly as he set two plates on the table.

“You hate this. Not working.”

She let out a huff of breath as she began opening a bottle of wine and peeked up at him. “Yeah. I do. But you know, it's good practice for me. I've never . . . enjoyed my own company, I guess. So I'm looking at this week as . . . therapy. You know how I like self-applied therapy,” she said, giving him a wry smile as she handed him a glass of wine.

He chuckled, swirling his wine and tilting his head as his brows dipped. “I do have some personal insight into that.” Their eyes held for a moment. *Yes, you do, don't you?* She had the urge to apologize to him, but that felt awkward, and it was not the time. She looked away, walking to the stove where she dished up their food and brought a bowl of chicken and vegetables, and a bowl of brown rice to the table.

They sat down and dug into the food, chatting about mundane things for a bit, and it felt *good*. It felt normal and average and absolutely everything Liza had ever craved in her life. *I could so easily fall in love with you, Reed Davies*, she thought, and though a trickle of fear followed the thought so did

a sparkle of something else. *Happiness? Hope?* She wasn't sure. It was a new feeling, one she'd never felt before.

Reed took a sip of his wine and then stood, reaching for the folder he'd left on the counter. "I hate to start talking about this damn case at home," he said, flipping the folder open, "but I need to show you a couple of photos and ask if you recognize the people in them."

"Okay. Who are they?"

"Milo Ortiz and Sabrina McPhee. They're the people who found two of the murder victims."

"Oh. Okay." The other poor souls who'd unsuspectingly come across eyeless corpses. "Do you think . . . we're connected somehow?"

"I don't know," he said, sliding two photos across the table. "It's just a hunch. It might not pan out."

She nodded, placing the two photos side by side and looking at the late twenties or early thirties man, handsome with light brown skin and hazel eyes, and a woman who looked to be about the same age with shoulder-length brown curls and deep brown eyes. She tilted her head, taking a few moments to look at them. "They look . . . vaguely familiar. Maybe?" She brought her hands up and massaged her temples. "Were they patients at Lakeside at some point?"

"I don't think so, though that's unconfirmed right now."

“Hmm,” she said. “Yes, there’s definitely something familiar about them. But, no, I’m sorry. I’m not sure I’ve ever met them. Maybe they’ve used mental health services in general?”

“That could be,” he said. “There’s confirmation that at least one of them had a . . . difficult past.”

Her gaze lingered on him for a moment. By the look in his eyes, she got the feeling the word *difficult*, deeply understated whatever Reed was referring to. Liza slid the photos back across the table. “It can be a small community, those who use mental health services. You tend to encounter the same people, hear the same names, even pass by the same faces, whether you run into them directly or not. That could be it.”

He picked up the photos and put them back in his folder. “Yeah, okay, maybe. I’ll have to see what else we can find out about them.”

They cleared the dishes and Liza picked up the bottle of wine, holding it up in question. “No, thanks,” he said. “Actually, I’ll clean this up, and then I’m going to make a trip downstairs to the gym. I need a workout.” He gave her the ghost of a smile and rubbed at his eye. He looked tired. He had to be. He’d been working around the clock on this current Hollow-Eyed Killer case. She’d barely seen him in the last few days. He was probably frustrated too, had energy he needed to burn. She felt guilty, suddenly. Awkward. She grabbed their plates from the table, wondering if she wasn’t there, if he’d

choose a *different* way to burn off some energy. Maybe he'd go to a nearby bar, pick up a woman . . . but . . . no. That wasn't him. That wasn't Reed Davies. That had been *her* MO. For different reasons than to burn off energy, but still.

"Let me clean this up," she said. "You go."

"No, this'll only take a few—"

"Seriously, I've got it," she said, laying her hand on his exposed forearm.

He glanced at it as if he too could feel the frisson of heat that passed back and forth between their skin. His eyes met hers and held for a moment. "Okay," he said. "Thanks."

Liza turned back to the kitchen, happy to busy her hands with something. She loaded the dishwasher as Reed went and changed, and a few minutes later, he leaned into the kitchen wearing a hoodie and gym shorts, a duffel bag in his hand. "I'm going to set the alarm. See you in a bit."

She turned, smiled. "Okay. Have a good workout."

Liza listened as he keyed in the alarm code and then turned back to the sink, resting her hands on the edge. She felt wired too. Pent-up. Frustrated. The solution, for her, had always been to immerse herself in work, first at school, and then once she'd begun her career. And now, she'd been temporarily stripped of her safety net. She hadn't been allowed to take any of

her case files home with her, and without them, about the only thing she could do was go online and brush up on clinical methods of treating psychopathology . . . perhaps read some new psych journals . . .

But she'd meant what she'd told Reed—she needed to practice sitting with her own thoughts. That was a form of therapy too and an important one. She needed to feel safe in her own head. And frankly, she didn't really feel like looking up the latest published psychology papers. She didn't know *what* she felt like. "Because," she murmured, "you don't know your own mind." Which proved the point.

"Ugh," she said, picking up the hand towel on the counter, drying her hands and then tossing it aside. Maybe she should just go to bed and try to get into one of the novels on Reed's bookshelf in his living room.

She walked to the room across the hall where she perused his shelves, finally choosing what looked like a courtroom thriller. She smiled as she returned to the guest room. Reed enjoyed crime puzzles so much, he even read fictional stories about solving them.

Liza made herself comfortable on the bed, cracking the book open and beginning to read. She was surprised when she heard the door open and the alarm being turned off, and glanced at the clock to see it was already nine p.m. She sat up, considered going into the hall and saying hi, but why? She didn't want to be right under his feet all the time. He might want space after

coming home from the gym. Maybe it was his routine to take his case notes and sit on the couch with a drink while he went over them. Anyway, it was late, and she was getting tired.

Liza set the book down and went to the bathroom where she washed her face and brushed her teeth, and then put on a clean nightshirt. She folded the covers back and got between the sheets, picking the book back up again. The shower down the hall came on a minute later and Liza lowered the book, glancing at the wall, a flush moving through her body as she pictured Reed peeling off his gym clothes and stepping under the spray. A small thrill tingled between her legs and her nipples pebbled beneath the thin material of her nightshirt. Liza frowned at the closed door on the opposite side of the room, surprise and uncertainty sweeping over her. She had managed to relax enough during sex that her body responded to touch, but she couldn't remember feeling turned on in response to a *thought*. A small smile curved her lips, a sensation not unlike wonder spilling through her. *Yearning*.

What would he do if she joined him in the shower?

Another thrill trembled over her nerves.

She wouldn't do that, of course. She couldn't. Because Reed had made it clear that a quick round of sex—shower or otherwise—was not on the table. She turned over, picking up the book again, reading three words and then placing it down.

The water shut off and she strained her ears to hear him, but the only sound reverberating inside her was the staccato beat of her own heart. She couldn't hear him, but God, she could *feel* him.

The thing was . . . Reed hadn't said sex was off the table completely; he'd said that he wanted more from her than that. And therein lay the problem. Liza pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and chewed at it for a moment.

She'd worked hard to overcome her distaste at being touched. Then she'd even begun to enjoy sex, as long as it was temporary and anonymous though *Reed* was the first man who'd given her an orgasm during intercourse. But she could never become overly intimate with someone because that would lead to uncovering all sorts of truths about her past and who she was.

Then came Reed. Reed who *knew* her past and somehow—miraculously—seemed to accept and want her anyway. Reed who'd encouraged her to use her past for *good*. Liza sat up.

She didn't know a time when she hadn't held secrets. Shame. She'd thought of her past as a particular kind of loneliness, and it was. But it was also a strength. She'd *done* those things, as ghastly as they were. As unspeakable. Things others might not have been able to do. She'd done them to survive. To live. And she need not put them into descriptive words for anyone else, but inside herself, she must figure out a way to stitch them over

her heart, not as an impenetrable shield, but as a badge of courage. A scar of honor, maybe, because so many of them she'd done out of love.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, taking a deep breath as she placed a hand over her chest, feeling it move from deep inside her body, out her mouth. She heard the bathroom door open and then Reed's footsteps move down the hall toward the kitchen.

Are you ready? This would take courage—a different type of journey through the dark. *But he'll be with you. Yes.* She wanted it. Wanted *him*. More than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. Joy trembled within. It felt ephemeral, delicate. She wanted to capture it, to hold it close. She was afraid, so afraid it'd disappear.

She hurried to the door, opening it quickly and walking with purpose toward Reed. She didn't dare hesitate, didn't dare give herself a chance to rethink this.

When she rounded the corner into the kitchen, she was slightly out of breath. Reed was standing against the sink, a glass of water in his hand, wearing nothing except another pair of track shorts. She let her gaze sweep over his bare chest, her face flushing as she met his eyes.

His brow creased and he lowered his water glass. "Everything okay?"

Liza fidgeted, feeling so damn timid that she wasn't sure she should go through with this. But she gathered her courage and walked to where he

stood, reaching out and letting her fingers trail down his stomach muscles. She watched in fascination as they tensed with her movement, and then she raised her eyes to look into his. He appeared frozen, staring at her with a sudden sharp intensity that caused her heart to beat triple time. He slowly placed the water glass on the counter next to him and took her hand, holding it against his skin. “Liza,” he said.

“Please,” she answered, a nervous laugh almost escaping. She caught it, but she could do nothing about the blush that filled her cheeks. She hadn’t meant to beg. She thought of how powerful she’d felt that night as she’d led him from the bar to his apartment and then straight to his bed. How faraway that woman seemed. What an illusion that power had been.

This is me, she thought. The real me . . . and I’m offering myself to you.

Reed paused again, his eyes moving over her features, his brow still creased as though he was trying desperately to understand her.

“I have to know you understand what this means.”

She nodded. “I do.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Okay, but I’m still going to spell it out.” He paused. “I don’t just want one night of sex. I want you there in the morning, and I want this to be the start of more.”

She allowed her lips to tip. Her entire body was buzzing with anticipation, with excitement, with . . . yes, happiness.

“You mean, we’ll have sex . . . again,” she joked, the elbow of her outstretched arm bending as she took a small step closer.

He smiled. “Among other things.”

Liza bit her lip, nodded, hoped he could see her heart in her eyes. “Those other things . . . I want them too, Reed. I do.”

She expected him to kiss her then, but he didn’t. Instead he flattened his hand over hers and used it to slide her palm upward so it was just below his heart. “One more thing . . .” He looked at her frankly, but paused. Liza watched his face and waited. She felt his heart beating, strong and steady. “I want you to be confident that I’ll stop anytime you want me to. And you set the pace, okay?” He waited for her to nod before he went on. “But I’m not going to hold back, Liza. That wouldn’t be enjoyable for either one of us. If you don’t like something, you let me know, and if you do like something, you can let me know that as well.”

She understood what he was saying. He wasn’t going to use kid gloves with her in bed. The knowledge brought a surge of relief. It reassured her that he wouldn’t be thinking about all the ways she was damaged while he was touching her body. He would be thinking only of her, of him, of *them*, in the present moment as they navigated this new relationship together. “Yes,” she said. “Thank you.”

His lips tipped. He leaned in and kissed her. And it was sweet. God, it

was sweet. It was just a boy kissing a girl who desperately wanted to be kissed. It was as simple and as earth-shattering as that. Liza stepped into him, her hands moving down his skin softly, gently. She felt as if she were floating and the only thing anchoring her to earth was him. This beautiful, honorable man who'd come into her life so unexpectedly and turned her world on end.

He broke from her lips, and they walked together to the bedroom where Reed turned on the side lamp and tilted it toward the wall the same way he'd done that first night. He clicked off the overhead light and when he came back to her, he took her hand, leading her to the end of the bed. "Are you cold?" he asked.

She shook her head. She felt warm, overly so. Flushed and tingly. *I trust you*, she thought with wild wonder. *I trust every part of myself with you*. Liza felt something weighty inside slide off like a chain falling free. She felt slightly giddy and a little afraid, she wasn't sure, but whatever this was, she'd never experienced it before. It felt new. *She* felt new.

"Can we . . . can we go slow?" she asked, not so much out of fear, but because he'd told her she could set the pace and she wanted it that way this first time. And she wanted to consider it just that—her first time—because she'd never really gotten one. It'd been viciously and violently stolen from her and she meant to reclaim it. Here. With Reed. Because he was right—monsters didn't get the final say. She was going to make certain they didn't.

He smiled at her, so beautiful that it left her breathless. “Anything you want,” he told her.

Reed took hold of the hem of her nightshirt and lifted it slowly, pulling it over her head and dropping it to the floor. For a moment he simply looked at her, his gaze moving over her naked skin and causing goosebumps in its wake. Funny that his gaze alone could do that. He hadn’t even touched her. He lowered himself to the edge of the bed and brought his hand up and traced each breast, his finger moving slowly around her nipples, and then brought his hands to her waist, gliding them slowly down her skin, over her hips, and down her thighs. She felt electrified, waiting for his hands to move to another part of her body, the anticipation nearly making her groan. And she watched in awe as the simple sight of her body caused him to swell and harden, his body outlined in the thin material of his shorts. Her breath caught, coming faster.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, and his voice was low, gritty. She *felt* beautiful. Worshipped. She felt . . . clean. Pure, even. She was offering herself to the man in front of her, knowing that he looked at her and saw unmarred beauty. He was exploring her. Touching her with reverence as if *he* was in awe. And because of that, it *felt* like her first time. In every way that mattered, that’s exactly what it was.

“So are you,” she said. He smiled up at her, boyish, sweet, and her heart

flipped once and then squeezed tightly.

“Do you know the very first thing I loved about you?” he asked.

Loved. The word electrified her, and yet brought a trill of fear close on its heels.

“My impeccable taste in men?” she asked breathlessly. Nervously. This was so . . . it was so *new* and so she used humor to deflect.

He laughed softly. “Well that, yes, obviously. But mostly it was the way you laughed. The way it lit up your whole face. The way it made me feel.”

Oh, Reed.

Her insides melted, that old part of herself that was still figuring out how to let go. He was helping her do that, every breath, every touch, every sweet word he uttered was a stitch she was using to adhere that badge of courage to her heart.

He pulled her forward as he scooted back and they lay next to each other on the bed as he continued to run his hands over her, his fingers trailing around the band of her underwear, down her hips, and then up the tender insides of her arms. Each time he got close to one of the places she needed him so desperately to touch, he moved away, teasing her until she was practically squirming with need. “Reed,” she breathed, and it sounded like a whine, so she laughed, taking his hand herself and bringing it to the damp material between her thighs.

He smiled, leaning in, and kissing her as he brought her underwear down and tossed them aside, not breaking from her mouth as he maneuvered his own shorts off. Warm skin met warm skin and they both sighed. He kissed the corner of her mouth, softly, gently, and though the kiss was almost chaste, with their naked skin pressed together, every part of her felt so incredibly sensitive.

She let out a small gasp of pleasure when he slid his finger inside her and she felt his heart kick up and his erection give an answering jolt. Sensation unraveled within, waves of pleasure that licked at her spine, through her core, and down the backs of her legs as he stroked her slowly. “Oh,” she moaned. “I like that.”

“Good,” he said, his voice strained. “I like that too.”

He brought his mouth to hers and they kissed and touched, Liza learning his body as well, glorying in the slow exploration. He was lean but muscled, athletic, his skin both rough and velvety. A wonder. She took over, his finger slipping from her as she turned her attention to him and he watched her explore and taste, his expression both drunk and pained, fingers flexing beside him as if he was barely containing his need to touch her.

After several long minutes, he let out a raw growl, turning her suddenly. She laughed as her back hit the mattress and he hovered over her, his lips tipping sweetly, though his eyes were hooded with desire. He reached for a

condom and she recognized the brand. It was one of the ones she'd left behind that night that now seemed a million miles away. She watched as he slid it on and then he hooked his hand beneath her thigh, the muscle of his bicep curving as her leg slid up his hip and she cradled him between her thighs. He pushed slowly inside her, their gazes locked. Liza didn't even blink.

His head fell forward slightly as if it was suddenly too heavy for his neck. "Oh God, Liza," he breathed, moving inside her, his lips parting and his eyes drooping with pleasure. She felt alive with joy—every nerve ending humming—watching with awe the pure bliss on his face. She'd always turned her face away because she didn't want to be seen, but in doing so, she'd never watched. She'd never enjoyed the way a man looked in the throes of ecstasy.

It was beautiful. He was beautiful.

She raised her hand and brought it to his face, her thumb stroking over his cheekbone, along one dark eyebrow, over his half-parted lips. He took her thumb between his teeth, sucking on it, his eyes locked on hers as his rhythm increased. A sound escaped her, half gasp, half groan—a noise of encouragement—as a jolt of hot arousal shot straight to her core.

When they came, they came together, their eyes wide open, hearts beating in sync. As they both drifted back to earth, Reed laid his forehead on

hers. “Did you hear that big boom?” he asked breathlessly, his mouth close to hers.

Liza blinked up at him, smiling in dazed confusion.

“The sound of another one biting the dust.” He kissed her once, softly, quickly. “Me,” he whispered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Reed pushed open the door to the small shop, a bell ringing overhead, the scent of dust and old paper meeting his nose. He looked around at the cases of comic books that created rows in the center of the large room, shelves along the walls overstuffed with plastic-sleeved titles, and a counter near the back where a young man stood, bent over something in front of him. The guy glanced over his shoulder at Reed, laying down whatever was in his hands that he'd been working on and pushing his glasses up on his nose.

“Detective Davies?”

“Yeah. That obvious, huh?”

“Let’s just say you don’t look like my average customer.” He pointed to the firearm obscured by Reed’s coat. “Plus, there’s that. My name’s Kaiden.”

Reed stepped up to the waist-high counter. “Nice to meet you.”

“I pulled those Tribulation titles you asked about.” He reached around behind him and plucked a short pile of comics off a table against the wall. A strange stillness settled inside Reed, even while his heart kicked up. The cover featured three men walking in a triangular formation wearing business suits and holding briefcases, their expressions lax and zombie-like, their eyes black holes with tar-like streaks rolling out of the empty sockets. *Hollowed-out* sockets. Off to the side a woman was begging for their help as a man

dragged her by her hair, tears pouring down her cheeks, and in the corner a group of children were screaming as fire lapped at their feet.

“Jesus,” Reed breathed. “I’ll take them,” he said and his voice sounded distant.

“You want them all? They’re collector’s items, and they’re not cheap.”

“Yeah. All of them, please.”

The guy shrugged, and placed them on the counter, picking up the first one and punching a price into the cash register.

The punch of the old-fashioned keys brought Reed out of the semi-fog he’d been in. “You mentioned you don’t have all the editions. Do you have any idea where I can find the rest?”

“Oh, yeah.” Kaiden pulled a pad toward him and jotted down two websites. “If you go on those forums, someone should have the rest for sale. You might have to find multiple sellers, but you’ll be able to locate all of them. By my count, you’re only missing three. I could order them for you myself, but I don’t have time to get to it until tonight, and I’d upcharge them.” He gave Reed a gummy smile.

“That’s all right. I think I can handle it.”

“Make sure to haggle,” Kaiden said, continuing to ring up the comics, all of which were encased in thick plastic sleeves. “Those guys’ll try to get as much out of you as they can.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Kaiden reached for a paper bag and put the pile of comics inside, placing it on the counter. “Eight hundred, fifty-two dollars and nineteen cents.”

Reed stared. “For comics?”

“Like I said, *collector’s* editions. Near mint condition.”

Wow. Reed blew out a breath. He’d been a kid once. He could appreciate a good comic as much as the next guy. But what was that? A hundred dollars a pop? People paid that? Reed placed his credit card on the counter. It didn’t matter. He needed them.

Outside the shop, he walked quickly to his car, parked just a block up the street. He got in, rolled down the window and tore the bag open, pulling out the comic on top and slipping it from the plastic sleeve.

His eyes moved over the beginning of the story, his heart hammering more and more quickly.

Holy *shit*.

Reed held the comic book up in front of the room, moving it slowly from left to right so everyone could see it. The whole team was there, including

detectives working other cases that happened to be in the office. This was big. And something they'd never seen before. Everyone wanted a front-row seat to this break. "Tribulation," he said, his blood seeming to course faster as he voiced the name. This was *it*. The break they'd needed to understand this killer who had the whole city on edge. "It's a lesser-known title, although a collector's series among real comic aficionados." He handed it to Ransom to begin passing around the room. "And it's our killer's playbook."

There was a general murmuring around the room and Sergeant Valenti raised his hand, urging them to be quiet. "There'll be time for questions afterward," he told the group. "First, let Detective Davies give you the rundown."

Reed hitched one hip up, half sitting, half leaning on the corner of the desk. "I'm going to tell you the overall plot. The general concept goes like this." He leaned forward slightly, "There is no separate Heaven, and there is no separate Hell. At least not apart from the earthly sphere. When the Earth was created it was split into two halves, Heaven and Hell, though both coexist simultaneously, and each interacts with the other."

"They're both here," Ransom added. "Right here. Commingling."

Reed gave him a small tilt of his chin. Ransom and Pagett had been reading through the comics following Reed, so they were well acquainted with the material and could talk it through. "Some humans are living in Hell,

some in Heaven. Those who live in Hell realize where they are, but not all those living in Heaven do. Some wander, unseeing, *blind* to the demons all around, and blind to the suffering of others.” He paused so they could take that in. “They serve only their own selfish interests. When one is recognized as such—a person who shows proof of his or her blindness by disregarding the pain of those in hell, or furthering it—they must be destroyed.”

Reed twisted his upper body, tapping the board with the three enucleated victims and then picking up another edition of Tribulation and holding the cover up that featured the three men walking in a triangular formation, those begging for help to the sides of them, being ignored. “Holy shit,” someone breathed near the back.

My thoughts exactly.

“And then there are the demons themselves,” Reed continued, “the ones who must fall from power if Heaven is going to reign supreme.” Reed twisted his torso in the opposite direction and pointed at the list of falling victims on the board. “We believe our killer is taking it as a literal command.”

He pointed back at the eyeless victims. “Those are the blind. Selfish. Greedy. Exploitative. According to this killer.” And according to Reed, frankly, though that wasn’t really relevant. He pointed in the other direction at the falling victims. “Those are the demons. The true victimizers. He’s playing the whole story out.”

A low buzz started near the back of the room and again the sergeant held up his hand. “Detectives Carlyle and Pagett and I are reading through the editions, and I’ve ordered the ones not locally available. There’s a lot to go through, and there’s a plotline that follows the fates of five angels who were mistakenly sent to the realm of Hell. They each have an individual story, but they share that common bond.”

Reed turned to the sergeant and the sergeant nodded. Reed looked back at the group. “Again, we’re still reading through the material so something more may become obvious. If it does, we’ll share it.” He glanced around. “Does anyone have questions?”

A newer detective near the back raised his hand. “Those angels born in Hell? Who are they to him? If anyone?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Reed said. “They might be specific, they might just be indicative of a type of person, for instance, abuse victims.” And if so, that would include Liza.

“Does that mean *he’s* one?” the same detective asked. “An abuse victim? Who is *he* in the story?”

“Again, we don’t have the answer to that yet. He might not be anyone. He might just be using the story to exact justice for those he believes have been wronged.”

“Is this biblical?”

“No. It basically contends that the Bible got it wrong. That this scenario”—he tapped the comic book—“is more accurate.”

“Have you talked about what the *goal* to acting this all out might be?” Detective Duffy asked, looking between Reed, Ransom, and Jennifer.

Reed shook his head. “We don’t know other than the satisfaction he would get from following this script he takes as gospel. He believes he has the power to make Heaven reign supreme, whatever that might mean to him. Righteousness, perhaps. What is clear is that he believes it to be true. He believes in this world order.”

“It’s just a *story*,” Duffy said.

“Not to him,” Reed answered. “To him it’s real.”

“So he’s a nutjob,” Duffy said.

“But we already knew that,” Jennifer answered.

Nutjob. Sure. But it’s more than that. It’s giving this guy meaning and purpose. Control. “It’s actually not that he’s a nutjob—”

“Oh, come on, Davies. This guy’s a psycho, lording heaven and hell over victims for sport,” Duffy stated.

“To us that’s what it is,” Reed said, recalling what he’d spoken with Liza about, the things she’d encouraged him to consider. “But we have to remember that this guy doesn’t think like us. To him this makes perfect sense. To him, this is justice.”

“Fuck. As if our job wasn’t hard enough. We have a guy believing he’s God,” Duffy muttered.

“See, Davies? Nutjob,” Ransom said, winking.

Reed gave him a wry smile. “All right. For now, *nutjob* works just fine,” Reed conceded, looking around.

“Any other questions?” Sergeant Valenti asked. There was a general murmur but no one else raised their hands.

“None of this has been released to the media, so I want to make it very clear that you’re not to discuss it outside this room? Capisce?”

The group nodded in agreement.

“Feel free to bring anything to us that you might consider helpful,” Reed said. “We’re working as quickly as we can on this so we can figure out how to stop this guy and appreciate anything that might help toward that end.” The other detectives started standing and gathering their things, walking to the door.

Everyone filed out, leaving Reed, Ransom, Jennifer, Olsen, and Sergeant Valenti in the room.

Sergeant Valenti stood. “I have a meeting with the chief in half an hour,” he said. “So I’m going to get out of here. Call me if anything comes up.”

They thanked him, and he too left the room. “Anything else before we

get back to reading?” Reed asked.

“I’d just started looking more deeply into Sabrina McPhee’s history. She was raised by an aunt and uncle after she was removed from her home. I don’t have the details yet,” Jennifer said.

Reed made a hissing sound through his teeth. “That’s it. The link between Elizabeth Nolan, Milo Ortiz, and Sabrina McPhee.”

Jennifer nodded. “I have a call in to Job and Family Services for her file. I’ll update as soon as I have it.”

“Great. Listen, they can be slow. While you’re waiting, will you check and see if her father or uncle, maybe a brother, or her ex-husband, are missing or haven’t been seen in a while? And if so, let’s be proactive and see if we can get dental records.”

“To match against John Doe with the brand?”

“Exactly.”

“On it. I do have something concrete, though,” Jennifer said, picking up a small binder next to her on the table. “I finally got the complete list of residents from the halfway house.”

“Took them long enough.”

“Well, in their defense, it is pretty extensive as it goes back five years. And it seems like they’re extremely short-staffed. *And* they reminded me repeatedly that they could have required us to get a warrant.” She nodded at

the binder. “I looked through it but nothing jumped out at me.” She handed it over to Reed. “Maybe it’ll be useful at some point.”

Reed nodded, taking it from her outstretched hand. “We’ll look through it too. For now, let’s keep reading those comics. Maybe we can get a handle on where this might be leading.” Although they didn’t yet have the final three books. He’d gone online and ordered them—for a king’s ransom nonetheless—from some guy on a comic book forum.

They returned to their work stations and Ransom sat down, put his feet up on his desk, and started reading the edition of *Tribulation* Reed had finished with right before the meeting in the incident room. Reed decided he needed a short break from demons and hellfire and instead flipped open the binder he’d tossed on his desk.

“Man, you want to know something funny? I could almost believe this is true. Maybe comic book dude was right and what we consider reality is nothing more than an idea.”

Reed glanced at the copy of *Tribulation* Ransom tapped on, raising one brow. “Uh-oh.”

Ransom chuckled. “No, seriously. Think about it. For some people, this, right here”—he gestured his finger downward and then circled it around, indicating Earth—“*is* hell. Consider some of the cases we’ve seen, the lives people lead. You think they’re afraid of lakes of fire and brimstone? Nah, for

some that probably sounds like a tropical vacation.”

Reed ran his teeth over his bottom lip. He thought about the sanitation worker he’d interviewed in his home, Milo Ortiz. He thought about what he’d experienced—offered up as sexual gratification to child predators by his own mother. The flashbacks he must experience . . . the grief he must feel at being betrayed that way . . . the internal battle he must wage. He thought of Liza, of Josie, of a hundred victims he’d interviewed, listening to the trauma they’d survived, sometimes just barely. How could a person be afraid of hell, when hell was all around you?

For that matter, hell was all around every one of them, wasn’t it? Because, in actuality, it was never more than one phone call, one accident, one tragedy away.

“And others,” Ransom said, “experience heaven, right here. And I’m not talking about Hollywood celebrities or members of the royal family. I’m talking about the average Joe who was born into a loving family, who has enough food to eat and a safe place to call home. A little Netflix and chill on a Saturday night. I’m talking about—”

“You and me,” Reed said.

Ransom paused. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I’m talking about you and me.”

“We’re not blind though,” Ransom went on. “We see hell. We see how *close* it really is. We see suffering. It’s why we do what we do. But there are

people who *don't* fucking see. They turn the other way or use those weaker than them for profit. Man, think of the evil motherfuckers we've come across."

Reed could think of several right off the top of his head. He scratched his jaw. "Yeah, so it's a good concept. And any good concept has an element of truth to it. Relatability. But anything good can be twisted."

"You're right." Ransom tilted his head. "You know, speaking of twisted, I've been thinking about that whole liminal space deal." He paused for a moment. "You know the way the descriptions of those places make us *feel* universally?"

Reed nodded, listening, almost transfixed. Ransom used one hand to indicate his midsection. "That squeezing beneath your ribs. The full-body chills. You know what all those sensations come down to? Being *alone*. Being left behind somewhere we don't recognize. The feeling of *that*." He leaned forward slightly. "We're meant to be connected to other people. And anything else feels foreign—*alien*—like we've been forgotten in a place where we don't belong."

Five angels mistakenly sent to hell.

Was that how their killer felt? Was that what this whole exercise was about? A desperate escape from whatever form of hell he'd found himself in—lost and *alone*? Forgotten? "Damn, Carlyle. You can spew some deep shit

when your mouth's not full of food.”

Ransom grinned. “Don't I know it.” Then he raised the comic and went back to his reading.

Reed watched him for a few seconds, and then picked up the binder again, beginning on the first page.

The halfway house had been generous enough to list the names in alphabetical order and include any information they had on the habitant—former address, phone number if any, and dates of residence.

The list of names started five years prior and continued up through the current date. Reed read through them semi-quickly, flipping through the pages in the hopes that one of the names would stick out to him, but not expecting any to. As he got close to the end, he paused, moving his finger back up to the name he'd almost missed as his mind was only half on the task.

“Everett Draper?” he murmured.

“Huh?” Ransom asked, looking up from the comic.

“Draper,” he said, frowning. Reed sat up straight, pushing the binder back farther from where he'd had it leaned on the edge of his desk. “Gordon Draper's grandson. The former director of Lakeside Hospital.”

“The dude who called about the comic?”

Reed nodded, thinking. He hadn't mentioned anything about his

grandson living at the halfway house, but why would he have? Gordon Draper hadn't known the place was part of their investigation. And his grandson was dead. He'd committed suicide. Reed hadn't asked how or why, it hadn't been his business. The old man was obviously still torn up about it. It made sense, though, because if his grandson suffered from some form of mental illness, he would have lived in a halfway house or somewhere similar at some point.

Ransom's mind was clearly going in similar directions, because he said, "All right. So the kid who lived at the halfway house had a grandfather who worked at the hospital where one of the victims was found."

"Yeah," Reed said distractedly. "But he's dead."

"By suicide."

"Yeah."

"Is it my imagination or do we have a lot of suicides on our hands in this case? I know we can rule out the falling deaths as murders, not suicides now. But we still have Sophia Miller, the girl who brought charges against Sadowski . . . Draper's grandson . . ."

Reed glanced at Ransom. "I don't know that that's unexpected. The suicidality rate is high among the mentally ill."

Ransom shrugged. "True."

Reed chewed on the inside of his cheek, thinking. "Speaking of Sophia

Miller, her mother said she dated someone at that halfway house, right?”

“That’s right. She did.”

“Think it’s possible it was Everett Draper?”

“Possible. And that would be another connection.”

“Yes,” Reed murmured, though what that might mean was still elusive.

“I think we need to talk to Draper again.” Reed picked up his phone, going through his received calls from the day before and calling Draper’s number. He picked up on the fourth ring.

“Mr. Draper? This is Detective Davies calling.”

“Hello, Detective. This is a surprise. What can I help you with?”

“I looked up the comic you told me about. It was extremely helpful. Thank you.” He didn’t want to let on exactly how helpful the old man’s tip had been, not yet. It was something the media did not have, and something the killer didn’t know they had either. They needed to keep it very close to the vest at this point.

“Ah. So you’ve read it. Interesting stuff, isn’t it? If not a bit macabre. That appealed to my grandson, though.”

“Yes, ah, I’m actually calling about Everett. His name appeared on a list of residents who lived at a halfway house that’s come up in our investigation.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Did you know your grandson lived at a halfway house right before his death?”

“Yes. Everett had issues, Detective. I made it clear he always had a home here but unfortunately, he preferred not to live by my rules, as reasonable as I believed them to be.” He paused. “I had hoped that house would be good for him. Living among his peers, gaining some independence. Finding a cocktail of medication that allowed him to function at a higher level.”

“Mr. Draper, do you know if Everett dated anyone who lived at that house?”

“Dated? No. I’m sorry, I don’t. Everett didn’t share that sort of thing with me.”

“Okay. Well, if you do remember anything else that might be important regarding Everett, will you give me a call?”

“Of course.” He paused. “This case you’re working on, it’s a puzzle, isn’t it? I’m sorry I can’t help more. But I have faith in you, son.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.”

Reed hung up the phone and sat staring at his blank computer screen for a few minutes.

Even though they had something specific to work with in the discovery of the comic, things seemed more complicated than ever, and Reed worried

he wouldn't put the pieces together in time. He thought of Zach, and how he must have felt the same way all those years ago as he'd worked to bring justice to Josie and the other women Charles Hartsman had victimized. And he'd been too late.

Reed felt it—time was ticking down toward some uncertain but inevitable end.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The ringing of his cell phone woke Reed and he rolled over in bed, careful not to jostle Liza as he reached to silence it. *Ransom*. He got out of bed as quickly and quietly as possible, looking over his shoulder as Liza mumbled something in her sleep and turned over. He smiled as he closed the door to his bedroom behind him and connected the call.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry to wake you, but we’ve got something.”

It was already light outside, but there was no window in his kitchen, so Reed flicked on the light. The time on the stove display read eight fourteen.

“Do you need me to come in?”

“Nah, it’s your off day, but I knew you’d want to be in the loop on this one.”

“What you got?”

“I drove to Sophia Miller’s mom’s house like we talked about yesterday, you know, to show her the picture of Everett Draper.”

“She recognized him as the man who’d been dating her daughter,” Reed guessed.

“Yup. Your hunch was correct, my friend. Everett Draper, the grandson of the former Lakeside Hospital director dated the girl who made the

complaint against Sadowski for being a peeping Tom.”

“Then she dropped the charges and later OD’d.” Reed paced from one side of his small kitchen to the other, catching sight of himself in the reflection of the microwave, bedhead sticking in all directions, only wearing a pair of boxers. “But what does that mean?” he asked Ransom. “Everett Draper and Sophia Miller are both dead, by their own hand.” He and Ransom had read the reports as part of the case, and there was nothing suspicious about either of their deaths, nothing to suggest anything other than exactly what it appeared to be: two troubled people had decided they didn’t want to do life anymore and had put an end to it.

Sophia had been right down the hall from her mother when she’d overdosed. Everett had been in an upstairs room at the halfway house. Reed couldn’t imagine a way someone could make death by hanging appear to be a suicide if it was in fact not.

Was it possible that, like Liza had said, it was simply a small community, and the connections were only a coincidence and meant nothing to their case?

Possible.

But unlikely?

Yes, Reed had a sense that it was. He just didn’t know why.

“I can put a call in to Everett’s grandfather again,” he said. “See if he

can tell us anything else about Sophia Miller?” Reed had a picture of her. He could email it to the old guy. There really was no need to visit in person just to show him a photograph. They already had confirmation from Sophia’s mother that Everett was the man her daughter had been dating. That was enough. But any more potential information couldn’t hurt. Mr. Draper had said Everett didn’t confide in him about that sort of thing, but maybe Sophia’s name alone would jog something the older man had forgotten . . . some offhand comment that could be helpful . . .

“I can call him,” Ransom said. “You deserve a day off—”

But they both knew that there was no such thing as a day off when there was a breakthrough in a case. “I’ll make the call from here and only come in if I need to. I have somewhat of a rapport with Mr. Draper at this point.”

“Okay. Let me know if he has anything important to add.”

“Will do.”

Reed hung up. As much as he was tempted to slide back into bed with Liza, there was a killer on the loose, and he was not going to sit on anything, be it a lead or a follow-up. He went to the bathroom where he brushed his teeth and took a quick shower and then grabbed a pair of track pants and a T-shirt from his dryer. He’d put the load of laundry in there a week ago and forgotten about it, but at least he’d put it in the dryer and not left it in the washer. It was clean, if not a little wrinkled.

He brought his cell to the living room and scrolled down through his recent calls, locating the one he recognized as belonging to Gordon Draper. He paused before hitting send, staring out the window unseeing, thinking about the ways in which the man's grandson was connected to the victims. Connections were forming everywhere but still no clear picture, like having the entire edge of a puzzle done, but not being able to identify the subject.

Everett Draper had dated or had some form of romantic relationship with the girl who'd made a complaint against one of the murder victims, Sadowski, the victim who took over for his grandfather when he retired from Lakeside. He'd lived at the halfway house where several residents had been victimized by Toby Resnick, another murder victim, and Clifford Schlomer, a murder victim as well.

He seemed to be at the center of so much relating to the crimes.

But Everett was dead.

Reed let out a sigh of frustration and hit the send button, listening as the phone rang. The old man picked up after a few rings.

"Hello, Mr. Draper, sorry to bother you so early. It's Detective Davies again."

"Oh, no bother, Detective. This isn't early for an old man like me whose creaky body begins waking him up at the crack of dawn. What can I do for you?"

“I just have a quick follow-up question actually. You said your grandson Everett hadn’t mentioned dating a woman at the halfway house where he lived. But we have reason to believe he was seeing a woman named Sophia Miller. I wondered if that rang any bells?”

There was a very brief pause. “I’m sorry, that doesn’t sound familiar to me. Can I ask why you haven’t asked her to confirm her relationship with my grandson?”

“Unfortunately, she’s deceased.”

“Deceased? How?”

“I’m sorry to say she overdosed.” He tried to remember the date she’d died, but without his case file in front of him, he couldn’t remember exactly. He believed it would’ve been a few months before Everett. He wondered if it had anything to do with the man’s own suicide.

“Oh. Oh dear. Well,” Mr. Draper sighed. “That’s terrible news. Pity for her family. No one understands the lasting effect of such a situation better than I do.”

Reed frowned, regretting that he’d picked at the old man’s scab. “I’m sorry, Mr. Draper.”

“No need to apologize.” He paused again. “I’m sorry I can’t offer more. But now, that would hardly be fair.” He let out a soft chuckle and Reed smiled at the odd joke. “This killer of yours, though, there has to be an

endgame, right?”

“An endgame?”

“Yes. Something that wraps this all up nicely for him. Maybe there’s even a bow.” He swore he heard the old man’s mouth move into a smile on the other end of the line.

“Actually, that’s not generally the case. These types of murderers will usually keep killing until they’re stopped.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Even him? His whole MO seems very specific. Almost as though he’s leading up to something. No, there’s an endgame, son. What is it, I wonder? Have you read the conclusion to those comics?”

Reed let out an uncomfortable laugh. “You really have been keeping close tabs on the case,” he said. The comment unnerved him though. Did the old man have insider information? Or had he just picked up the idea from news reports? Reed pictured Gordon Draper sitting in his wheelchair in front of the TV, flipping from station to station as they broadcast the latest, pontificating on every angle as the media liked to do. He almost felt bad for Draper. A lonely man with no family left, no career, only his regrets to keep him company. Along with TV marathons of Law and Order. Those were always the folks who got overly involved with police investigations.

Mr. Draper laughed. “What can I say? I’m a bored old man with only my garden to keep me company now,” he answered, confirming what Reed

had just been thinking.

“Yes, well, if you think of anything else regarding Everett, will you give me a call?”

“Absolutely. Goodbye now.”

Reed hung up the phone, a strange skittering tickling his spine, wondering why his call with the man had given him a case of the creeps.

I'm sorry I can't offer more. But now, that would hardly be fair. He'd laughed, as though it was a joke, but it was weird. Did he know something he was choosing to hold back for some reason?

This killer of yours, he has an endgame.

Endgame?

“Endgames” weren't typical of serial killers. But then again, neither was using the plot of a comic book series to commit brutal murders. Was all this leading to some final conclusion dreamed up by the now-deceased creator of Tribulation?

Reed stood there, looking out at the Cincinnati skyline mostly unseeing, all the information in his brain swirling, drifting, coming together and then moving apart.

Reed's *father* had had an endgame, hadn't he? An endgame that no one figured out in time.

A ball formed in Reed's stomach. He needed those final Tribulation

editions. He needed to know how this all ended, and if their killer was on the path to recreating some bizarre conclusion.

He heard the soft patter of footsteps behind him and turned, smiling to see a sleepy, mussed Liza. “Hey,” he said, turning. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

She shook her head, walking to where he stood and wrapping her arms around his waist. He gathered her to him and kissed the top of her head, breathed her in. Calm descended. “Who were you on the phone with?”

“Actually, I was on the phone with Gordon Draper.”

She bent her neck to look up at him. “Really? Why?”

“Because for some strange reason, this case keeps leading us to his grandson, Everett.”

Liza paused, a crease appearing between her brows. “Everett? But Everett’s—”

“Dead, I know. Did you know him well?”

She shook her head. “Not really at all, except through his grandfather who would speak about him on occasion.” She paused. “He was a nice boy . . . quiet . . . troubled. Actually, he was at that camp with me, the one I told you about? His parents died and—”

“Camp Joy?” A flash of surprise caused Reed to drop his arms, turning so he could look at her more closely.

She nodded. “It was the only occasion I spent any time with him, and even then, only because we were in the same cabin.”

Camp Joy . . . the same cabin . . . “So you knew him?” Reed asked, voicing his thoughts aloud as his mind scrambled to piece . . . something together.

“No, not really but—”

His phone rang, jolting him from his thoughts. He swore softly, taking it from his pocket. *Ransom again.*

“Coffee,” Liza mouthed, pointing toward the kitchen. Reed nodded as he connected the call.

“Sorry, man,” Ransom greeted. “Your day off’s gonna have to wait.”

His stomach sank. “What happened?”

“Another body. I’m told this one is . . . odd. And our guy left it at Spring Grove Cemetery.”

Spring Grove Cemetery? “I can be there in twenty,” Reed said.

“See you then.”

Reed went into the kitchen where Liza was adding coffee to the machine. Regret knotted in his gut. Fuck, he’d wanted a whole day with her. Just them. She turned, her eyes meeting his. “You have to go in,” she said. It wasn’t a question, just a statement, and there was no whine or bitterness behind her words. He appreciated that. So much.

“I’m sorry. It’s the last thing I wanted.”

She pressed brew and walked to him, putting her arms around his neck. “I figure as the woman of a homicide detective, I’d better get used to it.”

Reed grinned. Damn, that sounded at least semi-permanent, and he liked the hell out of it. “It’s not always like this. But there are times . . .”

“Like now,” she said, kissing him briefly on his lips and stepping away. “Get going, Detective Davies.”

He started to turn and then turned back. “Hey . . . I wouldn’t normally ask this, but can you do me a favor and stay in while I’m gone?”

She frowned, leaning a hip against the counter. “Are you worried about my safety?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. I don’t have any specific reason to think so but—”

“Reed,” she said. “If you have a feeling I should stay in, I’ll stay in.”

“Thank you,” he breathed. “For trusting me. It might be nothing but—”

“Go.” She laughed. “I’m in the middle of a book anyway. It’ll keep me company until you get back.”

“Okay good. I’ll call as soon as I know when that is.” He turned and went to his room where he changed quickly and grabbed his badge, wallet, and firearm. Near the front door, he called a final goodbye to Liza.

As he drove toward the crime scene, his stomach felt tight. What in the

hell was this going to be? It felt like they had so many pieces, but they hadn't put them together fast enough to stop this guy. His hands tightened on the steering wheel as a sense of futility gripped him. They needed *more*. Just a couple of threads and a picture would form. Reed could *feel* it. As awful as it was, maybe this new murder would bring them a few more clues as to what avenues to take to *stop* this madman.

Reed stopped at a red light, picking up his phone, as he considered what Liza had told him just fifteen minutes before. He let himself fully ponder it now. Yet another connection to Everett Draper, and no way was any of it a coincidence now. He glanced at the time on his clock, wondering what sorts of hours Camp Joy kept. He was still five minutes out from the cemetery, so he decided it was worth a try. He googled the camp and dialed the number and a moment later a man answered the phone. "Camp Joy, how can I help you?"

Reed identified himself and told the man he was looking into a crime and needed some information on some campers who had been there fifteen years prior.

"Uh, okay, wow. Um, I'm probably going to have to have our administrative director call you back. She's not in yet, but she'll be here soon. Can I take down some information so she can pull up the records before returning your call?"

“That’d be great. Like I said, it would have been fifteen years ago, and it was a group of kids there just for the weekend who had recently experienced trauma in their life. From what I understand, it most likely would have been arranged by a social worker.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m familiar with that program. The state doesn’t do that anymore. Budget cuts. Anyway, do you happen to know what month it was?”

“I don’t.” He needed to question Liza more in-depth about it, but he’d been surprised by the news, and they’d gotten interrupted . . .

“Okay, no problem. I’ll have Barbara pull that year. There probably weren’t more than twelve. We only have two cabins that are appropriate for larger groups of kids. The camp liked to keep them together, you know? So they would have been in either Buckeye or Sycamore.”

Reed’s pulse jumped. “Buckeye?”

The symbol.

The *brand*.

Holy shit.

“Yeah, I can’t say for sure, but most likely. I’ll have Barbara Guthier get back to you though.”

“Please,” he said. “As soon as possible would be great.” He gave the guy his number and then disconnected the call, turning into the cemetery entrance.

What the fuck did this mean? He wanted to sit and think about it all, consider how it involved Liza and why, but there was already a slew of city vehicles parked down a slope near a massive oak tree.

And someone else was dead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The body was propped against a gravestone, partially slumped over so the face was not immediately visible. Reed greeted Ransom, who was climbing out of his car as well, and began walking toward the criminalist that had arrived before them.

“Any information yet?” Reed asked Ransom.

“None. Except that it’s odd, and that it’s an older white male.”

“Odd? In what way?”

“I don’t know. Guess we need to see it.”

Reed smelled the body before they were within a few feet of it. “Christ,” he said, wincing. “Well, that’s different. He let this one rot.”

“Goddamn, I hate that fucking smell,” Ransom said. “If I haven’t mentioned it before, make sure Cici cremates me. I’m not ever about smelling that way, even when I’m dead.”

“Noted.”

So, Reed thought, *that’s what they’d meant by odd?* Either the killer had let this one rot, or, because of the more isolated location, he’d been sitting there longer than the others before being discovered.

As they approached the corpse leaning against the gravestone and the smell of decayed flesh intensified, Reed turned around, facing the same

direction as the body. *Why was he placed here?*

There was a manmade pond visible from that vantage point, but it was probably too far away to be meaningful to the scene. “Do you know who found him?”

“A city cop doing a detail. It was the guy’s first one here, so it appears that this discovery was random.”

Huh. Something else *odd*, in addition to whatever the techs had found.

Reed looked down, squinting at the stone near his feet, moving the grass aside so he could see the name. He didn’t recognize it, but when he moved to the one beside it, he saw that that one looked newer, the name easily read. “No way.”

Ransom, who had turned to look in the same direction as Reed walked over to where he stood. “You don’t fucking say.”

Reed looked at him. “Everett Draper.”

“Gentlemen,” Lewis called. He was kneeling next to the body a few feet behind them and had probably just noticed their arrival.

Reed and Ransom turned, walking toward the body, Reed swallowing down his disgust at the stench.

“Lewis,” Reed greeted. “Any information on the victim’s ID?”

“Nope. No ID on the guy. We checked his pockets. But, look at this.” Lewis reached a gloved hand up and pushed the man’s head back.

Reed stared, blinking. The man's face was a rotted mess of decayed and sunken flesh, his cheek lumpy and . . . moving as maggots squirmed beneath what had once been skin. Even through the carnage of death, he looked . . . *familiar*. Reed frowned.

"Damn," Ransom swore. "Dude's not just dead. He's *dead*."

"It's not just the decomposition that's a departure from the other victims," Lewis said. "Take a closer look." He gestured toward the man's eyes, still intact, just blackened with paint, hardly noticeable in the midst of the rest of the purple and black death palette of what had once been a human face. Reed rubbed his chin. The killer had followed the same MO, but had not removed the eyes and left this one to rot, which made it a *different* MO entirely.

"What's with his legs?" Ransom asked.

Lewis glanced down and Reed tore his eyes from the DOA's ravaged face and looked at his legs. They appeared . . . shriveled within the fabric of his pants. *Atrophied*. Shock slammed into Reed as his gaze flew once again to the man's face.

"He was disabled in some way," Lewis was saying. "He'd have been in a wheelchair."

"No," Reed said.

"Oh yes, no question."

Reed's mind was reeling. "I don't get it. This isn't possible."

"I don't get it either," Lewis said. "The eye situation is less grisly anyway, but the rest?" He made a face.

A distant buzzing was growing louder in Reed's head. "The decomposition," he managed.

"Yeah," Lewis answered. "This guy has been dead for a week, if not a little longer. Also of note, there's no brand on the back of the neck that I can see, though the skin there is pretty decomposed." Lewis lifted his head momentarily. "It's possible he's been sitting right here, but no one noticed him." He glanced around. "It's out of the way. Also, this guy?" He held up the man's fingers, purple and bent in unnatural positions. "He was tortured. There are wounds all over his body. The killer took a little extra time with him."

Reed shook his head, standing, and taking a step backward. "No, *not* possible."

"Oh, it is," Lewis said, pulling up the man's sleeve, where several gashes stood out, gaping and dark red against purple, peeling skin. "Look. He's been burned, stabbed, sliced. Someone really went to town on him."

"Not that. Not any of that," Reed said, shaking his head, his heart pounding. "I *know* him."

"What?" Ransom asked and Lewis looked at him curiously.

“That’s the former director of Lakeside. Gordon Draper.”

“Wait, *what?*”

“But”—Reed rubbed his temple—“it’s not possible that he’s *here*. I just talked to him. I just talked to him this morning.” He was breathless, his words staggered, as though he’d just finished a run.

Ransom was staring at him as if he was watching Reed slowly lose his mind and wasn’t quite sure how to react. Maybe he *was* losing his mind, because this was absolutely not possible.

“I talked to him *today*,” Reed emphasized, as though saying it more than once would cause the mystery to become clear. “I called him after we spoke, Ransom. *Today*.”

What’s his endgame do you think, son?

Son. Reed let out a small sound somewhere between a groan and a gasp for air as he grabbed his skull.

Oh, dear God.

No.

Nonono.

He turned to Ransom, pulling him aside as Lewis gave them another strange look and went back to work. “It was *Charles Hartsman*.”

Ransom’s face screwed up. “Your bio father? Dude. No. Wait, slow down. Talk to me, man.”

“I talked to Gordon Draper this morning, Ransom. And I talked to him a few days ago too. But that isn’t possible because Gordon Draper was *dead*.”

Ransom let out a slow breath. “Shit.” He looked to where there were several uniforms standing near the path, the first officers on the scene most likely, and a few more who they’d probably end up putting at the front gate. The scene was organizing. More CPD employees were arriving. Soon, the place would be swarming. “Do you feel sure about that?”

“Yes,” Reed said. “Very. No one else could have done an imitation that convincing.” He’d read about his father’s crimes, knew exactly how he’d committed them, convincing even the smartest and most observant people he knew with his dead-on impersonations.

Reed took a few steps back to Lewis. “Is the cause of death the same as the other victims?” he asked, gesturing to his own neck.

Lewis looked up. “No, actually. That’s the other odd part. Eyes are intact and this man—Draper, you said?—was killed with a stab wound to the heart.” He used a gloved finger to move the jacket the man was wearing aside, showing a blood-soaked shirt beneath, a black hole directly over the man’s heart. “What do you make of it?”

Reed’s own heart echoed hollowly. “Okay,” he mumbled, only realizing after he’d walked away that he hadn’t responded to Lewis’s question. He felt like he was trapped underwater.

“The MO is all different,” Reed said. “It’s like he tried to recreate it, but either failed, or didn’t care to get the details right.” He wanted it to appear related but . . . *not?*

“So you think the Hollow-Eyed Killer is someone completely different?”

Reed nodded, even while doubt ricocheted through him. Was he right? Or could Charles Hartsman be the Hollow-Eyed Killer? And if so, why? What motive would *he* have?

Casus Belli, Charles Hartsman had written on the wall above what had been believed to be his final victim. *The war is ended.*

But maybe that had been a lie?

“I don’t know, Ransom. I don’t think Charles Hartsman committed the other murders. His physical description is completely different than the one the witnesses who saw Julian Nolan being coerced up the stairwell gave. No, this one”—he gave his head a nod to the body behind him—“seems different. Out of place completely. But . . . we can’t rule anything out.”

Ransom’s expression held deep worry. “Okay. We’ll call Sergeant Valenti first, and see how he wants to handle this.” Ransom paused. “I think I agree with you though. It doesn’t feel like he’s been our perp all along. But what *reason* would he have to involve himself in any of it?” he asked. “Charles Hartsman? To come back to Cincinnati, risk getting caught, intrude

on an ongoing murder investigation”—he waved over to the prone body of Gordon Draper—“*kill* again, if he in fact did that as well?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” His *father*. *Charles Hartsman*. He’d spoken to his *father* this morning, not Gordon Draper. He couldn’t fathom why or how, but he knew he was right. He *knew* he was.

Why kill Gordon Draper though? Why in the world would Charles Hartsman murder a retired hospital director?

His mind scrambled, trying to recall what Hartsman had told him.

He ran a hand through his hair, going back over his conversations with the man over the past week. “He told me about Tribulation,” he said. “He’s the one who gave me that tip.”

“Okay,” Ransom said, a worried frown creasing his brow. “Listen, let’s let the techs do their job and get out of here. We’ll call Sarge on the way. We’re going to need to get inside Gordon Draper’s house, Reed. And the sooner the better. Then we’ll brainstorm.”

Oh *shit*. What if Charles Hartsman was still there? No, he wouldn’t be that stupid. Reed’s mind careened from one thought to another. He’d killed a man and then impersonated him. He wouldn’t be hiding out in his house. They still needed to check it out. And stat.

“Let’s go.”

They jogged to the officers near the road, telling them they had a tip to

check out, and to guard the scene closely. “You got it,” one of the men said.

“Did you guys drive together?” he asked the man and his partner. They both nodded. Ransom pulled his keys from his pocket and handed them to the officer. “That’s my car over there,” he said, pointing to the city car he’d driven. “Make sure it gets back to the homicide building?”

“Sure, sir. Will do.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

Thirty seconds later, Reed was pulling out of the cemetery, Ransom in the passenger seat.

Ransom pulled out his phone and Reed heard his sergeant’s barked hello over the line. Ransom filled him in on what they’d discovered at the scene and where they were headed.

“Okay, yeah, we’ll wait,” Ransom said. He responded to a few more barked orders Reed couldn’t make out and then disconnected the call.

“He wants us to wait for some uniforms. He’s sending them from District Two now. Hopefully we’ll arrive about the same time.”

“I need to tell you about the call I made on the way to the scene too. It involves Everett Draper as well.” He told Ransom quickly about Liza’s weekend at Camp Joy and how she’d told him Everett Draper was there with her.

“You’re kidding. Why didn’t she tell us this sooner?”

“Why would she? She had no idea Everett Draper’s name had even come up in the case. And she didn’t have any personal knowledge of him in recent years.”

“All right. But still. What does some camp have to do with any of this?”

“I’m not sure, but something. I called there on the way to the scene. The admin director’s supposed to call me back, but I spoke to a man who said that in all likelihood a group like the one Liza and Everett would have been a part of, would have stayed in a cabin named *Buckeye*.”

Ransom stared over at him for a moment. “Well, fuck me sideways.”

Reed’s phone rang, showing a similar number to the one he’d dialed earlier. “This is Camp Joy calling now,” he told Ransom. “Detective Davies.”

“Hello, Detective. This is Barbara Guthier with Camp Joy returning your call.”

“Thank you for getting back to me, Ms. Guthier. I’m not sure how much the man I spoke with earlier told you, but I’m looking for information dating back fifteen years.”

“Yes, Zeek told me exactly what you needed. The names of campers who stayed in Buckeye for the weekend as part of a state-run program for kids who’d recently experienced upheaval in their home?”

“Yes. That would be it. I’m not sure of the month, but a teenager named Elizabeth Nolan would have been in the cabin in question.”

“Okay, well that’s helpful. Hold on just a second.” He heard her flipping through papers and after a moment, she came back on the line, “Here we go. Elizabeth Nolan, age thirteen. That was in June.”

“Can you tell me who else was in that cabin with her?”

“I sure can. There were five campers in Buckeye that weekend along with Elizabeth Nolan. Milo Whiting, Sabrina Attenburrow, Everett Draper, and Axel Draper.”

That buzzing noise that had been steadily growing in Reed’s brain since he’d recognized Gordon Draper grew louder now. He knew all those names except one. Axel Draper. *Draper.*

Everett’s brother?

Reed’s head throbbed. *The picture.* He’d looked right *past* him when Gordon Draper had pointed out his grandson’s picture because they’d been discussing *Everett.* But Reed remembered now.

There had been *two* boys in the photo.

“I really appreciate the information,” he managed. “If I have any other questions, can I call you directly?”

“Absolutely, Detective. I’m calling from my office number. Feel free to use it should you need anything else.”

He mumbled a thanks and hung up the phone, staring wordlessly ahead at the road disappearing under his car for a moment.

“The other campers,” Reed said. “They were Milo Whiting.”

“Milo Ortiz,” Ransom said. “He took his sister’s husband’s name later. Holy shit. Okay.”

“Sabrina Attenburrow.”

“Sabrina McPhee.”

“Yup. She was married. Attenburrow’s gotta be her maiden name.”

“Everett Draper and Axel Draper.”

Ransom paused. “Axel Draper. His brother.”

“Yes,” Reed said. “Yes. Gordon Draper took both his grandsons in after their parents died in a house fire. They must have both been sent to that camp as a reprieve of sorts between experiencing the loss of their parents and relocating to their grandfather’s home.”

Ransom stared ahead for a moment. “Five of them, you said?”

“Yeah,” Reed answered.

Five angels mistakenly sent to hell.

He looked at Ransom. “They’re the main characters. The angels born in hell.”

Ransom ran a hand over his short-cropped hair. “All right, okay so . . . Axel’s one of them? And these bodies . . . is he leaving them as . . .”

“Gifts,” Reed said. “He’s leaving them as gifts.”

“Goddamn,” Ransom said. “He’s our guy, isn’t he?”

Reed's heart was pounding. "I think so. I think so, yes." But where did Hartsman come into this?

And what about Liza? He picked up his phone, his hand somehow steady as he dialed her number. It rang three times . . . four. His skin broke out in a cold sweat.

"That was quick."

He blew out a harsh breath of pure relief. "You're okay."

Liza paused and he heard something rustle. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why? Is everything all right?"

Yes. No. I have no idea. "Things are unfolding, Liza. I just want to make sure you're okay. Hey, listen, along with Everett Draper, his brother, Axel, was at that camp with you?"

Liza paused again as though trying to recall. "I guess he was there, yes. Honestly, I'd forgotten him. He was very quiet, rarely spoke. Just sort of . . . watched."

Yes, he had. And he'd seen more than anyone realized. "Okay. Hey, if you remember anything else about him, call me, okay?"

"All right. Why though? Is he part of this?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll fill you in when I get home. The alarm's still activated?"

"Yes. I'm all locked up. I'm fine. Reed . . . be careful, okay?"

“I will. Talk to you soon.”

He called Zach’s phone next. “Hey there,” he said, his tone grim. “I just heard. Another one, huh?”

“Yeah. Listen, Zach, Charles Hartsman might be in town. I’ll have to catch you up later, but . . . you might want to head home to Josie.”

There was a beat of silence. Reed heard all Zach wanted to ask in that short pause, but he held it back, knowing he’d get answers later. *Trusting Reed*. “On my way. Be careful, Reed.”

“I will.”

Reed pulled off the exit toward Gordon Draper’s home.

He dialed the number for Sabrina McPhee’s gallery and when her answering machine picked up a minute later, he hung up. He’d already left several messages. “Fuck,” he murmured. “Something’s not right. Neither Sabrina McPhee nor Milo Ortiz has called me back.” Reed glanced at his phone, keying in a search for the number for Rumpke, the garbage collection company Milo Ortiz worked for. A receptionist answered and Reed told her what he needed and a moment later, she was routing him to Milo Ortiz’s boss.

They pulled into Gordon Draper’s neighborhood. “You’re calling about Milo Ortiz,” a man with a gruff voice asked.

“Yes. My name is Detective Davies, and I have some questions for him

but haven't been able to get in touch in the last few days.”

“That makes two of us. Ortiz has been a no-show. It happens. But I gotta say, it surprised me. The guy's always been real reliable. Guess you can't trust anyone these days.”

Reed managed to rattle off his number and asked the man to call him if he heard from Milo.

“That can't be good,” Ransom noted, having obviously gleaned the information from Reed's side of the conversation.

No, no it wasn't. It felt like Reed's blood cooled another few degrees. As soon as they were done here, he'd have a couple of uniforms go to their apartments.

They pulled up to the curb in front of Gordon Draper's home, just as a patrol car rounded the corner coming from the opposite direction. Reed and Ransom got out, and Reed leaned over to address both uniform cops. “We're going to check things out inside. Watch our backs?”

“Yes, sir. Radio if you need us.”

Reed and Ransom approached the door, drawing their weapons. As they moved closer, Reed saw that the door was cracked open. Everything inside Reed slowed, his focus becoming laser sharp. He glanced at Ransom who nodded, each of them moving to one side of the door. Ransom reached out and used his gun to rap on the glass. “Cincinnati Police!” he yelled.

They waited. No sound came from within, though a small moving shadow caused them both to lean farther back, weapons raised. “Cincinnati Police!” Ransom yelled, louder this time. Ransom caught Reed’s eye. “It’s been a while,” he said. “Still got it in ya?”

He was trying to add some levity, but all Reed could think was that he might be about to come face to face with his father. He’d have to shoot him. He wouldn’t hesitate. Sweat broke out on his brow. He’d make sure Charles Hartsman knew who he was and then he’d put a bullet in his brain. “Let’s do it,” he said, using his foot to push the door all the way open.

A cat meowed, running through the now fully open door, rushing past them. “Fuck!” Reed breathed out, easing his finger off the trigger. He’d almost shot the thing.

He quickly triangulated the open door, his eyes latching on to the overturned wheelchair in the open foyer area. He heard Ransom’s voice, calling the two uniform officers for assistance, and telling them to call for more cars.

The District Two officers were there in less than twenty seconds, their guns drawn as they followed Reed and Ransom into the house, working as a unit to sweep the rooms on the lower floor. Nothing seemed out of place, except the overturned wheelchair. But that wasn’t much of a surprise was it? They already knew Draper was dead.

“Detectives,” one of the officers called. “Over here. There’s a light on in the basement.”

“I’ll take the second floor,” Ransom said, moving toward the staircase, and Reed nodded, walking to where one of the officers had opened the basement door. A dim glow shone from downstairs, coming from one of the rooms beyond. “Cincinnati Police!” Reed yelled, before nodding to the officer. Reed went first, sweeping his weapon around the corner before stepping into the large open area, devoid of anything other than an old, musty-looking couch, and a couple of cardboard boxes in the corner. The light was coming from a room to the back.

His pulse jumped, heartbeat swooshing loudly in his ears. He looked behind him at the officer and the man nodded, indicating he had the rear. “Cincinnati Police!” Reed called once more. With a gasp of breath, he swept the open door, lowering his weapon, as his eyes went wide.

The room was empty, at least of human life.

But . . . he stepped forward. “Oh Jesus,” he choked.

Holy mother of God.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“I’ve never seen anything like it outside of horror movies,” his sergeant muttered, shaking his head as he looked around the smallish space. “It’s a fucking kill room.”

That was as good a name as any, Reed figured, looking around with revulsion at the table stained with thick dried blood and old stains, to the trays of torture implements of which he didn’t even want to imagine their usage, to the chains and hooks on the walls, and the barred cage built in to the wall in the corner.

People had suffered there. Unimaginably.

One being Gordon Draper himself if the semi-recent pool of congealed blood was any indication.

Reed had been there for almost forty minutes and he still didn’t feel desensitized, cold dread reverberating through him at the thought of the things that had gone on in this dim, dank room of horrors.

“Gordon Draper used this, huh?” Sergeant Valenti asked, leaning over and peering at the dusty tray of tools.

“He had to have,” Reed said. “It was his house.”

“How’d he get up and down the stairs?” Sergeant Valenti asked.

“Maybe he didn’t so much anymore.” Reed thought back to the photos

of the man he'd looked at when he'd first visited this house, the photos of a different Gordon Draper. Strong and standing. "He wasn't always disabled." And according to the layer of dust on surrounding objects, the room hadn't been used in some time.

"You think it was Charles Hartsman who made mincemeat of Draper?" his sergeant asked, pointing to the third set of footprints on the floor, the ones that had been there when Reed arrived.

"It had to be him. I believe he impersonated the man. And it would explain the different MO."

"Motive?" his sergeant asked.

Reed blew out a slow breath. "I don't know. No fucking idea."

His sergeant looked up, narrowed his eyes, and peered at him. "You all right, Davies? Does this bring up a conflict of interest? I could recuse you from this case."

"No." He took a deep breath. "No, it doesn't. The fact that Charles Hartsman may be involved, absolutely will not affect my professionalism on this job. I give you my word, Sergeant."

His sergeant studied him for another moment. "All right. We can't really afford to lose you anyway. You know this case inside out. But don't make me regret it."

"I won't, sir." They didn't have indisputable proof that Charles

Hartsman actually was involved at this point. But Reed knew he was. Inside his gut, he knew.

As the sergeant stood looking around at the walls and ceiling, Reed allowed his gaze to follow the third set of prints, a sort of drag mark next to them that Reed assumed must be where Gordon Draper's feet had trailed along the floor.

At first it had appeared that the footprints led directly to the autopsy-type metal table in the center of the room, and then they overlapped as they took the same path out, presumably sometime later. But now Reed saw that they'd actually deviated slightly from the original path, seeming to stop at a spot closer to the door where more dust was disturbed. As Reed squinted down at the dirty concrete, he noticed that there appeared to be a large, loose section of cement. "Sarge," he said, and his boss turned toward him. "Look at this." Reed went over to the section of floor, reached into his pocket, and removed the gloves his sergeant had brought with him when he'd arrived and given to Reed. He maneuvered his fingers in the large cracks at each side until he was able to shift the piece of flooring. It lifted easily and Reed set it aside, both of them peering inside the dirt hole.

"Goddamn," his sergeant mumbled. Inside were dozens of Polaroids of women, their faces tear-streaked, makeup running down their cheeks and rimming their eyes as they stared terrified into the camera. Reed picked one

up, his heart beating dully as he took in the frightened expression of the woman in the picture. There was a name written at the top in black Sharpie, the letters square and blocky: Cora Hartsman, “Mimi.”

Reed stilled.

Hartsman.

Mimi.

The note, the one written to Charles Hartsman on the CPD tipster site. *Charlie, I know where Mimi is. She’s my sweet pea, and she did not leave. Contact me.*

And he *had*. This, *this* was what had lured Charles there.

Had Gordon Draper attempted to contact Charles, or had it been Axel Draper, the old man’s . . . what? *Successor?*

Mimi. Hartsman.

Charles’s *mother.*

Gordon Draper had murdered her.

Oh Jesus.

His mind raced as he tried to remember what he knew about Charles’s birth parents. Not much. Just that his mother had been a prostitute and his father a junkie. They’d abandoned him to the system, although later, his mother, apparently clean, attempted to get him back, but was a no-show at the court hearing, as often happened with addicts. Only . . . she *hadn’t* just

been a no-show. Maybe she *had* been trying.

She hadn't left him.

She'd been taken.

She's my sweet pea and she did not leave.

Nausea washed over Reed in a sudden, shocking wave of sickness. He swallowed, focusing back on the photo of the young, scared-looking brunette with red lipstick smeared across her face. *This woman is my grandmother.* There was something paperclipped to it with a rusty paperclip, and when Reed pulled the photograph aside, he saw it was a seed packet. He stared, another memory tickling the edges of his mind.

I was out back in the garden.

I'd let it get so out of hand . . . untended. Gardening is not the easiest of pastimes for a man in my predicament.

Gardening.

His eyes moved slowly to the seed packet attached to the photo in his hand, already knowing what he would see.

Sweet pea.

"This is Charles Hartsman's mother," Reed said. "It has to be why he murdered Gordon Draper."

His sergeant paused, his brow twitching as he took the photo from Reed and looked at it, obviously noting the last name. "We'll check it out."

Reed nodded numbly, picking up another photo.

Each photo in the dirt hole had a paperclip attaching a seed packet to it.

“The garden,” Reed said, meeting his sergeant’s eyes. “These women . . . they’re buried in his garden.”

They heard the sounds of footsteps on the stairs and stood, turning as the first of the criminalists entered the room. “Davies. You’re bound and determined to have us running all over town today, aren’t you?” Lewis said as he entered, coming to a standstill as he looked around at the chamber of death. “This isn’t good.”

“No disagreements here,” Reed muttered. “We’ll get out of your way. Let me know if you find anything noteworthy.”

As they climbed the stairs back toward where Ransom was still doing a walk-through of the house, performing a more thorough search of closets and cabinets, his sergeant was using his phone to call cadaver dogs. He hung up as they entered the upstairs hall. “Dogs’ll be here shortly.”

Reed turned, heading toward the kitchen where there was a back door. He opened it, stepping outside into the mild spring day, the sunshine above seeming *wrong* somehow. How could the sun still shine when rooms like the one he’d just been in existed? When evil like that walked the earth?

Hell. I just visited hell.

There was a patio directly off the back door and beyond that, a large

yard stretched before him, twenty or thirty raised planters in row after row after row, plants and weeds competing for space within each one. Reed's heart tightened like a clenched fist. There were murdered women in those planters. He knew there were. The dogs would confirm it.

“At least we can give some families a little peace,” his sergeant said, looking around as if in a daze, his thoughts obviously having followed the same path, his certainty about what they'd find as strong as Reed's.

Yes, at least they could give some families a little peace. But that's about all they could do, and the thought caused an icy frisson of violence to tremble through Reed. They'd arrived too late. Far too late. *Years* too late. No one had come running when those women surely begged for mercy. For help.

His own grandmother had died in this very house. Where had her little boy been while she was being tortured in the room of horrors below? Being tortured as well in a *different* house of horrors not too far from there? No. *No*. He couldn't think about that. Not now.

He turned away, heading back inside where Ransom was coming down the stairs. Ransom had stuck his head in the basement room earlier. He knew what they were dealing with, but Reed updated him on the pictures they'd found in the floor, and the garden out back, including the one of Cora Hartsman.

“This just gets crazier and crazier.” He paused and Reed looked more

closely at him. He'd been at a lot of disturbing crime scenes with Ransom over the past few years, but this was the first time he looked truly haunted.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, ah, we found a laptop in Draper's office.” He paused, his eyes drifting off for a moment as though he was picturing something. “He took video of some of it,” he said. “The women.”

“Oh Christ,” Reed breathed.

“That's not the worst of it though.” Ransom lowered his voice. “That little kid, his grandson, he made him participate.” Ransom scrubbed a hand down his face. “The way he begged, Reed . . . for himself, for them . . .” Ransom turned away, gathering himself. “I've been doing this job a long time and I don't think I've seen anything worse than that.”

Reed didn't know what to say. There were no words for that type of horror. After a moment, he cleared his throat. “We'll have evidence,” he said. At least there was that.

Ransom nodded, and they both stood straighter, shrugging off their emotions as best as possible. It was not the time for that. “We need to talk about this, Reed. We need to try to figure out this guy's next move. And where Charles Hartsman fits into all this.”

“I know. I think we should let the techs and the dogs take over here. Has Jennifer called you back yet?” She'd dropped everything to focus on the task

of tracking down Draper's grandson, Axel, and he hoped to God she was having some luck.

"Not yet."

"Did you find anything upstairs?"

"Nothing noteworthy. It looks unused, which makes sense since the old man couldn't do stairs. He must have had someone in to clean though, because there wasn't a lick of dust."

"Anything in the room where he slept?" Reed asked, nodding toward the bedroom on the first floor.

"Nada except a shitload of medication. Dude wasn't well."

"Yeah, in more ways than one," Reed muttered. If he had known earlier, he might have been tempted to raise his hands in a round of applause over the man's dead body.

But Charles Hartsman had done that. So, Reed would be *celebrating* his biological father's atrocities. And he could not let that come to pass. Reed felt a bout of crazed laughter rising in his throat. If he didn't lock it down, he'd be no good to anyone.

"We did find a few issues of Tribulation in his office though," Ransom said. "Unfortunately, they're the ones we already have. I bagged them up as evidence."

"He told me he didn't have any copies," Reed said, then shook his head,

massaging his head quickly. “No, *Charles Hartsman* told me he didn’t have any issues, though he must have been the one to read through them since he gave us the tip. Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s as crazy as kill room dude?”

Reed made a small sound of agreement.

“It looks like someone may have been sleeping on the couch in the office too. The criminalists will go over that. Maybe we can get proof it was Hartsman.”

Reed nodded, looking around. There was a cat food bowl half full of kibble near the end of the hall. If it was in fact Charles Hartsman who’d been living there and impersonating the old man, calling in tips to Reed and who knew what the fuck else, then he’d also fed the cat.

Apparently, his father didn’t abide by the starvation of animals.

Only co-eds.

Reed felt himself reeling.

Compartmentalize, Davies.

As he glanced toward the room he knew to be Gordon Draper’s office, something came back to Reed, a moment that had felt wrong to him though at the time he couldn’t explain to himself why. *I failed*, Gordon Draper had said as he’d gazed at the photograph of his grandson, Everett. Not I failed *him*. But *I* failed.

Those words had repeated in his head after he'd left his house. They hadn't quite fit.

Had Gordon Draper meant that he hadn't created the monster he'd sought to?

At least not in that particular grandson.

"He has an endgame," Reed murmured, looking up at Ransom. "That's what Charles Hartsman said yesterday."

What's his endgame do you think, son? Have you read the conclusion to those comics?

"He was giving me another tip."

"Are you sure he was trying to *help* you? And if so, why?"

"I have no fucking clue."

Ransom glanced down the hall as a second team of criminalists entered the house. "Didn't you order those last three Tribulation issues?"

"Yeah. They should be at the station by now."

"Let's go get them," Ransom said. "And hope Jennifer's got something for us by the time we get there."

They walked toward the front door. Charles Hartsman had obviously accomplished his goal. He'd killed the psychopath who had murdered his mother. Why would he try to help Reed with this case now? He had no good answer for that.

Compartmentalize, Reed reminded himself yet again. He had to. This was his job, and he had a feeling things were only going to swing further sideways.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Reed disconnected the call, tossing his cell in the center console. “Uniforms are on their way to Sabrina McPhee’s apartment and Milo Ortiz’s house.”

Just as he set it down, Ransom’s phone rang and Reed heard him greet Jennifer, saying a silent prayer that she had something useful for them. “Hold on. I’m going to put you on speaker,” Ransom said.

“Jennifer,” Reed said as soon as Ransom held his phone up between them.

“Hi. All right. Every available officer in the city is looking for Axel Draper. I pulled up everything I could on him. Twenty-seven years old, lives in Loveland, alone from what I can tell. He worked at a security company until about six months ago when he quit suddenly, and unexpectedly, according to his boss there.”

“Six months ago,” Reed said. “That corresponds with his brother’s suicide.”

“Yep. The boss I spoke with said he was severely broken up about it. He took some time off for the funeral and then called and said he wasn’t coming back.”

“Huh. Okay. And he hasn’t worked since then?”

“No. But he doesn’t necessarily need to either as he has quite a nice

settlement from his parents' estate."

"Right. His parents died when he was a kid. That's why he and his brother went to live with their grandfather."

"Who must have been at the height of his serial killing career."

"Five angels mistakenly sent to hell," Reed murmured, thinking back to Draper's laptop now in evidence. What the boys had experienced in that house, the things they'd seen . . . that had to be the reason for Everett Draper's suicide. He'd never recovered . . . and in a different way, neither had Axel.

"I had some uniforms swing by his address, but no one was home, and they said it appears severely neglected. Grass up to their knees, and when they looked in the windows, there were dirty dishes on all the surfaces they could see."

He'd had some sort of breakdown, Reed thought. Had his brother's suicide been the final straw in what was an already shaky mental stability? And what was beyond the doors of that house? In the garage? *Basement?* An eyeball removal surgery setup? *Christ.* "We need to get a warrant," he told Jennifer.

"I agree. I'll get on that right away."

"Okay, good." Something suddenly occurred to Reed. "Jennifer, what was the name of the security company he worked at?"

“Um, let me see . . . ShieldSafe.”

Reed’s heart gave a small jolt. “That’s an alarm company, right?”

“Uh . . .” It sounded like she was typing something into a search engine. “Yeah. It is. That’s their main business anyway. They serve the entire Tri State Area.”

Sweat broke out on his brow. He didn’t use that particular company, but if someone knew security systems really well, wouldn’t they be able to disarm one relatively easily?

“I gotta go. We’re almost at the office though. See you in three.”

He hung up, dialing Liza’s cell. “Come on, come on,” he murmured as it rang and rang. Her voicemail came on and he left her a clipped message to call him the second she got it.

“Hey, it’s unlikely, okay?” Ransom said, obviously having followed the train of his thoughts. “She’s probably in the shower.”

“Yeah,” Reed breathed, but a bad feeling was zinging over his nerves.

He pulled in to the parking lot of their office building. “So,” Ransom said, obviously to distract him. “We could be dealing with two killers here. Axel, who went mental after his brother died, and is now playing out the plot of Tribulation for reasons only a total psycho could explain, and Hartsman, who left his life on the lam, showed up for reasons possibly having to do with his mother’s murder, and is now trying to subvert Axel from his master plan.”

Reed hadn't thought about it in quite those terms, but there was something to that theory, as unbelievable as it sounded and as many questions as it still raised . . . *What's his endgame do you think, son?*

His father's endgame had been Professor Vaughn Merrick, the man Charles considered responsible for the horrific torture he'd endured as a child.

"His grandfather involved his grandson," Ransom was saying. "Think of what that would do to a kid, having to participate in the torture and murder of countless women."

And then tend the garden where their bones were buried. A shiver moved through him. Yeah, that could fuck someone up. And bad.

If Axel Draper was playing out the plot of Tribulation, didn't it stand to reason that his ultimate demon, the one waiting for him when he'd been "mistakenly sent to hell," would be his own grandfather? The endgame? The final battle?

Bellum Finivit.

Had Charles Hartsman killed Draper himself to usurp Axel's endgame? Or was it purely a personal vendetta? *Mimi* . . .

"We need to see how Tribulation ends," Reed stated.

They headed straight for Reed's mailbox and he swore viciously when there was only a few pieces of interoffice mail and nothing else. "That kid

promised me he'd overnight those copies," Reed said. Ransom followed as he took the stairs two at a time, making his way to his desk to see if someone had left it there. *Zilch.*

He ran his hands through his hair, making a grunt of frustration. His phone rang and he snatched it up, his heart sinking when he saw it was not Liza. "Hello."

"Detective Davies, this is Sorrento over in District One. I just did the welfare check on Sabrina McPhee."

"Anything unusual?"

"No. The building super let us into her apartment. We had a look around. Nothing strange except it appears she hasn't been there for a couple of days. The daily calendar page on her desk hasn't been flipped since Sunday and her mailbox is full of uncollected mail. There are some suitcases in her closet, but I have no idea if she had more travel bags. Coulda taken off on a vacation?"

That sinking feeling went lower. She wasn't on vacation. Reed would swear on it. "Okay, thank you, Officer Sorrento. I appreciate it."

"Not a problem."

He filled Ransom in, and then dialed Liza, hanging up when her voicemail came on once again.

Something is very wrong.

“I have to go check on her, Ran—” His phone rang yet again and he grabbed for it, swearing when he saw it was Zach. “Zach. Listen, I’ll call you back, I—”

“No,” he practically yelled. “Arryn’s missing.”

Every molecule in Reed’s body came to a screeching halt.

“*Missing?*”

“Yes, hold on.” Zach’s voice grew distant for a second as he spoke with someone in the background. “Sorry, officers just arrived.”

“What’s going on, Zach?” Ransom was still, watching him with wide eyes.

Zach let out a harsh exhale. “After I talked to you, I headed straight home. Reed, Charles Hartsman had been here just moments before.”

The world around Reed darkened for a moment and then lit up, overly bright. He sagged against the edge of his desk. “Oh, God. Josie?”

“He didn’t touch her. Reed, another guy showed up too. He had a gun, threatened Josie. Charles took a bullet, Reed. The unknown suspect took off with him.”

Took off with him? “Is he dead?”

“I don’t know. Josie thought it was a shoulder wound, but she’s not sure. There was a lot of blood.”

Josie was okay. He exhaled a short breath of relief. Reed stood straight,

paced. All around him, other detectives were watching. Duffy approached Ransom.

“Hartsman’s the one who told Josie the guy had Arryn. But it was garbled. Hartsman was losing consciousness.”

Reed paused. “Okay. But you didn’t see this guy take Arryn too?”

“No, but from what we can tell, she’s been missing since this morning. She never showed up for class.”

“You sure, Zach? You know Arryn—”

“I’m sure.”

Reed made a hissing sound. *This is not happening.*

He started to ask Zach if he was okay, but of course he wasn’t okay. But Zach wouldn’t fall apart. Reed knew he wouldn’t. He’d stay calm and focused and directly on target until he found his daughter. And Reed was bound and determined to do the same right alongside him.

“How’s Josie?”

“She’s okay. Holding it together.” *Of course she was. Because that was Josie. That was his mother.*

“We think the unknown suspect is a man named Axel Draper. I’m trying to get some information on his next move. I’ll be there as soon as possible and I’ll tell you everything we know. Zach . . . we’re going to find her.”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “Thanks, Reed.” Zach hung up.

Reed's whole body was vibrating. "Talk to me," Ransom said.

He gave Ransom an extremely short summation of Zach's call. "He's setting it up. The conclusion, Ransom. He's gathering all his characters." Was he gathering them alive, or dead? That was the question.

Triage.

Assign degrees of urgency.

Most pressing matter first. It was all he could do. Rely on his crisis training. "Will you head to the farmhouse? Zach and Josie will need the support, and Zach needs to be briefed on everything we know. I have to check on Liza."

"Absolutely. I'm going now." He grabbed his wallet and keys that he'd tossed on his desk.

"Ransom—"

"I got you, man. I'll be there in record time."

"Thank you."

Together, they headed for the exit, going separate ways in the parking lot.

Reed jumped into his car, sticking his own light to the roof before peeling out of the lot. As he drove, he dialed the kid's number who he'd paid to send the final three editions of Tribulation. Reed tapped his palm against the wheel as he drove, "Answer, motherfucker."

“Hello?” The guy’s voice sounded like he’d just woken up.

“This is Reed Davies in Cincinnati. You were supposed to send me those editions of *Tribulation*.”

“Huh? Oh.” He yawned. “Yeah. Sorry. Someone offered me more money for them. I had to take their—”

“Jesus Christ! Who?”

“What?”

“*Who* offered you more money for those editions?”

“Some guy in your city, actually. Drake . . . Dapper? No, Draper, I think? I shouldn’t be telling you that. It’s, you know, privileged information, so don’t front me out.”

Was he fucking *kidding*? Reed’s hands gripped the wheel. *Hartsman* had ordered those comics and had them shipped to Draper’s address while he was staying there. *Why? Why* had he wanted to read them first?

“You should have honored my order.” Goddammit. He didn’t have *time* for this.

“Hey, man. Business is business, okay? I’ll reimburse you the overnight mail cost. I’m sure you can wait to find out the conclusion. Nothing’s that epic. Dude, trust me. I once waited for—”

“I needed those comics, and I don’t have time to wait. Lives are on the line here,” Reed said through clenched teeth.

“Oh. Well . . . I mean, if you’re desperate, I read that whole series. I can tell you what happens.”

Reed hesitated, the road speeding past him, the reflection of the light on the roof of his car flashing red. He hardly wanted to rely on some kid’s memory, but what other fucking choice did he have now? He *was* desperate. “Tell me the gist of it. Just the ending.”

He heard the guy shifting around as if making himself comfortable and Reed almost swore aloud but held it back. “Okay, so, these angels born in hell, you know? The main characters?”

“Yep.”

“Okay so . . . let’s see. There’s the hot blonde with the big—”

“Highlights,” he barely scraped out.

“Okay, okay. So, all their stories come to a head. Despite some wins, evil is prevailing . . . yadda yadda yadda. There’s a ritual they have to perform so they’ll finally be released from the grips of Hell and ascend to their rightful heavenly home.”

“Tell me about this ritual.”

“Right, well, they have to form a circle.”

Reed let out a slow breath. If Axel was going to play out this ritual, his five angels were alive. All except Everett, of course. Axel considered himself one of them, too, though. That meant he wouldn’t hurt them, right? He

wouldn't hurt Liza. And Arryn . . . perhaps he was using Arryn as a stand-in of sorts for Everett?

“Where? Where do they form this circle? Where does this ritual take place?”

“Um . . . the catacombs,” he said. “They use the catacombs the demons travel in, because the ritual has to be performed in their lair.”

Catacombs?

“Yeah. It has to be performed in the demon's lair by these five angels. They have to kill one innocent and one demon.”

“An innocent?”

“Yup. A sacrifice must be made. Like one of those Inca virgins. Someone innocent and pure. Pretty crazy, huh? Dark stuff.” He chuckled. “I remember the picture. It's like this sweet-looking young girl with black curls and big eyes who's all, ‘noooo, don't hurt me.’” He made his voice go high-pitched in a piss-poor imitation of a scared female. “They all have to burn together. Fire opens this, like, portal to Heaven so they can return to where they rightly belong.”

Fire? “Do they do it?” Reed asked. He felt almost numb, though his focus was sharp, every detail of the road and the inside of his car precisely outlined as if the world around him had turned into some sort of eerie negative.

“Yeah, they do it. They get to Heaven. The end.”

“Thanks.”

The guy started to respond but Reed hung up.

His phone dinged as a text came in.

Ransom: Update from offcr who checked out Ortiz house. Still not home. Offcr was able to see in windows, including bedrm. Nothing out of place. Ortiz truck in driveway.

Reed: Thx

Axel Draper had Milo too. Reed would bet his life on it.

Please, please don't let him have Liza.

He dialed Zach's number.

“Hello?”

“Zach,” he said as he pulled up to the curb in front of his building and jumped out. “I think Axel is taking Arryn to what he considers some type of catacombs. It's part of the Tribulation story, where the final ceremony happens. Axel Draper is bringing all the characters together so they can act out this ritual.”

“Tell me more.” He heard a door shut and the sounds of commotion that had been in the background a moment before quieted. “What sort of ritual?”

“It involves an innocent and a demon, and a fire. He's planning to burn them all.”

“An innocent . . . Arryn.”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“And Hartsman’s the demon?”

“Maybe. What could catacombs mean?”

There was a short pause where Reed imagined Zach was gathering himself, and then he heard the tapping of computer keys, and knew the room Zach had stepped into was his office.

Reed punched at the call elevator button. *Come the fuck on!* Five seconds passed, and Reed swore quietly, heading for the stairs, taking two at a time. As he cleared the second-floor landing, Zach said, “Okay, listen, in the twenties, Cincinnati invested in a subway that was never completed. It’s . . . this set of empty tunnels and stations beneath the city.” It sounded like he was reading off a website.

Empty tunnels? Reed burst through the stairwell door out into the hallway. “Zach, that’s *gotta* be it.”

“I’ll get a team together immediately. Ransom’s already here. There’s an old tunnel entrance on Hopple Street. We’ll leave now. Meet us there.”

“I will. I’ll call one of your phones as soon as I’m close.” They both hung up just as Reed rounded the corner to his apartment. The door was open a crack. Reed’s heart dropped to his feet, his breath coming harshly as he removed his weapon, triangulating the door and entering quickly. “Police!”

he yelled, but the only sound that greeted him was eerie silence.

He made his way down the hall, mindful to be tactical, but a sense of dread and urgency compelling him to do so as swiftly as he possibly could.

Liza, Liza. Please be okay. God, please be okay.

In the guest bedroom there were minor signs of a struggle as though someone had surprised her, but then quickly incapacitated her. His gaze swept between the hardcover book dropped on the floor, to the overturned lamp. She'd fought, but he'd either drugged her, or injured her. His eyes moved over the floor, the bed. No blood.

No, no no. Axel needed her alive to perform this ritual. She had to be okay.

At least for now.

He felt time ticking down like a giant pulsating clock chiming in his head. A clock that would eventually run out.

Reed forced himself to calm down, to focus. Liza needed him now. *Arryn* needed him now.

Because the cast of characters was complete.

The madman had gathered his players.

With a strangled grunt, born of fear and frustration, Reed headed for the door but turned back when he realized he was still wearing dress shoes and didn't even have a coat. If he was going to join the search party—if he was

going to be an asset to the rescue team—he at least needed boots and a jacket. He ran to his room, kicking his shoes off and pulling a pair of hiking boots from his closet, which he didn't take time to lace, simply shoving his feet into them and grabbing a waterproof jacket from his closet. As he pushed the door shut, the rush of air caused a pile of case photos sitting nearby on his dresser to flutter off.

Reed didn't take time to pick them up, simply stepping over them and heading for the hallway. But one of the pictures caused him pause and he turned back, looking down at the photograph from one of the victim's necks.

The brand.

Buckeye.

That's where it had started.

At Camp Joy in that cabin where five angels mistakenly sent to hell had first gathered, telling their stories perhaps, sharing secrets that some of them, young and reeling from trauma, might soon forget as life moved forward.

But not one. One had always remembered. One had woven their individual tragedies into a bigger story, trying desperately to find meaning in his own pain.

Something was skating around Reed's brain . . . something just out of reach. He took a moment, trying desperately to grasp it.

What else had they done there? They'd learned about the Underground

Railroad. It felt like a light went on inside his mind.

Liza's words whispered through Reed: *There's a now-abandoned house near the river where freedom seekers hid in this below-ground storage area that had a water runoff tunnel leading from it that let out on the shore. I imagined those scared people gathered there, crawling into that darkness and then running through the woods in the pitch-black of night, the only light cast by a sliver of moon. The bravery that would have taken, the terror that must have been in their hearts, but they did it anyway, running toward a world that would not embrace them because they decided that freedom was bigger and far more powerful than their fear. Their stories—though vastly different—made me want to be brave too.*

Axel Draper had acted out other non-literal commands before—pushing people to their deaths to act out demons falling from power.

Underground Railroad.

Underground *lair*.

He doesn't think like you. He's twisted. You have to try to think like him.

Liza's voice rose up inside him and he swallowed a panicked groan.

Could they be wrong as far as the unused subway tunnels?

No, *he* could be totally off-base. He probably was. But . . . her words repeated. *He's twisted. You have to try to think like him.*

Reed left his room, heading for the kitchen where he opened his laptop

and did a google search of the house Liza might have been talking about.

He found it immediately, the images of the home making it clear that it was long-abandoned just as she said. He was surprised that it had sat empty for so long and that no one had bought the property, but he didn't have time to research why.

He read the address out loud so he'd remember it and then grabbed the coat he'd thrown over the back of a kitchen chair and raced for the door. As he rode the elevator downstairs, he dialed Ransom's number, swearing as it went straight to voicemail.

Reed stepped off the elevator, dialing Zach's number. His phone went straight to voicemail as well. *Fuck!* They were probably already below ground, or very close to beginning the search of those decayed tunnels. This was *Zach's daughter*, and no one would have wasted a second. There would be no phone reception down there. They might not even be using radios so as not to alert Axel of their arrival should they find him.

Reed pulled away from the curb, typing the address of the old house into his GPS. There was a team of good men searching the subway—and the streets of Cincinnati. He owed it to Liza and Arryn to cover all the bases.

It took him twenty minutes to make the drive to the street near the edge of the Ohio River. The lights of Kentucky glowed softly in the distance, brighter because of the lack of streetlights in this deserted area. Reed drove

slowly down the dark road, thick trees lining both sides of the private drive. He came to an overgrown entrance to what had once been a driveway and turned in, his tires crunching over the weeds and gravel.

When he came to a tall, iron gate, he stopped, stepping from his car and inspecting the large padlock, attached to a long chain wound through the bars, both rusted with age. He wouldn't be getting through this way.

Reed turned on the flashlight on his phone, pointing it down at the ground, his heart galloping as he saw fresh tire tracks in the dirt.

Someone had been here very recently.

CHAPTER FORTY

Liza came to slowly, the sound of pinging water echoing around her, the smell of dankness and rot filling her nose. Her head felt too heavy for her neck. Images came to her . . . a man entering the room where she'd been reading—*Axel*, she knew that now. Reed had mentioned his name, and she could see him in the once chubby lines of his older face. The stark fear as he'd rushed her, the painful prick to her neck. Liza cracked her eyes open.

An ancient wood-slatted wall met her gaze, damp with moisture, and weathered by age, and when she looked around, she saw she was in a large open cavern, where five people were sitting in metal chairs, their hands chained behind their backs. Liza's gaze moved slowly between them, all appearing to be drugged like her, their heads lolling forward: The two people from the photographs Reed had shown her, and . . . She felt her mouth go slack. "Arryn?" she gasped but Arryn didn't look up.

Icy panic filled Liza's veins. *Unconscious, just unconscious.* Axel had brought them all here. What was this? And what was he going to do? *Why?*

She turned her head slowly to see a fifth person, this one strung up in the corner next to her, his hands chained over his head, feet bound in rope and barely touching the floor. Dizziness rolled through her.

Charles Hartsman.

Who else could it be? A small sound left Liza's throat as she took in the infamous serial killer who looked like an older version of Reed, blood trickling from a bullet wound in his shoulder down his naked chest. Liza's gaze moved from the bloody wound to the word tattooed above his heart in large, black script: *Caleb*.

Caleb?

Who is Caleb?

Charles lifted his head and stared directly at Liza, his dark eyes piercing even in the dimly lit space, its only source of illumination a kerosene lamp hung from a hook in the wall. Her heart constricted. She couldn't look at him. She couldn't look at a man who was the physical embodiment of Reed Davies and hate him. It felt like hating a part of Reed, though she knew that was irrational. She *knew* it, but still, she dared not meet his eyes. Liza squeezed them shut against the man's gaze as he attempted to move his hands within the chain, but there was no give. Her own muscles felt like they'd been pumped full of lead but she attempted to wiggle her feet, get some blood flowing to her extremities.

Oh God, oh God. Get me out of here.

Liza's head ached as she tried to work through this situation with drugs still pumping through her system, making her slow, tired, yet somehow still wired with terror.

There was a short stairwell behind her, leading somewhere even lower. Somewhere so dark she couldn't see the room beyond. In the opposite corner, Arryn stirred, moaning softly. A door near Arryn opened and Axel entered. Liza saw a stairwell behind him that must lead above ground. She heard the soft patter of rain right before he pushed the door closed, latching it and stepping forward slowly, out of the darkness like a monster appearing from the gloom. He was tall, at least six foot five. Muscular. *Strong*. A man who could easily carry a body up several flights of stairs. A man who could toss someone, or several someones, over the edge of a building. *Her brother*. He turned toward them, his eyes moving from one to the other until he came to Liza.

“Hello, Angel,” he said, smiling sweetly at her. She shivered. “It’s so nice to see you.” He looked at the others again. “It shouldn’t take too long for them to come to. But we’ll wait. I need them awake for the ritual.”

Ritual?

He walked to a corner where there was a black case and a red, rusted can. He picked the can up, humming some unknown tune as he walked around the perimeter of the room, pouring the liquid in a trail behind him.

Gasoline. Liza smelled it.

Oh God.

He was planning on *burning* them? A scream rose within her.

Hold it together. Reed must have figured out you were abducted by now. But even if he had, how would he ever know where Axel had taken her? She didn't even know where they were. Then again . . . she looked around. "The house," she murmured. "The one they told us about at Camp Joy." Her voice sounded gritty, unused.

Axel looked up. "That's right. I knew you'd remember. This is it, Angel. This is where we ascend. All of us." He used his hand to sweep toward Liza and the other two. *Oh my God*, she thought, realization flooding her, *they're the other two kids who were in our cabin.*

"You recognize them, don't you? Milo and Sabrina? All of us, back together again." His shoulders dropped. "Except Everett," he whispered. "But I'm his brother. I carry his blood inside me. Maybe . . . maybe this will save him too."

Liza looked at Milo and Sabrina, seeing them not as they were now, but as they'd been. *Then.* Yes, yes, she remembered now. Milo had been prostituted by his own mother, and Sabrina had been severely beaten by her father. She'd almost died, been left with a permanent limp and scars littering her skin. Everett and Axel's parents had both died in an accidental fire. They'd shared their stories, there in the safety of that remote cabin. It was the first time Liza had spoken her pain because those kids? They understood.

"I read those final Tribulation editions," Charles broke in. "Just this

morning, as a matter of fact. Riveting. I guess I'm playing the demon in this far-off-Broadway show?"

Axel smiled, a long hum sounding in his throat. "Playing? Hardly. You're a demon, Charlie," he said. "I knew Mimi would get you here, and she did."

Charles's expression grew icy, but as quickly as that, he smiled. "Don't lie. You wish you'd killed your grandfather yourself, don't you, Axel?"

His grandfather? Gordon Draper? Killed?

Axel paused for a long time, gasoline dripping from the can he was holding, creating a puddle on the floor. "I'm glad he's dead. But"—he shook his head—"no, I wanted the *ultimate* demon. *You*. The one they could never catch. The one my grandfather said was too smart for *everyone*. He respected you," Axel said. "He was . . . star-struck."

"Trust me, he wasn't star-struck the last time I saw him," Charles said, his lips curving. "I don't think he enjoyed spending time with me at all."

"No," he murmured. "I'm sure he didn't. But he'd still be jealous. He'd be jealous that I caught you. Because I had the ace up my sleeve. I looked through that box. I found Mimi's picture. He didn't even realize who he'd killed or who was out in that garden. My grandfather was never great at remembering names, only screams." He moved his head from side to side, stretching his neck. "I wasn't there for that particular killing, but when I

asked him about sweet pea, he told me that she'd begged. She'd begged him not to take her away from her little boy. He did, though. He did take her away from her little Charlie. You. But as it turned out, you were a demon too."

Charles moved suddenly and Liza sucked in a breath as Axel's posture changed. He was wary of Charles, even with him strung from the ceiling, hanging from chains.

She didn't understand what they were discussing, but it terrified her all the same.

Charles sniffed, regaining whatever composure he'd seemed to lose for a moment there. "I enjoyed watching him die, even if I would have liked to draw it out a little more. But . . . time constraints." Charles paused, appearing thoughtful and as relaxed as a man could look while hanging from shackles. "As it turns out, however, I do have some limits. A nose? Well." He shrugged, a small movement with his hands tied above his head the way they were. "That's just a nice clean swipe. But removing the eyes?" He shook his head, cringing dramatically. "Wow, you've gotta be a real sicko for work like that."

"At least I waited until they were dead."

"It's not as satisfying if you don't hear them scream."

"That's what makes you a demon."

Charles laughed. "I guess you're right." He paused. "But you, Axel,

really were exactly what he hoped for. He would have been so proud to know what he'd created. Are you sure *you're* not the demon in this room?"

"He *would* have been proud, but he wouldn't have understood. He was a demon, and demons don't see truth." Axel paced for a second and then stopped, staring at Charles. "I'm *nothing* like him," he said. "He killed innocents for the pure pleasure of it, just like *you*. I do it out of necessity and for a grander plan, a righteous plan. I abolish evil and *protect* innocents."

"What about her?" Charles nodded his head toward Arryn. "What about all of them?"

Axel glanced at Arryn, pressing his lips together. "It's for the ritual. Only the power of a sacrifice will set us all free. It's been written."

"Maybe you shouldn't believe everything you read."

Axel smiled softly. "Make light if you want. You wouldn't understand. You don't see truth either. Just like him."

"No. He didn't see truth, did he?" Charles said, more softly now. "He thought Everett was just like him. He thought *Everett* would take ownership of that room once he no longer could. I watched the videos. I know what he did."

Axel stared at him for a moment, turning away and then back, his arms crossing and uncrossing as he became agitated. He let out a strangled chuckle, tipping his head to the low ceiling above. "Well, let's see. That's

because my grandfather wasn't *only* a demon himself, but he thought he had a secret recipe for his own demonic *legacy*. That's what Everett was supposed to be! His legacy," he repeated, voice going higher. "How could he let those special, *special* genes of his just *die* out? There are so *few* in the world, he said, those rare individuals who have the strength and the fortitude to extinguish unnecessary life."

His legacy? Unnecessary life? Liza's head was pounding as she tried desperately to understand. Gordon Draper was a . . . killer? What kind of alternate universe had she been dropped into?

"Those women were nothing more than manure for his garden—*literally*." Axel let out another forced-sounding chuckle. "He hadn't seen any possibility in our father," Axel went on, "so he'd hidden his hobby from him, conducted his playtime elsewhere. But our father suspected. He suspected he was evil, and so he kept us away from him. Then our parents died and . . . well, we were at our grandfather's mercy. He thought *Everett* started the fire that killed our parents on *purpose*. He thought he was fascinated by fire just like he'd been as a boy, but it was an accident. Only an accident. Everett was *not* like him. But he made him participate." A high keening sound erupted from Axel's mouth before he cut it off. "To hear my brother *beg* him not to . . . to hear him . . ." Axel's voice broke but, once again, he gathered himself quickly. "He tried to make Everett his legacy. And

instead he ruined my brother. He *ruined* him.”

Ruined. She stared at Axel in horror, trying desperately to understand what was happening, what this whole thing was about. *Ruined*. It was the word her brother had used too. The reason he’d wanted so desperately to set them all free.

In some sort of sick and twisted effort to create a legacy of horror, Gordon Draper had apparently traumatized his grandsons so severely, and in the wake of such a tragic loss, that one had taken his own life and the other had gone insane?

Was she understanding this correctly? It seemed too unbelievable to be true.

And yet here they were, chained to chairs in an underground cavern about to be set on fire.

“Explain it, Dr. Nolan,” Axel said, his voice hoarse. “Tell us all why he thought Everett’s supposed obsession with fire meant he’d inherited our grandfather’s demonic genes.”

Liza’s head cleared infinitesimally. Fire . . . *fire*.

She blinked, swallowed, mindful of angering him or . . . pushing some unknown button. “It’s called The Macdonald Triad,” she said haltingly. Gordon Draper had believed his grandson carried his same psychopathic tendencies, the same flawed sequence of genetics. “Your grandfather

believed Everett had exhibited at least one of the three signs said to be predictive of later violent tendencies, particularly . . . serial offenses: animal cruelty, bedwetting, fire-setting.”

Axel’s mouth twisted into what she assumed was supposed to be a smile. “Ah, well, there you go. Science.”

Liza closed her eyes, picturing Everett, his shy smile, the gentle demeanor. The stack of comic books he’d brought to camp and kept on his bedside.

“He was wrong, Axel. So very, very wrong.”

He’d been tortured.

And Everett’s suicide had evidently completely thrown his brother over the edge of reality. Whatever he was attempting to do here was part of some wild explanation he’d come up with for the trauma they’d both endured. Some answer to the inexplicable question of *why*.

A life raft to clutch to in a black, bottomless sea.

And she was part of it. She and Arryn.

“Why her?” Liza asked, nodding over to a still unconscious Arryn.

Axel smiled. “All demons have a weakness.” He nodded at Charles. “His is Josie.” He cocked his head to the side. “He let her go,” Axel murmured, staring at Charles, his expression almost . . . perplexed. “Not once, but twice. My grandfather never would have done that. No loose ends,

he always said. Never any loose ends.” Axel’s voice trailed away, eyes going distant before he startled slightly, coming back to himself, gesturing toward Charles again. “I let him know Josie was at risk and just as I thought, he fell right into my hands.” He smiled. “I prepared this. All of it. It took *meticulous* planning, lots of time. Months and months. I followed all of you . . . Josie”—he turned toward Arryn—“Josie’s family.” His smile grew tender and a distant shiver went down Liza’s spine. “I watched Arryn, I even talked to her once. She was kind. Innocent. Pure. *Perfect.*”

Liza’s head cleared a little more, the room becoming sharper, more real.

“Your grandfather is dead, Axel,” Liza said. “Isn’t that enough? Please, let us go. Let them go”—she nodded to Milo, Sabrina, and Arryn—“and we can talk. You don’t have to kill anyone, not even him.” She extended her head toward Charles. “We’ll talk and we’ll figure this out, just like we talked before. Then”—she looked over at Milo and Sabrina—“we’ll all talk, okay, Axel?”

“No,” he said. “It’s too late for that now. You have to understand, Angel, this is for *you* too. It’s the only way to escape hell and evade evil once and for all. You want that, don’t you?”

He looked over to the others shackled to the chairs, his gaze moving between Milo and Sabrina, who looked to be in various stages of regaining consciousness. He addressed Charles. “They understand evil.” He walked

over to Liza and ran a finger down her cheek. She shrunk back, groaned. “This angel, terrified of the dark because her father locked her there, alone, for days.” Something in Charles’s face shifted as he watched her. Liza looked away.

Axel walked over to Milo, placing his hand on his shoulder. “And this angel, who numbs himself to keep the visions at bay, the memories of what those men did to him.” He moved to Sabrina, smoothing her hair away from her face, though it fell immediately back to where it’d been with her head bent forward. “Her, attempting to exorcise the demons through paint, splashing the memories of every slap, every kick, every vicious word, and every broken bone that never healed quite right onto canvas.” He sighed. “My grandfather hadn’t started our . . . lessons yet when Everett and I met you all at Camp Joy, but later, I remembered.” He looked around at all of them. “I remembered you—I remembered *us*—as I sat alone in our room, reading Everett’s comics, listening to him beg, listening to those women scream in agony for hours.” He drifted off, face going slack for a moment, shoulders shifting forward. “I remembered, and I realized who we really are.”

Axel swiveled, his eyes landing on Charles, his expression blank, the eyes of someone who wasn’t all there. “And *my* demon? Well, you already know Everett’s and my demon. You wanted to know about our grandfather? He didn’t just hurt us, he thought he’d create another version of himself. He

thought he had the perfect recipe.”

“Well,” Charles sighed. “His recipe was a little off because you’re a few cinnamon sticks short of an apple pie, my friend. You do realize that, right?”

“You think you’re funny?” Axel smiled benevolently. “You think this is a joke? Of course you do, because you’re the same as him. You’re not as clever as you think you are, Charlie, because I caught you, didn’t I? He made us study you, you know. You and others like you. *Motivation*,” he said. “It’s how I know all your secrets.”

Milo began lifting his head, but then it dropped, lolling to the side once again. He didn’t wake.

“I know you think I’m crazy, and maybe I am,” Axel said, turning back toward them. He shrugged. “But *maybe* madness in itself is a kind of sight.” He paused. “The things I’ve seen . . . the things that were done to them . . .” He nodded to Liza, Milo, and Sabrina in turn. “All these so-called experts can call it whatever they want, make excuses for it, blame it on any number of things, try to treat it, medicate it, incarcerate it if they want, but they can’t ever convince me evil doesn’t exist. And evil. *Must*. Be. Destroyed. None of us were meant to be . . . here. And all I want, all I want, is to go *home*.” He leaned back against the wall, letting his head fall back, breath coming sharply.

“You can’t go home, Axel,” Charles said. And though he’d been almost

flippant a moment before, Liza was caught off guard by the sincerity in his voice. She wondered if it was real or pretend. “Take it from me. No matter how many people you kill, no matter how much justice you exact, you can never go home.”

Axel stood straight, opening his mouth to address Charles when something caught his attention on a shelf near where he was standing, a picture blinking to life. “The motion sensors,” he muttered, moving closer. Liza strained to see, ice hitting her veins as she made out the figure on the camera. Reed. Oh God, *Reed*. He’d found them. How had he found them? She wanted to scream for him, but he was far too far away, and she was in a pit under the earth.

Axel set the monitor back down. “Detective Davies won’t interfere,” he said. He looked at Charles. “I have tripwire at the perimeter of the property, right at the edge of the fence. Explosives. I told you, I’ve *planned* this. I couldn’t risk anyone surprising us. Because this is my night. The angels are on my side. All of heaven is cheering us on. But . . . we don’t need to watch the detective blow up, do we? That would be . . . unpleasant. I’m not a cruel man. I had to keep you all safe though. It had to be done.”

Liza’s stomach plunged.

She looked over at Charles and his jaw was tight with something that looked like rage as he glanced away from the monitor that Axel was still

watching, his attention focused there as Reed walked around his car, looking up at the front gate. How far was he away from the perimeter of the property? The edge of the fence? Oh *God*. “Not good timing, Caleb,” she thought Charles muttered. She stared at Reed’s biological father as his eyes moved to the other three people in chairs across from them, and then finally to her. He pinned her with his eyes.

Her gaze moved as he slowly lifted his feet, his stomach muscles straining. She blinked up and saw that a red strip of skin was peeling back from his hand as he held his weight entirely by his arms.

Her eyes flew to Axel and then away. His back was still to them.

Liza’s eyes widened and she stared at Charles again, confused and horrified as he moved his feet slowly upward. She blinked. There was a small metal tool in the side of his running shoe. Her eyes flew to his again and he nodded to the video screen that Axel was beginning to set down. *Go*, he mouthed. And in one movement, he brought his feet around to her shackled hands and she plucked the tool from his shoe, Charles lowering his feet to the floor in the second before Axel flicked off the monitor and turned back around.

A bead of sweat dripped down Liza’s face. Charles Hartsman had given her a tool. *Why? Why did he do that?* Why hadn’t he used it himself? Maybe he couldn’t? Maybe he figured she would be quicker with her hands behind

her back rather than over her head like him? Her heart pounded. Her hands felt slick with sweat, and she feared she'd drop the tiny file-like object in her hand. *Go*, he'd said.

Warn him. Warn Reed that he's headed toward an explosive. Her heart sped, pumping blood through her veins so swiftly she feared she'd pass out. Charles was staring at her intensely, so she forced herself to calm down. *Calm, calm.*

She moved the tool slowly until she was grasping it tightly in her fingers, and she began to work on the lock behind her back.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Liza kept her gaze glued to Axel as he walked to Sabrina, tapping her lightly on her cheek. “Wake up, Angel,” he said. “It’s almost time. You’ll want to be awake for this.”

Liza used the fingers of her hand not holding the pin to locate the lock, bringing the pin to it and inserting it inside. A bead of sweat dripped into her eyes, stinging. She wiggled the tool inexpertly, frustration and fear making her want to scream. She didn’t know what she was doing.

Sabrina moaned, bringing her head up, her eyes opening slightly. “That’s it,” Axel crooned before walking over to Milo. He shook him a little harder, but he didn’t rouse. Liza removed the pin, taking a breath and inserting it again, trying desperately to keep her hands as steady as possible. She felt Charles’s eyes on her, and when she glanced at him, he was watching her intently, his jaw rigid, eyes dark with intensity. He made a slight movement with his head. *Down, over.* And then again.

Liza brought the pin from the lock again, taking a few seconds just to breathe. Her fingers were slippery with sweat and they continued to tremble. But time was ticking down, the room was rife with gasoline fumes, and the tiny piece of metal in her hand was her only chance.

Axel turned and Liza went stock still. He smiled at her, moving in her

direction. Oh God. *Does he know? Does he know?* He stopped in front of her and removed a small bottle from his pocket. Sweat continued to drip down the side of her face and bead on her upper lip. *If Axel sees, please let him think it's a side effect of the drug and my fear.*

Keeping eye contact, he pulled a pocketknife from his pocket as well and flipped the blade open. Liza's heart lurched. "What are you going to do?" she practically panted.

"I just need a little of your blood, Angel. I'll take it from your palm. It will only hurt for a second."

Her palm? *Oh God.* Liza clenched the small pin in her hand, her mind spinning and her breath stalling as she tried to figure out what to do.

Axel walked slowly behind her and uncurled her fist.

The one not holding the pin.

Liza's breath exploded in a relieved gush of air. She met Charles's eyes as Axel sliced into her flesh. The pain was almost a victory in itself, and she gladly took it. He hadn't discovered her secret. She felt Axel squeeze her palm as her blood dripped and when he walked back around, she saw the drops of her blood in the bottom of the bottle.

Axel brought the knife to his own palm and made a slow slice, blood pooling. "I'm providing the blood for myself and Everett, my brother," he said, tilting his hand so his blood dripped into the bottle, mixing with her

own.

He turned, taking the few steps to Sabrina, who was blinking around drowsily. With one final glance at Charles, Liza took the opportunity to grip the pin in her fingers. *Down, over. Down, over.* She inserted it into the lock and pressed down firmly and then moved it over quickly to the right as Charles had indicated. With a barely discernible click, the handcuffs fell open. Liza almost gasped with relieved joy, but managed to keep her face stoic, catching the handcuffs behind her back before they could clatter to the floor.

She didn't dare look at anyone other than Axel, watching him to make sure he hadn't noticed what she'd done. As he moved behind Sabrina and took her blood, Liza remained still. He was standing now, turning toward where Milo and Arryn sat near the door.

She turned her head slightly, looking at the short set of wooden steps that led somewhere lower, her pulse pounding with the knowledge that if she did get free, that might be her only escape.

Not if. *When. You can do this, Liza. You can do this.*

When Axel turned to face Milo, Liza very quickly hooked the handcuffs on the back of her chair so they wouldn't fall. Her breath was coming short, and she was having trouble not gasping audibly. But she couldn't do that. It would bring Axel's attention to her. She watched as Axel sliced Milo's palm,

the man exhibiting no reaction at all. Even in her extreme fear, the deadened look on the man's face made Liza's heart ache. He'd learned how to accept pain. Liza didn't have to wonder where he had developed that particular skill, or why.

I remember your story, Milo. I remember now.

Axel placed the vial back in his pocket and picked up a second gas can by the door, uncapping it and splashing it on the ancient wood, rivulets running to the floor. Arryn was next and she was closest to the door. Liza would have no chance of using that exit or going anywhere near it before Axel was on her. No chance at all.

And she had to attempt her escape now. Once the fire started, it was over for them all.

Her terror ratcheted higher.

Her only choice was down.

She had no idea if there was even anywhere to *go*, if she made it down those stairs or if it was a dead end where he'd trap her, handcuffing her again or something worse. But maybe if she could manage to escape, or even hide, he'd be unable to perform whatever sick ceremony he was attempting with one of his players gone.

And she had to try to warn Reed. He was moving closer even now.

Adrenalin pumped through Liza's veins.

As Axel raised the gasoline can again, busy with his chore, Liza dove out of her chair, heading for the steps. She heard Axel yell behind her and then a loud crash and a grunt of pain—*his* she thought—but she didn't waste the seconds it would have taken to look back.

She flew toward the stairs, jumping over them entirely, her feet contacting hard packed dirt as she went into a momentary crouch, springing to her feet and fleeing into the darkness below.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Reed followed the tire tracks with his light. It looked as if they stopped at the gate, and then turned and went back the way they'd come. Someone who'd gotten lost and taken a wrong turn? Possibly. Indecision caused sweat to bead.

God, this could be nothing.

If Axel had brought them all here, how had he gotten them inside? Then again, he'd used his strength to move dead bodies all over town and huck others from buildings. Reed shined his light beyond the gates. It looked as though the house was a good quarter mile back. He moved his light up, searching for a way past the fence, but the bars were made of solid iron, swirled with decorative elements that would make it impossible to squeeze through anywhere, the top featuring large spikes, sharp and covered in rust.

Christ, just what he needed . . . to get skewered out here with no one knowing his location. He could shoot the lock off but . . . no, he couldn't risk the noise of a gunshot.

He looked through the bars of the fence once more. If Axel had found a way inside, he might have figured out another route from the back, but . . . Reed didn't have time to search for that either.

He dialed Ransom's number again and when his voicemail came on, he

spoke in low tones, telling him where he was and that if he found nothing, he'd be headed to meet them within the half hour.

Reed left his car where it was, lacing up his boots and heading down toward the river where the fence turned into the woods.

Fuck it was dark, practically pitch-black. Liza had mentioned a moon in her imaginings but there was no such light that night, any glow completely obscured by clouds and the cover of trees. Reed's breath came quicker, whispers picking up around him. He knew it was just the wind moving through the branches, but he swore there were muffled words in there, whole conversation slipping past him as he moved.

Christ, get a hold of yourself, Davies. He'd never been afraid of the dark. But here . . . there was a feeling. One he couldn't explain, but some sixth sense reacted to nonetheless.

Over the whispers in the wind, Reed heard the distinct sound of the river lapping the shore, and the movement of night creatures in the foliage around him. Another chill went down his spine as he fought his way through the overgrown brush, trying to walk as close to the border of the fence as possible, attempting not to rush and trip over something that couldn't be seen.

It took him twenty minutes to make it to the edge of the fence. He stood there for a moment, holding his light low while still trying to see the property beyond.

An owl hooted in the woods and the soft snap of a twig had him sucking in a breath, his hand going to his weapon. His heart whooshed in his ears and he held himself still, listening. *Nothing*. After a moment he released a slow breath, lowering his hand, and raising his light again as he swept it over the dilapidated exterior.

The place was in ruin.

Completely deserted.

Every ghost-hunters wet dream.

Fuck!

He'd just wasted forty minutes on a wild goose chase when he could have been among the search team.

Still, he had to look inside, just in case. Reed picked up his foot, ready to step out of the cover of trees, past the edge of the fence.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Liza heard a crash behind her as she turned a corner, barely able to see as the filtered lantern light behind her diminished. Her breath came sharply, heart hammering as she rounded another corner in what was a labyrinth of underground rooms, one wide open space flowing to the next, each growing dimmer and dimmer as her lungs burned in her chest. She heard Axel behind her, his steps slow. “Angel,” he called. “Liza, there’s nowhere to go. Come back. Don’t be afraid. You’ve got this all wrong, Angel. This is going to be the most wonderful night of your life.”

Liza came to a wall, turning left and right frantically. He was right, there was nowhere to go. Only backward. She’d come to a dead end.

What do I do? What do I do?

Panic surged as her eyes lit on what looked like a round door near the floor. A tunnel. *The water runoff tunnel.* Gasping, she bolted to it, running her hands along its rim, finding a handle on the side and pulling with all her might as a burst of foul-smelling rot hit her nose. “Angel,” Axel called. He was closer. In the room just beyond.

Liza looked into the pit of darkness in front of her, frozen with dread. It was her only chance. Tears streamed down Liza’s face as she climbed into the tunnel, her hand landing in a pool of slimy wetness. Something skittered

in the darkness beyond. She eased the door closed, crawling forward, his voice coming from behind her, but even through the closed metal, she could hear that he'd entered that final underground room. He'd see the tunnel door in a few seconds, if that. It was either go deeper or allow him to capture her. Liza crawled forward, slime squelching beneath her palms and her knees, her face breaking through a thick spiderweb as she moved just far enough that the small amount of light from the room wouldn't penetrate to where she was. Liza rubbed her face against her shoulder, stopping as the door squeaked slowly open, pressing herself against the wall of the tunnel. Something crawled under the collar of her shirt, scurrying down the back of her neck as Liza's breath hitched, her muscles quivering as she forced herself not to move.

“Li-za,” he singsonged, his voice echoing through the darkness. “Liza, Liza, Li-za. Elizabeth!” She saw the very faint outline of the circular entrance but knew he couldn't see her where she sat shivering, her knees pulled to her chest, holding her breath as tears tracked down her cheeks, waiting. Axel sighed. “We don't have time for this, Angel. I wish you could understand. You'd come back if you did.” He paused for what felt like a long time as though he was considering what to do. The spider under her shirt scuttled down her back. She felt another one run across her hip. There were more all around her, *on her*. There had to be more. “This won't change anything.”

Liza's heart sank as a scream rose inside her. "I know you don't like the dark, Angel. But if you refuse to be a part of our ceremony, then I have to make sure you won't interrupt it. It will be over soon. Even from here, you'll rise." And with that, he shut the door, the lever dropping into place.

No, nononononono! She rushed forward, crawling back toward the door even as she heard his footsteps moving away, simultaneously batting harshly at her back, brushing at her hip.

She splayed her hands against the cold metal, pressing, her heart hammering, fear rising inside her like the swells of a storm. Liza was locked in the blackness. *Alone.*

She sat back against the wall again, rubbing her back frantically over the hard surface to ensure whatever had been crawling on her skin was crushed dead. She brought her inner elbow to her mouth and bit down on the fabric of her sweatshirt, muffling a scream.

"Liza," Mady said softly.

She shook her head, closing her eyes even though she couldn't see in the pitch black of the place where she sat. "You're not really here. You can't help me."

"No, I'm not here. And I'm not Mady. This is *your* voice, Liza. It's *always* been your voice. You have to trust it. Claim it, Liza. It belongs to *you.*" The voice grew fainter, moving away. "It's time for me to go. You

were always the strong one. Trust yourself now. You know what you have to do.”

Liza let out a small sob, opening her eyes, shaking her head back and forth against what she knew was the only way. She had to crawl forward. A fresh bout of petrified tears poured from her eyes. Think! *Think!* This tunnel . . . it was a water runoff tunnel. This house had been built around it. That was its purpose, which meant it let out somewhere below, near the river. *Freedom.* The entrance was blocked now, locked by Axel.

But there's an exit.

You just have to get to it.

“I can’t do it,” she whispered brokenly to herself, fear rolling through her body in wracking tremors.

Yes, you can. You can do it, because you have to. You can do it, because Reed and Arryn and Sabrina and Milo are depending on you.

Reed.

God, Reed.

If she didn’t try to crawl toward help, Reed might step on that tripwire, he’d be blown to pieces. He’d be dead because she hadn’t *tried*. Her soul withered at the thought. She let out another quiet sob, picturing him in her mind’s eye, his smile filling her head, her heart.

Liza had never had faith in forever. That idea had always been far too

painful. Because she'd *suffered* and she didn't want to believe that suffering never ended. But in that moment as she pictured the man she loved, she wanted *desperately* to believe. She wanted to clutch to the idea that their souls were immortal and that there was such a thing as eternity, because she wanted to spend it with him.

The realization gave her strength, *purpose*, something to fight mightily for. To fight monsters and demons and whatever might lie in wait in the seemingly endless darkness before her. Liza turned her body away from the locked door. She put her hands down on the wet, slimy floor of the tunnel and she crawled farther into the hole.

How far do you think it is? One hundred feet? Two? What if the end has been sealed over somehow? What if the exit is underwater?

No, don't think of that. Just move.

She crawled forward, feeling the downward slope of the tunnel, tiny rocks and sharp objects stabbing the fleshy parts of her palms and digging into her knees, her hands squishing into gelatinous puddles she didn't want to think about. It smelled like rot and decay and dead things, both fresh and ancient. A piece of spiderweb caught on her lip, and she tucked her head to protect her face. Some creature let out a high-pitched shriek that echoed against the walls. Liza swallowed back a scream. *Just a rat or a squirrel. Keep moving, just keep moving. That's right. Reed's depending on you. Arryn*

and Milo and Sabrina need you too.

A hissing sound vibrated ahead and Liza drew back in terror, her teeth chattering, every muscle in her body primed to flee from that sound. Serpents in the dark, watching her as she crawled past them blindly. Of course there were snakes hiding in there. Because it was dark and wet and there were plenty of rodents for them to hunt. Liza scooted back, sobbing silently.

No, no, I can't do it.

What's worse? A snake? Even twenty? Or living with the fact that Reed is blown to bits and you might have saved him? Arryn burning in a raging inferno just like Mady did?

No!

Liza took in a shaky breath, putting one hand forward and then the other.

She moved ahead, her hand slipping as she picked up speed, a low keening sound coming from her chest, vibrating. As she set her hand down, a snake slithered over it—fat and heavy—and she cried out, turning her head, sliding her hand from beneath its body and hurtling forward. She pressed her lips together and shut her eyes, waiting for the whip-quick strike, the sharp bite of fangs embedding in her skin. She heard another snake, two, three, maybe more, slithering away as she moved past them, her hands and knees pounding over the rocks, the clink of stone against stone echoing around her, her own heartbeat hammering in her head.

She lunged forward, her palms slipping on the sludge beneath her, something jagged slicing into her wrist as she caught herself.

Something furry brushed past her ankle as she moved and she let out a small, panicked gasp, kicking backward, bile filling her throat. She almost heaved, but held it back, continuing forward, not stopping.

The darkness was absolute, so all-consuming that monsters swelled up from the emptiness before her, causing her to whimper and draw back in terror, her muscles going rigid. They were worse, so much worse than rats or snakes. They would rip her apart slowly, chewing her flesh, there in the blackness where her screams could not be heard. She was going to die alone.

Stop!

That's just your mind playing tricks on you. There are no monsters here. Picture Reed. Hold his face before you. Clutch to that.

A breath shuddered from Liza and she continued forward. *If the end is sealed, I'll have to turn back and make this trip again.* Fear pommelled her chest, a drumbeat of dread. It was unthinkable, it was—*no! Picture Reed. Only him.*

One hand forward then the other, each inch closer, closer.

A gray light emerged from the gloom and Liza let out a disbelieving sob of joy, of hope, crawling faster, not caring about the wounds on her palms. An explosion of rodents skittered all around her suddenly, as she disrupted a

nest. Liza threw her body forward, as the creatures shrieked and brushed past her in the darkness, their sharp nails ripping open her exposed skin. Small bodies crunched beneath her knees and her palm landed on one, the rodent emitting a death wail that quickly ended as its body squished beneath the impact. One latched onto her hip and she reached around, tearing it off and throwing it against the side of the tunnel, its body smacking wetly against the stone. Liza shook her head back and forth, humming a garbled sound of fear and disgust and horror as she raced closer to that muted circle of gray.

Don'tstopdon'tstopdon'tstop.

She smelled river water, the scent of plants and foliage and mud, crawling so fast, her arm went out from under her and her chin slammed into the floor of the tunnel. She groaned, lifting her head, and continuing forward until the muted glow grew bigger and bigger, the sound of the skittering creatures dissipating. She felt air on her face, and her relief was so intense that she began sobbing again, her head emerging from that dark hole into the sweet night air. There was ground beneath her and she spilled out onto it, taking only seconds to lay there, sobs wracking her body as she fisted the blessed mud under her palms.

Liza pulled herself to her feet. The river dropped off sharply to her right, the only path uphill was through the woods. More darkness. *You can do it.*

Yes. I can.

Liza stepped back into the darkness and she didn't just walk. Liza ran, her breath coming in sharp gasps as she struggled for purchase, slipping in the mud, going down on her knees, pulling herself up. The earth grew less slippery the farther she went, as dead leaves and dry grass covered that higher ground. Liza's muscles burned as she ran straight uphill, as fast as her body would allow, grunting with the extreme effort. Branches and foliage brushed past her, surprisingly gentle, feeling like the hands of those who may have made this trip before her, encouraging, guiding her forward. *Go, go. There's so little time.*

It was the journey of a warrior. It was the passage of a woman whose heart was so filled with love that it billowed over and suffocated all those other voices, the ones who'd told her she was weak and without power. The ones who'd deemed her unlovable. Soiled. *Ruined.*

She was not ruined. She was *not*.

There was light ahead, she could see it through the thick brush and she raced toward it, somehow avoiding the rocks and dips in the ground. She emerged through the edge of the forest with a sob of victory, stumbling, but remaining upright.

She saw movement ahead, the outline of a man as he began to step toward the house, toward the tripwire he didn't know was almost directly under his feet.

“Reed!” she screamed. “Stop!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Arryn's muscles tensed as the man named Axel climbed the short flight of steps and stepped back into the chamber where they were. *Alone. He's alone.* She pulled in a tremulous breath as he walked to where she lay on the ground, still handcuffed to the chair. She'd watched Charles Hartsman give something to Liza with his feet, watched—incredulously—as she'd used the small tool to free herself, Arryn's heart beating out of her chest with terror. Liza had done it. *Somehow*, she'd done it, and when she'd run for the stairs that led down into some lower part of whatever hell they were in and Axel had taken chase, Arryn had used her toes for leverage and thrown her body in front of him, colliding with the large man, both of them slamming to the ground.

He'd been up and after Liza in ten seconds, but Arryn had bought her that much. At least that. And here he was, no Liza in sight, which meant it'd worked? She'd escaped? Or had Axel hurt her? *Please, please don't let that be it.*

She'd watched, terrified and dumbstruck, as Charles maneuvered his bleeding body in an obvious attempt at escape in the few minutes Axel was gone. And though he'd managed to raise his feet to his mouth, grasping something in his teeth, he hadn't achieved freedom. He now simply hung

from his chains, his chest slick with sweat, a few beads rolling down the side of his face.

Was that why he'd passed a tool to Liza first? Because she required less time to use it, and Charles needed a distraction to free himself from the position he was in?

Axel lifted Arryn easily, setting her chair upright. Blood rushed to her head, making her dizzy. She watched him as he stood straight, muttering something unintelligible. He turned around, his gaze going to each of them in turn. "Stupid," he said. "So stupid. But what's done is done."

"Where is she?" Arryn asked, afraid to hear the answer.

He turned back to her, his eyes narrowing. "She's okay. She climbed into the old sewer. I had to lock it. She left me no choice."

Locked? In an old sewer? Arryn swallowed hard. *Oh God, poor Liza.*

"Don't worry," he said, as though to himself, his eyes focused on the wall now. "She'll be set free as soon as we complete this." He muttered something Arryn couldn't make out. He was crazy. This guy was stark raving mad and he meant to burn them all to death in this cavern in the ground, and she had no idea why. She wanted to cry, to scream, but she wouldn't; she wouldn't do that. She'd be strong. She was her mother's daughter.

The thing was . . . she *recognized* him—Axel. She'd seen him somewhere, and in that moment, she realized where. She'd bumped into him

on her way to class as she'd been rushing from the parking lot, through campus. She'd dropped her books, all the papers in her hands flying out around her as they'd collided, and though she was late, she'd laughed and told him it was okay, trying to make the big, bear-like man with the wide, stricken eyes feel better about the situation.

"This can't work without Liza, you know," Charles Hartsman said. Arryn's gaze went to him, the man who looked like an older version of her brother. She felt so confused, so scared, her brain still muddy from whatever drug Axel had pumped into her. She was terrified of the man, had *always* been terrified of him, but . . . he'd helped Liza get free. *Why?* She didn't understand it. This whole situation felt unreal, like a horrific nightmare she couldn't wake from.

"She won't move," Axel answered. "There's no need to worry. She'll stay right there. Yes, she'll be afraid, but we're all afraid." He looked at the people named Milo and Sabrina, a gentle expression taking over his face. "She'll cower there until Heaven opens. She's still here with us. In the underground lair. She hasn't really left."

"Maybe she's not what you think," Charles said. "Maybe she's more." He lifted his head slightly.

Axel trained his gaze on him. He appeared confused briefly, but then shook his head. "Darkness is her deepest fear. It *controls* her. That's what

this is *about*, Charlie. It's about being set free. Where we're going, there's nothing to fear, nothing at all." Axel leaned against the wall, a small smile curving his lips.

"Sometimes people conquer their fears," Charles said softly. "Sometimes they make sure those fears will never get the best of them again." But Axel had apparently tuned him out.

Charles Hartsman looked over at Arryn. He looked weak, almost haggard, as if he was withering by the minute. But as she stared, the corner of his lips turned up and he winked at her. Arryn's eyes darted away, moving to Axel who had picked up one of his gas cans again and was splashing gasoline on the walls. He'd done the perimeter of the room, the door, and now he was dousing the walls. What was left, other than them? When he struck a match, the whole place was going to burst into flames. Arryn pulled herself as straight as she could, determined to do anything possible to delay that moment.

Help me, Daddy, she said in her mind, praying her father could hear her from where she was, that he was on his way to rescue them. But for the moment, all she had were the people in this room. Her father had always told her she was a force to be reckoned with. The memory of his often-said words strengthened her, diminished some of her fear. *Yes. She'd be that girl*, even here, in the depths of hell where she was meant to die.

“I know who you are,” she said loudly to Charles. He’d let his head hang and now lifted it, meeting her eyes again. Axel looked up too, distracted from his muttering by their conversation. “I looked up my mother’s case when I was younger. The things you did to her . . . you’re a *monster*.”

Charles tilted his head as if considering her words. “Would you believe me if I told you I was sorry for that?” he asked, his voice gravelly.

“No,” she hissed.

He shrugged, a slight movement of his bound arms.

“That tattoo,” she said, nodding her head toward his chest. “That’s not his name. That’s not my brother’s name.”

Charles regarded her again, his expression placid. “It is his name. It was the one your mother gave him.” His neck jerked slightly as though he was almost too tired to hold it up. “I should have made sure they kept it. That was my mistake.”

“You don’t deserve to have any part of him tattooed on your body,” she said. “My brother is good and kind and honorable. He’s the best person I’ve ever met and he has *nothing* to do with you.”

Charles gave her what looked like a weary smile. “You’re a real pain in the ass, aren’t you?”

Arryn made a sound of disgust, looking away.

Axel walked over to Sabrina and Milo, lightly tapping their cheeks,

though their eyes were already open. Sabrina was crying quietly, and Milo was whispering to her, words Arryn couldn't hear. "It's time, Angels." He brought a matchbook from his pocket. Arryn's stomach plummeted, fear clutching at every muscle in her body. She didn't want to die this way. Not this way.

"Axel," Charles said. "Have you considered that you have this all wrong?"

"Quiet, demon," Axel said.

"Maybe I'm not the demon. Maybe you are. Maybe I'm the angel, and you're the demon. Or," he said, "maybe we're both." His voice was lower, softer, no longer filled with the same baiting gusto it'd been filled with before. He was growing even weaker.

He moved closer to Charles, addressing him. "Are you trying to manipulate me, Charles? It won't work. You of all people should understand evil. You of all people shouldn't have turned to it yourself. You took your deepest fear and you cast it off on others. You shouldn't have done that. That's what makes you a demon. You could have ascended with us."

"Coming from someone who's murdered"—he squinted upward—"let's see, by my count, six people, and those are only the ones we know about."

"I *destroy* evil. Someone has to."

"We're more alike than you think, Axel. But you've lost your mind."

There's no reasoning with you," Charles rasped.

Axel gave him a small smile, tearing a match from the book. "We've gone over this. The time for talking is over." He let out a rattly sigh. "I can't live in this world anymore. I want to go home. We all deserve to go home." He turned in a circle, addressing them all.

"It'll only be a few moments of pain, and then we'll all be free."

And then Axel struck a match, dropping it into a puddle of gasoline. Screams erupted as a trail of fire whooshed toward the walls and instantly began climbing. Spreading rapidly, the room alight in gold and orange flames. A growing inferno.

And in the middle stood the madman, head back, waiting with rapture, to burn.

Behind him, Charles's feet hit the ground. He straightened, teeth bared as Axel whipped around, one demon facing down another.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Reed jerked, halting the foot he was about to set down and turning in confusion. Was that . . . he swore he'd heard his name coming from the woods just behind him.

“Reed!” He heard it again, this time more distinctly and his heart jolted.

Liza?

“Stop!”

He turned around, rushing toward her voice. She emerged through the trees a moment later, muddy and . . . bloody, dirty tear tracks down her face, her breath coming in harsh gasps.

“Liza!” He rushed to her, taking her in his arms as she collapsed against him, crying and shaking, gripping him.

“Reed, Reed, Reed, Reed,” she chanted between gasps and sobs.

“You’re okay. Baby, you’re okay,” he said, confusion drumming within him.

“. . . rats and snakes and . . .” She was mumbling, as deep tremors rocked through her body, one after the other. “Charles helped me get free . . . he gave me a tool . . . and then the tunnel and . . .”

Charles? No, what? He held her away from him so he could look at her, his eyes moving wildly over her to assess where she was hurt, his mind

grasping blindly to understand what was happening, where she'd come from, and how she'd gotten free. Her eyes looked slightly glassy with shock, but she was looking *at* him not through him, and that was enough. Whatever she'd experienced, she was holding it together.

“He had you, Liza? Axel?”

She nodded, pulling herself straight, his words seeming to give her renewed strength. “He has them all, Reed. He has *Arryn*.” She pointed behind him toward the dilapidated house. “In there. He’s going to set a fire. Any minute. Any minute, Reed.”

Reed let go of Liza, reaching for his gun. “Okay. Stay here. Right here. I’m going to call in reinforcements, but I can’t wait. I have to go in.”

“No!” Liza had begun shaking her head and now gripped the front of his jacket as she caught her breath. “No, Reed, you can’t. There are explosives around the perimeter of the property.”

“Explosives?” *What the fuck?*

“Yes. Where the fence ends. There’s one right there. I don’t know where the others are but there are more.”

Reed glanced over his shoulder, swallowing. *Holy shit*. He’d been about to step past the fence when he’d heard her call his name. His skin prickled. She’d saved his life and probably his limbs. “All right,” he breathed, his mind spinning. He’d have to call in the Fire Department. They had an Explosive

Ordinance Device Unit. He felt sweat pooling at the small of his back. There was no *fucking* time for that. His *sister* was in there with a maniac who meant to burn her alive.

Sound behind them caused Reed to swing around, bringing his weapon up as Zach and Ransom emerged from the woods, coming from the same direction Reed had taken. His shoulders lowered as a breath of relief ghosted from his mouth. He lowered his gun. “Jesus, I’m happy to see you two.”

Their gazes flew to Liza and the house beyond and Reed could see the confusion on their faces. But they’d come. They’d answered his call. They were here, and they could discuss all the details later. “He’s got them in that house,” Reed said, nodding back over his shoulder.

Both men retrieved the weapons at their waists, ready to storm the place.

He turned to Liza, speaking quickly. “My car’s back that way,” Reed instructed. “Right through these trees.” He handed her his phone. “Use this for a flashlight and call for help. Go!”

Liza nodded, started to turn and then turned back, grabbing his head and kissing him quickly on his lips. “I love you. I love you so much,” she breathed. And then she turned and she ran into the darkness again.

“Let’s go—” Zach started to say, taking a step forward. Reed put his hand on his chest, stopping him, telling him about the explosives.

“Fuck!” Zach said, gripping his head as he walked in a circle, looking

desperately at the house that was so close, and yet, now, so far away. “Oh God,” he said, his eyes widening as his hand fell away from his head.

Reed whipped around. *Oh God, oh no.* Smoke was billowing from what looked like the foundation of the house, black clouds amassing even as they stood staring. Helplessly. He whipped around. There was no quicker way to the house than past the fence. They could go down to the river and come back up a different way, but that would waste minutes they did not have. And Liza had said there were other explosives too, ones they didn’t know the locations of.

“We’ve gotta set off the explosive,” Ransom said, leaning down and picking up a rock. “No time for anything else.”

Okay, yes. Good. Reed bent down and picked up a rock too. “There’s one somewhere near the edge of the fence!” he shouted as Ransom moved forward. His partner took aim, throwing the rock with all his might. It landed with a soft thud, but no explosion. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

With a roar of crashing timber, flames erupted out of the ground, sparks flying into the sky, lighting the night. *Oh no. Oh God.* They were in there.

With a shout of rage, Zach threw a rock to the edge of the fence, a raucous blast exploding from the ground. Reed raised his arms as debris flew at them, tiny pellets that hit their skin and rained down around him. His ears rang as he opened his eyes, stepping forward as the air cleared, the smoke

from the blast dissipating. “Come on!” he saw Ransom say, though his ears were still useless from the blast.

The house was a burning inferno now, flames licking high into the night, the entire structure crumbling. Reed’s breath came short as his hearing returned, the crashes and roars of the fire making him want to fall to his knees in anguish. An inhuman scream rose up, a piercing shriek that made Reed’s blood tremble in his veins. No one could have survived what was in front of him. No one. *Oh God, Arryn.*

The three men ran toward the house nonetheless, heat hitting them in waves as the fire rolled and jumped. They rounded the engulfed structure, looking for a way in, some hope for those inside. Reed heard Zach yell something, make a sharp turn away from the inferno and go down in the grass and then he saw them too, three people huddled together on the ground, lying just clear of the blaze that burned without mercy just a hundred feet away. All of them were coughing and gagging, holding their arms over their mouths as they attempted to suck in fresh air. Zach picked up . . . Arryn, it was Arryn. And he ran with her, carrying her to the remains of a stone foundation that might have once been a cellar or a barn several feet away. Reed’s head whipped back around. *Milo and Sabrina.* The other two people were Milo and Sabrina. Ransom helped Milo up and put his arm around his shoulders, helping him jog to where Zach was.

“Can you walk?” Reed asked Sabrina who appeared stunned. She bobbed her head, still coughing, as tears tracked down her cheeks. Reed helped her up and walked as quickly as possible with Sabrina’s limp, toward the others.

He heard sirens in the very near distance, seconds away. *Good job, Liza. Good job.* She’d have warned them about the explosives too. They’d be coming in prepared. “We can’t risk moving any farther than this until the explosive unit shows up,” Zach yelled over the thunder of the fire.

It was cooler where they were, and the blaze seemed to be completely contained to the old home, the trees nearby far enough away that a spark igniting them was unlikely.

Arryn was clutching to her father, tears streaking down her cheeks too. “How’d you get out?” Zach asked, pulling her closer. Next to him, he heard Ransom on his phone, calling in their location, but focused in on Arryn.

“Charles freed us, Daddy,” she said.

Zach pulled back, looking in his daughter’s eyes. Reed’s heart jumped. Liza had mentioned Charles too. He’d been shot. Axel had brought him there.

“Tell me what happened,” Zach said.

Arryn took in a big shuddery breath. “Charles gave Liza a tool that she used to escape. Then Axel started the fire. He had gasoline. The whole place started to go up. Charles . . . freed himself. He had another tool or

something.” She shook her head. “Everyone was screaming. I don’t know. It was hot. It was so hot.” Her eyes went wild for a second but then she seemed to rein it in. Zach squeezed her hand and she took another breath, continuing. “He fought Axel. Axel caught fire.” She squeezed her eyes shut for a second. “Charles freed us and dragged us out.”

Reed faltered, sitting down hard on the edge of the stone structure, the impact stealing his breath. *Why? What was going on?*

“Where is he?” Zach asked.

Arryn pointed through some trees nearby. “He went that way. Right through there. He’s injured. Pretty badly, I think.”

“You’re sure he went that way? There are explosives—”

“Yes. He went through there. I watched him.”

“Zach,” Reed said, pointing his finger to the soft earth where deep footprints could be seen in the mud. Zach followed Reed’s finger and then met his eyes, pressing his lips together.

Reed started to stand, opening his mouth to tell Zach he’d go after him. It’d rained most of the day. There’d be more footprints. He could follow Charles’s right off the property where he’d obviously avoided any explosives. But as he stared at the intense look on Zach’s face, he sat slowly back down. “Go,” Reed grated. He moved over, putting his arm around Arryn so Zach could stand. “Go now.”

This was Zach's battle. The one he'd been waiting two decades to wage.

Zach let out a controlled breath and then he turned, running, taking the same path Charles Hartsman had taken.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Zach ran, his weapon raised, following the footprints that had sunk deeply into the mud, stepping in the same places Charles had stepped. Charles was injured. He'd been shot hours ago, and must have lost a lot of blood. He couldn't be too far ahead. No more than five minutes.

The footsteps veered left, toward the river and Zach followed them, running as fast as he could through the reedy brush, his breath coming in panted exhales. He heard sirens in the distance, fire trucks responding to the fire, and—*he hoped*—uniform cars on the lookout for Charles. After ten minutes or so, he caught glimpses of the injured man through the trees, a hundred feet beyond. “Stop, Hartsman!” he called, but the man kept running, surprisingly fast and agile for a person who had a bullet in him, had fought a madman, inhaled a lungful of smoke, and dragged three people from a burning building.

Zach jumped over rocks and brambles, hot on Charles's heels, though the fugitive managed to maintain the gap between them. The river rushed past as Charles led Zach closer to the water, Zach slipping once on the edge of the shore, regaining his footing, and continuing on.

“You can't run forever, Charles,” Zach called, breathless with exertion as Charles headed uphill now, toward the entrance to the Combs-Hehl

Bridge. *Where the fuck is he going?* Zach's chest heaved as he ran up the hill after him, stepping onto the shoulder of the bridge. The wail of sirens grew closer. A few cars sped by, crossing from Ohio into Kentucky. Ahead of him, Charles slowed, tripped, caught himself and began walking, a staggered limp. Zach lifted his gun. "Stop or I'll shoot!" he yelled, his voice booming in the still night air.

Zach's heart slammed against his ribs as he fought to catch his breath. There was nowhere Charles Hartsman could go. He'd caught him.

After all these years. He'd caught him.

Charles made his way to the edge of the bridge, stepping to a break between the concrete guardrail and leaning against a steel beam. Zach slowed, his weapon raised. "There's nowhere to go, Charles."

Charles crossed one foot in front of the other, taking a casual stance, though his body visibly shook with what looked like deep fatigue. His chest was slick with blood from the bullet wound at his shoulder, his right arm and half of his flank red and blistered, the skin peeled back in spots. He'd been burned. Badly. Moonlight washed over him, the black letters of a tattoo standing out stark against his sickly, gray-cast skin.

Caleb.

Zach felt a pinch in his chest and shook it off, keeping the serial killer who'd terrorized *his wife* in his sights. His wife, who still bore the physical

and emotional scars of what this man had done to her.

Charles gave him a small, tired smile. “Lieutenant Copeland.”

“Get down on your knees. Don’t make me shoot you, because I will not hesitate.”

Charles squinted at him. “I know you won’t. I’m not going to make you, Zach. Can I call you Zach? I feel like we should be on a first-name basis at this point.” He closed his eyes for a moment, his chest rising and falling as he sucked in a shaky breath. “I’ve had enough of running,” he said. “Always just one step ahead.” He let out another raspy breath, leaning more fully against the beam. “You almost had me in Paris, by the way. If your man had just entered the airport through the other door, he’d have seen me. He was so close.” He smiled again and closed his eyes for a few seconds. More blood bubbled from his wound, streaking down his skin.

Zach took a few steps forward. “No more running, Charles.”

“No,” he agreed, sighing. “No more running.”

Blood whooshed in Zach’s brain. The moment felt surreal. How many times had he hoped for this outcome? How many hundreds of hours had he worked to capture this man? To exact justice? But he had questions. He had so many questions, and he had this feeling that Charles was willing to talk right then, but he might not be later.

“You knew Gordon Draper was a monster. Why didn’t you let us know?”

Send the laptop? Let us *arrest* him?”

“He killed my mother, Zach. She was a prostitute, and a junkie, but she loved me. She *tried*. And she failed a lot too. But then she . . . left, and . . . she never came back. They put me in that house and she never came for me. But all this time . . .” He let those words fade away, staring off behind Zach. “A comfy prison cell for the old bastard? Three squares a day? No justice there.” He met Zach’s gaze once again.

“It’s not your job to exact justice. Your sense of justice is warped,” Zach gritted.

“I know that. You think I don’t know that?” He smiled. “But Caleb’s isn’t. Nothing about Caleb is warped.”

Zach released a breath. “No,” he agreed. “Nothing about Caleb is warped. He’s a good man.”

Charles nodded, swayed, grimaced as he brought his fingers to his wound. “I didn’t expect him to shoot me,” he said with a small, pained laugh. “I didn’t expect that.”

As Zach watched him, he thought about what Arryn had said. He’d had a tool. More than one. He’d given one to Liza and used one to free himself and then the others. He thought about what he’d said to Josie right before he’d lost consciousness and Axel had dragged him out. *It’ll be okay. Everything will be okay.*

“You *let* him capture you. *Why?*”

“I didn’t know where he’d taken them,” Charles murmured. “He had your daughter.”

“So?”

Charles’s eyes opened, spearing Zach. He was quiet for several moments. “All these years . . . you’ve treated my son like your own. I watched you. Each ceremony . . . right up front, cheering . . . for him. You didn’t have to do that. You might have . . . hated him, not been able to look at him without seeing me, but . . . you didn’t. I couldn’t let your daughter die,” he murmured, shaking his head. “I couldn’t let Josie’s daughter . . . die.”

Zach swallowed, confusion sweeping through him. *Charles freed us, Daddy.* Zach held his weapon steady. “I’m grateful.” *It doesn’t mean you don’t belong in prison.*

Charles held eye contact. “I think you know I can’t be locked up,” he said, as though he’d read Zach’s thoughts. “Never again.”

Never again.

Zach stepped closer, keeping his gun pointed at the man who’d fathered Reed—*Caleb*—the embodiment of everything his birth father was not. The madman before him who had somehow preserved a remnant of humanity in his soul and saved four lives that day. “I can’t let you go. You have to know that,” he rasped.

“Yes. I know. I don’t expect you to.”

From both directions of the bridge, the sirens grew louder, several police cruisers skidding to a stop as officers jumped from the vehicles, blocking the roadway and pointing their weapons in Charles’s direction.

Charles glanced at them and then back at Zach, his expression unchanging. He stepped to the left and backed up, toward the edge of the bridge.

Zach stepped forward. “Don’t move,” he demanded.

But Charles’s face remained impassive, calm even as he took another step back, one foot hanging over empty air.

He heard the pounding of footsteps as the officers ran toward him from both directions. Zach jerked his hand up, moving it left and then right, holding them back as they skidded to a halt. His heart was in his fucking throat.

Charles gave him one last weary smile. “Tell Caleb . . .” Charles began, his voice barely emerging as his eyes began to close. “Tell him, he’s *my* . . . legacy.” And then he stretched his arms wide, his head tipping toward the sky as he took the final step back. Zach threw himself forward, his chest hitting the ground, head hanging over the edge, reaching, trying to grasp hold but not even coming close as Charles plunged to the water below, his body hitting with a hard smack and floating, lifeless, to the surface.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Three Months Later

He stood alone, hands in his pockets at the edge of the curved path, his form immediately recognizable. Beloved. Her Reed. Several feet away, on a grassy slope, two men with shovels tamped the earth where Cora Hartsman's bones had just been buried, along with a container of ashes that held the remains of her son.

Perhaps, if they'd been reunited in life, things would have been much different, not only for them but for so many others. That was the hardest part about their jobs. About life in general. You couldn't deal in what might have been, only what was.

Beside her, Ransom walked silently, both their gazes fixed on Reed as he turned their way. His expression registered surprise then something that looked very near embarrassment as they approached. He glanced down, his brow lowering. "I didn't plan on being here," he said, as though they required an explanation as to why he'd shown up to watch the burial. Liza's heart ached for him. He looked so conflicted. He was there to pay respects to the part of his birth father that had exhibited mercy at the end, and he didn't know how to untangle that from the monster he'd always viewed Charles

Hartsman as.

You are such a good man, Reed Davies. So filled with kindness and decency, and I will love you until the end of all time.

“Man, no one blames you for wanting closure,” Ransom said. “For Josie, for yourself . . . No one blames you at all.”

Reed nodded, breath escaping as his expression registered relief. “Thanks.” His gaze turned to Liza and his eyes moved over her, bouncing from one spot to another, assessing her well-being, a tinge of desperation etched into his beautiful features. He did that a lot lately, a product of the shock at realizing how close he’d come to losing her, as the atrocious details of what she’d experienced in that underground cavern came to light. She had suffered some post-traumatic symptoms of her own. It was getting better though. They were all healing. Moving forward.

Liza stepped to him, taking his hand and squeezing it. He released a breath, wrapping one arm around her and kissing her temple. “Thank you for coming.”

Liza glanced at the grave that held mother and son. “They’re together again,” she said. It felt right to her, and she understood why Reed had made the decision to bring them back together in death, even if he still struggled mightily with his birth father’s role in the case and the clashing emotions it’d brought forth.

The three of them turned, standing together for several minutes, watching the men with shovels as they completed their work. Liza had respects of her own to pay. The man being buried had solicited her teamwork at the end, and because of him, she was standing there. *Alive*. The warmth of Reed's hand wrapped around her own.

Tell Caleb he's my legacy. Those had been Charles Hartsman's dying words, and though the man had brutally victimized so many, though he was cruel and vindictive, he had been *right* on that score. He had given life to a man who was a force of goodness in the world. From darkness had come light, a luminous ray of strength and virtue that shone brightly on the dim corners of the world, on *her*.

"Ready?" Liza asked softly.

He nodded. "Yeah."

Together, they turned and moved toward the parking lot. Two people stood around a new plot nearby, perhaps the family members of another of Gordon Draper's victims, the bones of which had finally been released after months in evidence.

In total, the remains of twenty-eight women had been unearthed from the garden behind his home, the details of the crimes—old and new—rocking Cincinnati to its core. Even many months later, the media was still rabidly discussing the case of The Hollow-Eyed Killer, Gordon Draper's legacy of

evil, and the role Charles Hartsman had played. Seemingly, they couldn't get enough.

She and Reed chose not to watch, preferring instead to explore their feelings privately, without the interruption of the outside world who would judge the things they did not know and had never lived. *Never survived.* Instead, they surrounded themselves with family and friends, drawing near to those who mattered. Liza had bonded with Josie from the moment they'd met, and the older woman was helping her and Arryn navigate the trauma of their shared experience. Reed's mother doted on her like a daughter, making Liza feel so incredibly loved. Liza had also grown close with Milo and Sabrina, and they got together often, talking about what they'd gone through as only those who had been there—in that room—could truly understand.

Reed squeezed her hand again and she smiled up at him.

"See you back at the station?" Ransom asked, turning toward his vehicle, the one he'd picked Liza up in so they could join Reed at the cemetery after Zach had told them where he'd be.

"Nah," Reed said. "It's Saturday. I think I'm going to take the rest of the day off and spend it with my girl. I'll give Sarge a call."

Ransom winked, pulling an energy bar from his pocket and tearing at the wrapper. "About time you took a few hours off." He stuck the bar in his mouth and opened his car door, smiling. "See you tomorrow," he said around

the food.

The shrouded sky darkened. A raindrop hit Liza on the nose and she laughed. Reed smiled, leaning in and kissing the place where the raindrop had landed. As Ransom's car pulled away, a few more raindrops fell and a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. "Storm's coming," she murmured.

He nodded, his eyes locked with hers. He moved closer, lacing their fingers. "What do you say we go home and weather it together?"

She smiled, their gazes holding. She would weather any storm with him. "I say yes, Detective Davies." She leaned in and kissed him. "A million times, yes."

EPILOGUE

The afternoon light slanted through the stately arched windows, dust motes dancing in the lemony rays and casting the room in a dreamy glow. Reed slipped his arms around his wife, leaning his head on her shoulder as she gazed at the field beyond where tall grasses and wildflowers swayed gently in the autumn breeze. “You like it,” he said.

She turned her head, smiling softly. “Can you tell?”

“Mm,” he hummed, nuzzling her neck and inhaling her delicate scent. “I like it too.”

She released a breath. “It’s a fixer-upper, Reed. It’s going to take a lot of work.” She looked down and he followed her gaze to the old wood floors, stained and badly scratched. In need of sanding and staining and who knew what else. He didn’t know squat about home renovations. But he’d learn. For her, he’d learn. He’d give her the home she’d never had. A place to live, and love, and find peace in. A sanctuary. A soft place to land.

A place where they’d laugh, sometimes fight, make up, make love, and bring babies home to . . .

“I’m not afraid of some hard work,” he said. “And my dad is really handy. He’ll be happy to help out. So will Zach. He and Josie practically remodeled every room in their home.” And they’d both be right up the road

now if they purchased this old farmhouse in Oxford. God, Josie would be beside herself when they told her. Liza and Josie were extremely close, and Arryn was a sister to her in every sense of the word. His mother had taken Liza under her wing as well, and it filled Reed's heart to see all the women he loved and admired most in the world love each other so deeply.

Ransom was as useless as Reed at home repairs, but he'd be there to bring them lunch while they worked. He was sure about that.

Liza's shoulders rose and fell as a breath washed through her. "Josie told me their farmhouse used to be a bed and breakfast called Persimmon Woods," she mused.

He smiled. "Yup. What should we name this place?"

She turned her head slightly, and he caught the glint of a mischievous smile before she looked back out to the field. "Mountain View?" she suggested.

He laughed softly, nipping at the side of her neck.

"You do see the mountains, don't you?" she asked.

He moved his hands up her ribcage. "Well," he murmured. "I *feel* them." He cupped her breasts. "They're round and soft—"

Liza laughed, elbowing him softly. "Oof." He grinned, his hands falling away.

They stared out the window, enjoying the peace of the moment before

Liza said softly, “The small room upstairs with the built-in shelves will make a perfect nursery.”

Happiness shimmered through him, knowing she wanted what he did. Children. To build a family. They’d only been married a year, but he saw no reason to wait. If anyone understood the fragile nature of life, they did. It was the reason he hadn’t been able to talk himself out of proposing to her six months after their ordeal with Axel Draper. Six months after Liza had crawled through that tunnel of terror to warn him and help save the others. A lump still formed in his throat when he thought about the heroics she’d exhibited, courage that some of the hardened cops he knew might not have been able to muster. Why in the world would he wait to begin their life together? He loved her fiercely. He wanted to spend his life beside her. He’d asked, and through happy tears, she’d said yes. They’d taken vows in his family’s church in Kentucky that fall and had a small reception in his parents’ backyard, surrounded by everyone they loved. “Yes,” he agreed. “The room will make the perfect nursery. We should work on that.”

“It wasn’t much work,” she said softly, turning her head, “but . . . success.” Liza brought his hand to her belly, pressing her own on top of his.

Reed felt a moment of disorientation. He let go of her, turning her in his arms so he could look in her eyes. “Are you serious?”

She nodded slowly, her gaze searching his. “I took a test this morning.”

His heart leapt, a mixture of terror and euphoria commingling in his veins. His eyes flew around, snagging on all the mess and chaos around them. “We need to start fixing up this place right away.”

“We haven’t even purchased it,” Liza said, amusement dancing in her eyes. She raised her hand, cupping his cheek. “We have time, Reed. Last I checked, it takes a while to cook a baby.”

“A baby,” he whispered. God, they were going to have a baby. Happiness spiraled dizzily within and he dropped to one knee, his hands spanning her hips as he kissed her stomach. Liza laughed, running her hands through his hair as he grinned up at her. The light shifted, a golden ray of sunlight casting its radiance on them, freezing the moment in time, making it feel holy. *This is my heaven, he thought. Right here, right now, with you.*

Reed stood, gathering her in his arms, kissing her softly, and leaning his forehead on hers. For a while, they stood just like that, soaking in the moment. Then together they walked through the house once more, looking at it with new eyes. Eyes that knew they’d need to prioritize that small room with the built-ins . . . and add a back fence . . . and baby gates for the now-rickety set of steps. Speaking of those steps, he couldn’t have that. They were dangerous and he didn’t want his pregnant wife walking on them. Sweat broke out on his brow. He was tempted to run to the tool shop in town and purchase items so he could start tearing them down immediately in order that

they could be rebuilt as quickly as possible. There must be specs regarding railings and riser height. God, he needed to *know* those things.

Liza shot him a knowing smile before opening a closet, peering inside, and then standing back as if visually measuring for space. He took in a deep breath as he watched her. *I'm going to be a father.* Reed swallowed, thinking of the men who'd taught him about fatherhood, and with the thought a measure of calm moved through him. The men who had shown up and led by example, living their lives with honor and integrity, loving their families deeply and unconditionally. If he followed their lead, he was going to be just fine.

As Liza walked down the hall, opening another closet and looking inside, Reed followed, his thoughts turning to his birth father. It'd been a year and a half since Charles Hartsman had died and he still hadn't fully wrapped his head around what happened that earth-shattering day. He was still probing it carefully, trying to come to terms with the complex feelings he still had for the man.

He was a monster and yet . . . he wasn't. He'd saved Liza's life. And Arryn's and Milo's and Sabrina's too. He was deeply grateful to him, and yet he was a vile predator. So . . . yes, Charles Hartsman had taught Reed things as well. He'd taught him that all people moved between darkness and light into those gray areas between the two, the only difference between any of

them being the degree in which they walked in shadow and how far they traveled into murkier depths. Sometimes an evil man acted as a hero, and sometimes a victim became a tormenter. Criminals exhibited unexpected grace, and honest men had moments of great weakness. There was a strange, terrible, beautiful, complicated universe inside them all where nothing was simply black or white.

Liza turned toward him, her smile emerging on a happy sigh. "It's going to be perfect," she said, walking to him and taking his hand.

He smiled at his wife. "Yes," he agreed. "It is." To Reed, it already was, because he took nothing for granted and saw life as the undeserved and magnificent gift it was. Heaven showed up in small, stolen moments. And he had learned to recognize them for what they were. To *pause*, to hold them close and breathe them in as they filtered slowly, slowly through his soul. And for those tender slips of precious time, the broken world was *only* perfect.

Acknowledgments

How lucky am I that I have so many extraordinarily talented people on my team? My cup runneth over.

My editors: Angela Smith, Marion Archer, and Karen Lawson. Thank you for the intense focus and time spent questioning every aspect of this story and ensuring I had all the answers. You three pick up where I leave off and I could not be more grateful to have you.

Huge appreciation to my beta readers: Cat Bracht, Ashley Brinkman, and Cynthia Lear. You not only boosted my confidence but made so many constructive suggestions and helped richen this story.

And to Elena Eckmeyer for not *only* beta reading, but for beta reading six times. I am eternally grateful for all your insightful comments, your eagle-eyed finds, and mostly, for that big heart of yours that finds room to love the unlovable.

To Sharon Broom, I'm so thankful for your final look at this manuscript. I appreciate your time, your talent, and your friendship so very much.

Thank you to Kimberly Brower, the best agent in the history of ever.

To you, my precious reader, thank you for immersing yourself in my story, for expending so many emotions on my characters, and for continually

choosing my books when the choices are so plentiful.

Thank you to my Facebook group, Mia's Mafia, for your loyalty and your love.

To Janett Gomez, who is no longer with us, but is forever in my heart. If anyone embodied the spirit of a true heroine, it was you, my beautiful friend.

To all the book bloggers and Instagrammers who spend countless hours reading, reviewing, and creating beautiful art for the books they love, *thank you* doesn't seem like nearly enough.

To my husband, my heaven.

Note: While I did take a few small fictional liberties, Camp Joy is a very real place in Clarksville, Ohio that features the Living History Program I spoke of where campers run for freedom in the pitch black of night as runaway slaves. Each of my own children participated in this program with their classmates when they spent a school-sponsored weekend at the camp and it was a wonderfully, life-changing experience for them, one they still talk about, and one I know they will carry with them all of their lives.

About the Author

Mia Sheridan is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* Bestselling author. Her passion is weaving true love stories about people destined to be together. Mia lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband. They have four children here on earth and one in heaven. Her works include the Sign of Love collection (Leo, Leo's Chance, Stinger, Archer's Voice, Becoming Calder, Finding Eden, Kyland, Grayson's Vow, Midnight Lily, Ramsay, Preston's Honor, Dane's Storm, and Brant's Return), and the standalone romance novels, *The Wish Collector*, and *Savaged*. *Where the Blame Lies* is the prequel to *Where the Truth Lives* but may be read as a standalone.

The standalone romance novels, *Most of All You*, and *More Than Words*, published via Grand Central Publishing, are available online and in bookstores.

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