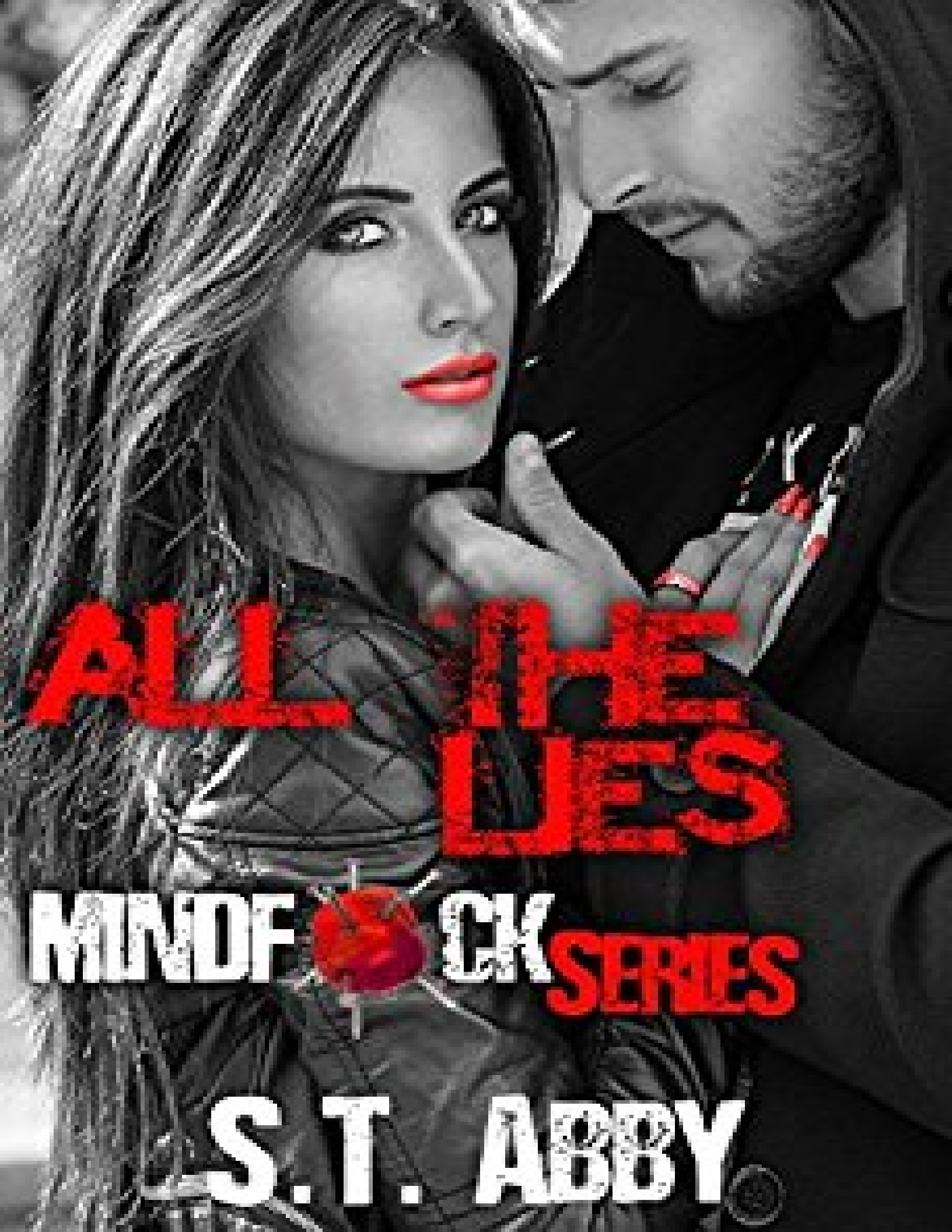

ALL THE LIES
MINDF CK SERIES
S.T. ABBY

All The Lies

Book 4 of the

Mindfuck Series

S.T. Abby

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Currently setting up all social networks. But for now, you can find me here My Facebook.

I also have a book club you're more than welcome to join, and you can talk books all day with like-minded peeps. <3

Or email me at stabbyauthor@gmail.com

I know this shit is fucked up, so don't bother writing to tell me I'm twisted in the head. ;)

This is for the ones who lost their voice. This is for the ones who wish they could be Lana Myers. This is for the ones people still whisper about.

This is for the ones who fight every single day to forget.

You’re not alone.

~~Tim Hoover~~

~~Chuck Cosby~~

~~Nathan Malone~~

~~Jeremy Hoyt~~

~~Ben Harris~~

~~Random Alley Guy~~

~~Tyler Shane~~

~~Lawrence Martin~~

~~Kenneth Ferguson~~

~~Boogeyman (Gerald Plemmons)~~

~~Anthony Smith~~

~~Kevin Taylor~~

~~Morgan Jones~~

Governments need to have both shepherds and butchers.
—Voltaire

If Logan and I ruled the world together, Voltaire would consider us the perfect blend.

My list might have grown, but the names are coming down quickly. It's almost time to sprint to the finish line. It's time they die at the hands of a dead girl who forgot how to be weak.

I can't wait to watch them burn.

Chapter 1

To the living, we owe respect, but to the dead, we owe only the truth.

—Voltaire

LOGAN

“Marcus Evans…that boy was a handful when he was a child, but such a sweetheart. And Victoria…she was always his shadow. Wherever Marcus and Jacob went, she followed. They let her. Just a year separated Victoria in age from the boys. And Robert, well, he did all he could to make sure those kids were loved. Jacob spent more time at his house than he did his own, because Robert was made of a sort of strength and compassion you can’t find just anywhere.”

Diana Barnes clears her throat, and I watch as she stands to get a glass of water.

“You boys want anything to drink?”

“No ma’am,” we both say in unison.

Her chocolate skin is a stark contrast to her ivory dress that hangs to her knees. She’s a regal, timeless sort of woman, with haunted eyes. Haunted eyes like my Lana.

Only there’s a sense of guilt there as well, unlike Lana’s. There’s a jaded harshness to the way she carries herself, as though she’s forcing herself to make it through each day.

“You have kids?” she asks us as she returns, sitting down with her water, drawing out the suspense.

“No, ma’am,” we both say again.

“I’ll bet you both enjoy being bachelors and thinking time will never catch up with you.”

Donny shifts in his seat uncomfortably, but I just smile.

“I’m not married, but I’m not a bachelor.”

She studies me intently for a moment. “Victoria would have liked you. She was mostly raised by her father after her mother died when she was ten. She shared a house with two men, so she was more comfortable making friends with boys than girls. She was selective with her friends more than her boyfriends. Not that anyone could have known.”

I inch forward. “Known what?”

“Nah. I’m getting ahead of myself. You need to know first that Robert died in lockup the night he was convicted of crimes he *couldn’t* commit. They threw every shoe and the kitchen sink at him to make him the murderer, as though that would somehow make the killings just disappear and everyone could go on with their lives.”

She sips her water again, and I refrain from demanding she get to the point.

“Robert was with his kids every night. My boy was even over there a lot of those nights. Jacob Denver, of course, was there most nights as well. Robert cooked, he cleaned, he cared for his children, and he usually had others come over and hang out as well. Such a good soul and a good home, people couldn’t stay away. My boy’s daddy left when he was a tiny little thing. Robert always talked to my boy as if he was his own, and as a single working mother, I

appreciated all the help I could get. I returned the favor when I could."

She pauses, swallowing down emotion that I didn't detect in her voice. Her eyes grow dimmer.

"He never could have raped and killed those women. He couldn't even raise his hand to his own kids. My boy saw him. Jacob saw him. Several of those nights, he was home with his kids and two extra. Didn't matter. They wouldn't allow the eye witness testimonies or admit them as alibies in the courtroom."

"What? Why?" Donny asks, confused.

"Because then they couldn't convict him of murders he didn't commit," she says as though it's obvious and he's stupid for even asking.

Donny leans back, annoyed. Not at her, but at the situation. He knows how Johnson is. He'll make something stick, and he'll cut all the corners to lock *his* suspect away.

"And the court backed this?"

"The court. The sheriff. Everyone. They held him in interrogation for five straight days. Locked him in that box with no right. Wouldn't let his lawyer in. Then lied and said he never evoked council. It was a witch hunt from the get-go. It was easier to pin it on the school janitor with no other family than his kids in this town. That Johnson fellow pegged it to be him, and from then on, they made it happen. The sheriff was right beside him."

The original profile was a sexual sadist. They don't have kids too often, and if they do, they're distant from those kids. Not loving and doting. He profiled the unsub as a loner, but he wouldn't have been.

No signs of forced entry means he was charming and approachable, likely someone they trusted. Hence the reason it was someone in the town who did it. His ability to frame a man makes him a narcissist, and this town played right into his hand, giving him the power that really got him off.

And fooling the world was the ultimate high.

“Did anyone have any grudges against Evans before that night?”

“No,” she says, laughing under her breath. “That man was a saint. If a kid had an accident at school, he cleaned it up and told them to run along before someone saw it. He didn’t want them to be embarrassed, and knew kids could be cruel. His own kids were mercilessly mocked for being the janitor’s kids.”

I lean back, trying to find out what in the hell made Johnson so insistent on pegging this guy as the unsub. Even he has a heart.

“What about the sheriff? Did he have any issues with him?”

Her lips tense. “The sheriff was too emotionally invested in finding someone—anyone—to make pay. His daughter was one of the first victims. The true sick, evil man who killed her…he put her in the middle of the street for everyone to find the next morning. She was naked and raped raw. Her skin was sliced to pieces, and she’d bled out overnight.”

Donny swallows thickly, and I sit back, wondering how in the fuck that never made into the case reports. The sheriff would have been required to step away from the investigation. It also makes him less likely to be the primary suspect, which was the direction I was leaning.

“She was eighteen,” Diana goes on, choking back a sob. “The sheriff wasn’t right in the head after that. After seeing that. It was the

hardest thing this town had ever gone through at that time. And from there, they just got worse. A body was even on the church steps one Sunday morning before church started. One was on the school steps, right there for the children to see. It was Ilene Darvis. She was a kindergarten teacher. Just twenty-three."

She has to stop and blow her nose, her tears falling freely now.

"Anyway, the night Robert was convicted, they were supposed to take him to the prison. Escorts were here and everything. He was found hanging in his cell the next morning after they delayed the transfer. Ain't no fool gonna believe that man really hanged himself when he was desperate to get an appeal. He was gonna seek out true justice. Not go down like that. I never could find out what really happened. I hope you do."

Donny's fists tighten. It's always painful to hear about the wrong man's life getting shattered because of another man's ego. Johnson shattered many lives.

"Couple days later, them babies were walking home, and Victoria stopped by here. I was beside her when her phone rang. Kyle called Victoria, telling her he could get her in to see her father's body, since they said they couldn't release it. The sheriff said they weren't eighteen, and since there was no one of age to claim the body, the city had the right to dispose of it. I got that taken care of later—too much later."

She blows out a shaky breath, as though she's steeling herself for the rest.

"Victoria had dated Kyle, gave that boy more of herself than she should have. He wasn't too happy when they broke up, but he didn't show his demon right away. He was manipulative and calculated like

that. She'd only dated him for a few months, one of the few boyfriends she'd ever had. Her daddy talked sense into her when he heard how Kyle talked down to her. She never said why she broke up with Kyle. But Kyle had never given her a reason not to trust him. Not until that night."

Donny's phone beeps, but he ignores it. When my phone starts ringing, I silence it. Neither of us are stepping away until we have our answers. It's just Johnson trying to find out what we're up to.

"Victoria went to meet him, and Marcus caught up with her, wanting to see his father as well. They needed answers. No note was left. No goodbye was given. He just died, and they slapped suicide on there. Jacob was not with them for once, and thankfully, neither was my boy."

She breaks, becoming a sobbing mess. "I shouldn't have been thankful when those babies suffered, but I was so glad they didn't get my boy too."

She's almost incoherent now, her tears falling too fast and her sobs wracking her body. Donny looks at me, dread in his eyes.

We knew there was assault. We knew it was sexual.

But I'm starting to piece together all the kills now.

Diana calms herself by some miracle, hiccupping around a sob.

"And Kyle, oh that boy was pure evil," she says, her tone turning angry now. "They met him at the end of Belker Street, and he wasn't alone. He brought several volunteers with him to help him *punish* the 'killer' through his kids."

Belker Street is where the message about angels was written to sound like an omen of things to come.

“They jumped them. Got them down on the ground. Stripped them bare in the middle of the streets. After that, they took turns on both of them.”

She has to stop when she gags, and she turns her head.

Donny is white, and his fists are tighter. My entire body is rigid right now.

“How many?” Donny asks quietly.

“Thirteen in all,” she says, still sobbing. “Only…Dev didn’t… couldn’t go through with it. He stood there, though. And he told me the story after it was over. The boy was so twisted up in the head he was sent to therapy for over a year. Then he joined a church ministry group that travels over the country spreading the word of God. He’s how I know.”

“So twelve of them took turns raping them,” Donny states, his calm tone betraying the simmering rage that matches mine.

“Over. And over. And over,” she growls, her tears falling angrily. “They didn’t stop. Those babies laid on that street for hours, bleeding and screaming for help. And no one came. But that’s not even the worst of it.”

I don’t know how much worse it can get.

“Lawrence, Morgan, and Kyle were the worst offenders; the darkest souls around. After they’d grown bored with raping them, Kyle walked inside someone’s house and borrowed a full length mirror. The Whisenants just handed the mirror over like they didn’t know what was going on right in front of their home. Kyle returned, handed the mirror to Morgan, and Lawrence jerked Marcus up to his feet.”

My phone rings again, but I silence it once more, not even glancing at the screen.

“Kyle pulled out a knife, and had Morgan hold the mirror behind Victoria. He wanted Marcus to be able to see what was coming next. Then Kyle told Marcus to ‘fuck’ his sister. To rape his own flesh and blood. Or he’d cut off his dick so he could never use it again.”

My stomach roils, and Donny chokes back a strangled sound.

“Marcus refused, told them all to burn in hell and take whatever. Kyle slid the knife over Marcus’s waist, cutting him, and told him it was his last chance. Said if he was pervert enough to like it in the ass, then he was pervert enough to fuck his sister. Marcus spit in his face. And Kyle made true to his threat. Castrated him there in the middle of the street.”

It’s all I can do not to walk out. I don’t want to hear anymore. Hell, I’m not sure if I can ever look at anyone in this town without hating them for helping hide this.

Why did Diana not come forward sooner?

When Diana recovers again, she goes on. “The mirror fell and shattered. Victoria had already been beaten to a pulp, her face unrecognizable. They’d pounded her face into the ground, hit her with their fists, and so much more. When the glass shattered, they dragged her through it, then Kyle sliced her at the waist with the knife. After that, he grabbed a piece of the mirror, showed her what she looked like, and he slammed the piece of mirror into her. His parting words to her were that she’d die a monster and a whore. They left them to bleed out in the streets.”

“Then Marcus drove them out of the county to give them a chance to survive,” I say on a quiet breath. “Because the sheriff

owns everything in Delaney County."

She nods slowly, then shakes her head. "Marcus never once thought he'd survive. He just wanted to save his sister's life. Neither one of them made it out of the hospital. And this town lost its soul. We all became hollow shells of who we were, because fear ruled us."

"Why not tell someone sooner?" Donny asks, trying not to sound accusatory.

She gives us a grim, solemn look. "The ones who tried ended up missing or dead. Lindy May Wheeler tried to stop them that night. She ran up, but Dev hauled her back off, tossing her into a car and locking her in it until they were done. She was married. Next thing I know, Kyle is telling her husband he slept with his wife…that she seduced him. Antonio left her, and no one believed her when she said she'd been raped repeatedly by Kyle. Her daddy had to get her out of town because he worried she'd be killed."

My blood freezes, and Donny's eyes meet mine. Lindy May Wheeler. The woman our unsub chose to care for a broken child he took the time to save from a true monster.

Diana doesn't notice our look.

"They threatened my boy. He was on his way to college in less than a year. They told me he'd never even graduate high school if I stirred up problems. I believed them. Still do. That's why I sent him to his girlfriend's place. That girl makes a lot of money, and she has the best security in New York."

"Most of these unsubs left town," Donny tells me.

"They had to," Diana interjects. "The only way the sheriff could keep people afraid, but still living here, was to banish everyone but

his boy from this town. His boy is the worst of all of them, but he ain't getting banished. But don't you worry. He paid them boys off real nice."

"Kyle Davenport is the sheriff's son. It's no wonder he covered this up," Donny says on a pained breath.

"Covered this up?" she asks in disbelief. "The sheriff orchestrated it. He had his deputies go to each and every house and said if they heard something, to stay inside. If they failed to comply, there'd be consequences. He even sent out a broadcast to our TVs telling us there was an immediate curfew—no one out past sunset until told otherwise. He helped his son plan this out, then let him do what he couldn't stomach to do himself."

"Why?" Donny asks.

But I know why without hearing the answer.

"His daughter was raped, tortured, debased, and shamed even after her death. As far as the sheriff was concerned, Robert Evans was the man who did it. Killing the man wasn't enough for him. He had to go and shatter his kids before killing them too. Said the world needed to be cleansed of the devils it bore. Yet he never sees the evil in his own son's eyes. Even that boy's momma knew he was no good."

Again my phone goes off, but I'm not finished here, so I ignore it once more.

"Kyle was a monster just waiting to be unleashed. Once that sort of evil escapes from a box, it doesn't go back in."

I agree with her whole-heartedly on that. He's raped at least three people that we know of, and one of them was even a male.

“You boys want to stop a killer from hurting this town. But I just want those babies to finally have a voice. People are dying from holding in these secrets for so long.”

“Who is Dev?”

“Devin Thomas. He’s the judge’s son,” she says on autopilot.

As I stand, I look at her and recite the names we know, two of which are an uncertainty. “Tim Hoover. Chuck Cosby. Nathan Malone. Jeremy Hoyt. Ben Harris. Tyler Shane. Lawrence Martin. Anthony Smith. Kevin Taylor. Morgan Jones. Kyle Davenport.”

She meets my gaze. “Jason Martin. He’s Lawrence’s cousin. He lives in South Carolina these days. Works as a real estate developer there. He was the twelfth.”

“Thank you for sharing this.”

“Just tell me you’ll do more than hear it.”

“I plan to,” I tell her honestly.

Donny follows me to the door, and I turn around to face her one last time. “How’d Victoria and Marcus’s mother die?”

“Car crash,” she says on a sigh. “A rich couple from a few towns over collided with her after they got drunk at a party. Their last name was Carlyle, I believe. They orphaned their own daughter with that wreck, and killed a damn good woman who was just trying to get home to her kids after a long day at the hospital.”

It’s like this family couldn’t catch a break.

“Nurse?” I ask, though I don’t know why I want to know.

“No. She was actually a coroner for the same hospital where the kids died. I figured that’s one reason they also chose that one. Their mom was a loved woman with a lot of friends from there.”

I nod in understanding, and we turn to leave.

“They worked in a pack mentality that night,” Donny whispers as we step outside and shut the door.

“With Kyle as their most dominant alpha. It was more prison pack mentality, joining together so as not to be the odd one out.”

“As young as fifteen, some of them,” Donny growls.

“Adolescents are easier to manipulate and control. They looked up to the three—Lawrence, Morgan, and Kyle. But Kyle mostly called the shots. Someone that night would have butted heads, with their being so many alphas.”

“Not that we’ll know. Morgan and Lawrence are already dead.”

“Devin. We need to find him.”

“He left part of the way through it to lock up Lindy May. What if he came back and watched? How else would Diana have known the rest of the story?”

I purse my lips. I noted that too. But Diana never explained.

“Were we ever able to interview the ones on duty in the hospital the night the kids came in?” I ask Donny.

“No. It’s been over ten years ago. We were lucky they were able to give us what they had.”

“Why not tell someone there they were hurt?” I ask him.

He shrugs, every ounce of energy suddenly gone from him. I feel like I’ve been through the same emotional vacuum.

“I don’t know, but I do know Johnson knew about this. Kyle was put into protective custody.”

“We need more than one woman’s word this all happened. She wasn’t even an eye witness. And if we’re taking on Johnson, then we’re also taking on Director McEvoy. We’re going to need solid

evidence. In the meantime, we need to find out who else is a target and what really killed Robert Evans."

"I've never once in my career wondered if I was on the right side of the law. Until today," he says quietly.

Revenge killings always make us question our standing. "He won't stop just at the ones who killed the kids," I remind him.

"He opened some doors, but didn't touch anyone. He stole some mirrors, put some ink in some water and played with some paint. He could have already killed numerous people. But he hasn't."

"He's terrorizing them. It's his form of revenge against the whole town. He knows how their minds work. They've been drenched in ten years of guilt for knowing this and doing nothing. They believe something supernatural is really going on right now."

"Why do I feel like he's just getting started?" Donny asks as we get in the SUV.

"Why doesn't Kyle Davenport have the same surname as his father?" I ask.

He pulls up his iPad, reading something on it. "Says Jane Davenport was the mother. The sheriff didn't know Kyle even existed until Jane showed up in town one day with Kyle in tow, and she handed over custody."

My eyebrows go up. "What?"

He shakes his head, whistling low. "Hadley dug all this up somehow. Kyle is one sick fuck. Started torturing and killing animals at the ripe age of five. By seven, his mother decided she couldn't handle him. He had a tantrum and cut her with a knife. She took him to the sheriff, who was all too happy to take away all her custodial

rights, and she stayed in town, watching her son grow up from a distance. I bet her life was a living hell."

"Where is she now?"

His brow furrows. "Dead. She died ten years ago, shortly after the trial for Robert Evans started."

"Why do I feel like that's not a coincidence?" I groan.

"Because everything in this godforsaken town is tied to that nightmare somehow."

Just as I crank the car, I look up, seeing a flash of red. Quickly, I get back out, and I climb onto the hood of the SUV, reading the tops of the buildings in the distance. It's the town hall I see from here.

Written in red on the side of the roof is one message: *It is difficult to free fools from the chains they revere.*

Donny climbs up beside me, and he sucks in a long breath.

"First he quotes the bible and now Voltaire? What's the purpose?"

"No clue," I tell him as I hop down. "Even though I think it's pretty clear what the messages separate mean."

Just then, my head snaps to the speaker on the pole, because music starts filtering through it. *"Hush, little baby, don't say a word. Momma's gonna buy you a mocking bird. And if that mocking bird don't sing, Momma's gonna buy you a diamond ring…"*

"That's not creepy at all," Donny says with a shudder as the nursery song plays on in a woman's voice.

Everyone in the street turns to stare at the speaker closest to them, all of them paling.

"You think he's going to cleanse the town?"

I tighten my lips. "He's showing a lot of control. I don't think he wants to cleanse, but I think he wants them to confess. He's here

because we are. Otherwise, he'd have killed the last name on the list that isn't in this town. He came when we did."

"But why?"

"When I find out, I'll let you know," I tell him, driving away from the house that dropped a bomb on us I wasn't prepared for.

Chapter 2

To the wicked, everything serves as a pretext.
—Voltaire

LANA

“How’s your dad?” I ask Jake as he walks around the room, hooking up a final monitor.

“He’s taking the meds again. You know as well as I do how hurt his ego is that he’s sick. But it’s handled. Now we can focus on this.”

I watch the look on Logan’s face as he steps out of Diana’s house, and I know she told him all she knew.

“I’ll watch Diana’s house, in case they make their move,” Jake tells me, brushing my shoulder with his as he sits down beside me, his eyes flicking to the numerous monitors he has spread out on the walls of the old hunter’s cabin.

The FBI came through, did a sweep of all these, and *then* Jake set up our temporary headquarters in his father’s cabin that has been empty for years.

I nod appreciatively, but I can’t take my eyes off Logan, seeing the pain in his eyes. Pain for a girl he never knew. Pain for a boy he’ll never know. Pain for a past that has haunted me for ten years.

And he’s not even finished getting all his details just yet. There’s still more to learn.

“He’ll find the evidence he needs, Lana. You’re right about him. He’s the real deal.”

Too good of a man to be sullied by the dark thing I've become.

"I know he will. Then my father's name will be cleared—at least to the people in this town who condemned him."

"And Marcus will have his vengeance from the grave," he adds quietly, cueing the music that has everyone in town pausing almost immediately.

Only the ones too young to remember the sound of my mother's voice singing that song on the church stage are able to shrug it off. But everyone else is growing increasingly terrified.

Terrified of the dead coming back to haunt them.

"You ever wonder what we might have become if my father had never been convicted of those murders?" I ask him softly.

"No. Because if I start wondering, I'll never stop," he says without hesitation.

The musty smell of the cabin will have to be washed off me before I leave.

"I'm putting him in danger by letting him go on this egg hunt," I tell Jake as I turn up the volume on the monitor with the sheriff speaking.

"You have his back," Jake says, his lips twitching as we see the sheriff turning a precarious shade of white, hearing the music play through the speakers.

He remembers that night. The night my mother sung that song on the church stage for a very important play. Almost the entire town was there.

"It'd better be enough, Jake. If he gets hurt because of me, I'll fall over that edge, forget what this is all about, and kill without prejudice."

My hands shake just thinking of the monster I'd become if I lost my entire soul.

Jake's hand covers my trembling one, and he leans toward me. "I'll reel you back in."

I stare at him grimly. "If Logan is hurt because of me—or for any reason—you won't be enough."

I feel it when the tear escapes, and Jake tenses, seeing the single bit of wet proof of how vulnerable I am because of one man. His lips tighten.

"Then we'll both make sure he stays safe."

I wipe away the tear, and I return my attention to the panicking sheriff as he shuts and locks the door of the town hall, turning to face SSA Johnson.

"That's Jasmine Evans singing on that speaker," Sheriff Cannon hisses. "Unless a ghost has come back from the dead, you're missing something."

Then the sheriff turns to one of his deputies. "Kill that damned music! Find out how he got into our town speakers!"

Jake smirks. "Good luck with that, Sheriff. I dare you to out hack me," Jake says smugly.

This is the part he's been waiting for. The part where we show them what sheep they all really are. The part where we show them how weak their minds are.

The part where we fuck the whole town up.

"I told you this was not going to be easy," Johnson growls as the sheriff turns back to face him.

"Oh? Because I remember you saying you could control this team. So far, they've asked too many fucking questions, and they're

hanging flyers all over my town. It's just a matter of time before someone gets the courage to talk."

Gotcha, you stupid bastard.

"Logan Bennett is your problem. The rest of the team, I can handle."

My gut clenches as dread unfolds in me. I'll fucking kill him before time if he goes after Logan. And I'll make an example out of anyone he sends.

"You sure you can get to Kyle without anyone figuring it out?" Jake asks me, his eyes trained on the screen too.

I don't answer, because I'm busy listening to what's being said.

"If he takes me down, you're coming with me. Remember that, Johnson," the sheriff snarls as he shuts the door to his office, giving them privacy.

Johnson narrows his eyes. "I never told you to go after those kids. This psychopath is targeting you because of them. He's not targeting you because of Evans. That sick fuck of a son you have needed a leash, and instead, you turned him loose, told him to do his worst. That team is here because you gave that monster free reign."

The sheriff's face twists in anguish, and Jake mutes all the other screens, focusing on this one with me. We knew the sheriff wasn't the original killer, but we never expected to see any remorse, because we profiled him as a sociopath.

"He's not sick. He was hurting. He saw his sister all spread out like that, brutally raped and murdered."

Johnson points a finger in his face. "I went along with Evans, because that cunt lawyer from New York got wind of his case and was already well on the road to proving the case was beyond biased.

The trial was never supposed to be here, and too many jury members were affiliated with you. He would have gotten free, and my career would have been ended for all the strings I pulled. You have no idea what I had to do just to get on this case so I could clean up this mess. I gave you the real profile. Find the fucker who is killing your people before Bennett finds out what we buried."

I look to Jake, and he glares at the screen as I speak. "They're on edge."

"Right where we wanted them," Jake says quietly.

The Wheels on the Bus starts playing on the speakers, and one woman trips, falling to the ground as my mother's voice continues to echo through the town. The voices of so many children accompany her voice, making it a hair creepier. The music dies suddenly, and Jake's lips twitch as he studies something on his laptop.

"They unplugged it from the server."

"Just like we knew they would," I agree.

"When they plug them back in, it'll alert me. I'll start it over."

"Until they have no choice but to leave them unplugged, and no way of telling the town what's going on when the haunted house opens."

He nods slowly. "You ready for that?"

A dark grin etches the corners of my lips. "Very much."

Someone entering the sheriff's office has my attention. Chad Briggs steps in, wearing his deputy's uniform, and seals the door behind him. His eyes flick to Johnson, then he addresses the sheriff.

"Some information has come to light."

"Then spill it," Sheriff Cannon growls.

His eyes flick to Johnson again. "Some sensitive information."

He waves dismissively toward Johnson. “He’s not the one from that group to worry about. What information?”

I can tell Briggs is hesitant, but he finally answers. “SSA Bennett and another agent were spotted leaving Diana Barnes’s home. They were there a while, Sheriff, and I just got word that her son is untouchable right now. Staying with some lawyer in New York. I think she told them everything.”

Sheriff Cannon curses, running a hand through his hair as he tosses his hat across the room.

“Calm down,” Johnson says, regaining his own composure. “That’s just the ramblings of an old woman. He’d need proof. There is none. And most of the suspects involved are dead already, so it’s not like they can confirm or deny. We need to focus more on making sure there’s nothing left that could show what we did to Evans.”

“There’s nothing,” Sheriff Cannon says, but my lips twitch.

“There’s plenty,” Jake says, grinning broadly. “You’re just too stupid to know it, Sheriff.”

And we have so much to share. When the time comes.

“Diana Barnes could become a problem if she gets someone to corroborate the story,” I hear the Sheriff telling Johnson, then his gaze shifts to Chad Briggs. “See to it that isn’t the case.”

“They’re going after Diana,” Jake says as Chad nods and heads out of the room.

“Not until nightfall.”

My eyes flick back to the screen where Logan is. I turn up the volume, though he’s almost too far away from the camera for me to hear.

“The coroner died two years ago, so that’s a bust,” Donny is telling him.

“We need to visit the hospital where the kids went,” Logan says, and my stomach sinks.

“Fuck,” Jake hisses. “He shouldn’t be focusing on you. He should be focusing on the corruption.”

“If he goes there and pieces things together the way Hadley did, then we’re screwed,” I say quietly.

“It was fate that Kennedy was dying the same night you needed to survive,” Jake says quietly. “And Kennedy Carlyle? The same girl who was the daughter of the drunk drivers who wrecked into your mom? There’s no way that was all for nothing. There’s no way that wasn’t a sign. We’re meant to do this. Not meant to get caught mid-way.”

“We need someone to speak up and talk about my father,” I murmur absently, watching Logan as he tears off his red tie, frustrated.

Jake stands and goes to the edge of the room, pulling out his wonderful creation of time releasing paint. They’re all labeled differently, each one having a different timeframe for when the paint will appear.

“Then let’s give them some incentive to talk,” Jake says before tugging on his hood and walking toward the door. “Call me if you see anyone slip up on me. I’m going to the school. I’ll disable the school cameras when I get there.”

“Got you covered,” I tell him.

The monitors surrounding us cover the entire town. It’s like staring at hell all day.

“Lana needs to go back home.” Logan’s announcement has me shifting my gaze to his screen.

“Good luck telling Hadley that,” Donny says with a grin.

“This isn’t amusing. She could be in real danger. I knew better than to bring her.”

He looks as though he’s agonizing over this.

“No offense, but you’re just too emotionally invested in her safety to see she’s actually safe. Not one woman has been targeted. Only men. If anything, she’s safer than you are.”

“I don’t trust the sheriff or Johnson right now. This has nothing to do with the Scarlet Slayer.”

Donny’s eyes widen, and so do mine.

“I sound so fucked up. I’m more concerned over two law officials than I am a fucking serial killer. This town is pure toxic,” Logan says on a sigh.

“Johnson is twisted, but he’s not an idiot. He knows he can’t lay a hand on you and get away with it. We need to find some solid evidence to give to Collins so he can give it to the subcommittee.”

“There’s someone obvious we haven’t spoken to since we acquired new evidence,” Logan says thoughtfully. “He only lives about an hour from here.”

“Christopher Denver,” Donny says on an exhale. “Of course.”

Jake’s father. My father’s lawyer. My father’s only friend in a town of traitors.

We knew they’d get around to talking to him sometime.

My eyes pop over to the school screen, seeing Jake with his hood on as he takes quick strokes, hurrying the paintjob. Everyone is

inside the school, and the windows are above his head, making it impossible to look out and see him.

I can't believe he's doing it in daylight right out front though. Fortunately, the streets are mostly quiet, and when he hears a car, he ducks behind the holly bushes.

Finally, I see Jake jogging around the side, heading into the woods that will spit him out right back here. My attention returns to Logan, and I focus solely on him.

"Who keeps calling?" Donny asks him as Logan silences his phone again.

"Johnson. I'm sure he's trying to find a way to throw us off this investigation. By now he's probably already heard we talked to Diana Barnes in private. He may be wanting to find out what we know."

"Let's go talk to Denver before he finds out what we're doing."

Logan glances at the time on his phone. "Okay, but I want to be back before it gets too late and make sure Lana is good."

"Call her from the road, lover boy," Donny says, rolling his eyes as Logan takes the driver's seat of the car. Logan seems to be laughing about it.

I can't hear what they're saying when they shut the doors, but I mute everything when my phone rings.

"Hey," I say, smiling like a little girl with a crush.

"I need to run out of town to work on a lead. Any chance you'd go back home? I don't like you being here."

I smile, loving the way he cares. My eyes flick to the screen where people are passing by the school, slowly gathering as the paint appears.

"I think Delaney Grove is growing on me."

He groans at the terrible joke.

“Logan, stop worrying. I’d rather be with you, or at least close to you, than sitting around wondering about you and if you’re safe.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about, babe. I can take care of myself.”

I can take care of you better.

My eyes move up as Elise and Leonard arrive on scene, taking pictures of the new message.

“Stop worrying about me. I doubt this guy even cares who I am.”

He grows quiet for a long minute.

“Logan?”

“Sorry. Was just thinking about how you completely ruin psychology.”

“How so?”

“Because you were attacked by a known serial killer because of my job, yet you stubbornly want to stay, acting as though the thought of another coming after you doesn’t faze you.”

I swallow hard. Never once has he sounded suspicious. Even now he sounds more confused than suspicious.

“I have a gun,” I tell him softly. “And I don’t want to be in my house.”

I close my eyes, hating the fact the lie will make him feel guilt.

“Go back to the hotel.”

“No,” I say on a sigh.

“Shit. We’ll resume this conversation later. Elise is beeping me.”

“Love you,” I say without hesitation, finding the words rolling off my tongue with natural ease.

“Love you.” I can hear the smile in his voice even as someone makes gagging sounds in the background.

Just as I hang up with him, Jake walks in, eyeing me as I try to wipe the dopey look off my face.

“As soon as this is over, I’m going to find my own goofy grin,” he grumbles, but the smile in his eyes betrays his Grinch-stole-Christmas tone. “Did I miss it?”

“Just getting started,” I tell him, motioning to the wall of the school.

The lies we tell influences them. The present is pregnant with the future.

The message is getting a lot of pale faces as it finishes appearing like *magic.*

“Logan is leaving town, and the sun isn’t too far from setting. I’m going to Diana’s.”

As I stand, Jake tosses up my knife, and I catch it by the handle as he takes my seat in front of the monitors.

“Stick to the sidewalks. The boots won’t lie,” he says, eyeing my girly combat boots that are fully equipped with blood red shoestrings.

Walking around with my weighted bags and my men’s boots might be a little suspicious.

The cold has washed in, which is perfect. It makes wearing a hoodie less conspicuous. I nearly froze to death in my dress.

But I wanted to return home in style—wearing the color red.

“Lay out pillows in case she faints,” he says as I walk out, and I smirk while taking the brisk walk, maneuvering the shortcuts through the buildings. The town is built like a circular maze, the roads getting wider as they circle the city. Town hall is directly in the center.

From the sky, it’s amazingly beautiful.

It’s only ugly when you’re in the middle of it and can see the truth.

I walk around back to keep anyone from seeing me at the front, and I knock twice, checking over my shoulder to make sure no one is watching.

When Diana opens the door, my heart unexpectedly sputters. I thought I'd steeled myself against any emotion I might feel when I came here.

I blame Logan. He's tearing away the ice I put in place.

"Can I help you, hun?" she asks sweetly.

I push the hood back. "You could let me in."

Her eyes narrow, and her smile slips.

I feel like an ass for scaring her.

"Diana, I need to talk to you, and you know what you told them today."

"I'm sorry, dear. I think you should go," she says, closing the door.

My hand shoots out, and I shoulder my way in, feeling worse when she gasps and stumbles back, trembling.

She's on edge because she told the story no one else has had the balls to.

"Diana, I need you to sit down. I don't want you to get hurt, and I'm only here to keep you safe."

"Keep me safe?" she asks, confused as she looks over me, obviously convinced I'm not a match for anyone.

My hoodie hides my knife, but I decide not to show her the blade. She might actually faint.

"Once upon a time you loved a little girl. You betrayed her to save your son. Today, you finally stood up for her and gave her a chance to be heard."

Tears waver in her eyes as she takes another step back.

“Who are you?” she whispers, emotion riddling her voice.

Adjusting the knife under the hoodie to go to the back of my pants, I pull up the front my shirt, revealing the scars I’ve hidden for too long.

Her eyes drop to my stomach, and she takes another step back.

“I’m that little girl.”

When she hits the ground, I catch her head just in time. Jake was right. I should have put down pillows.

“Well, shit,” I say to the woman who has fainted.

I can practically hear Jake saying, “I told you so,” in my head.

Chapter 3

Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

“Thanks for meeting with us, Mr. Denver,” I say to the man who hands us both a cup of coffee.

“I’m here to help in any way I can.” He studies us like he expects us to be on the wrong side of the law, as though he’s waiting for us to trick him.

It makes me hate Johnson even more.

“We’re hoping you can shed some light on what happened to Robert Evans.”

He grimaces. “It should all be on record. I’m sure the FBI has access to all that.”

“All murder trials are usually taped, but this one wasn’t.”

“It was,” he argues. He stands and goes to his bookcase, and he pulls out a book. When he opens the book and grabs a DVD, Donny raises his eyebrows at me.

Christopher Denver brings us the DVD, and he hands it to me.

“You can keep that. I have others.”

“The file stated it wasn’t filmed.”

“It was,” he states simply.

I blow out a long breath. “I realize the FBI are probably not on your list of people to trust, but I can assure you that the two of us are

looking for real answers."

"Because of the Scarlet Slayer," he says simply.

I cock my head, studying him. He has alibies, so he can't be our guy.

"That's part of what led us there, yes. But also because we feel as though the case might have been mishandled."

He snorts derisively, and I arch an eyebrow at him.

"Sorry. I'm just not used to such understatements being made with true sincerity."

Donny leans back, and I sip my coffee, looking around the house. His walls are mostly bare, other than several achievements from his son and from him.

"We spoke with Jacob as well. He wouldn't give us any information," I say, watching his face.

He remains impassive, years of courtroom training teaching him to school his features.

"My son was broken that night. The boy he loved was killed, and the girl he adored as his own sister died as well. And it was reported as a car accident. He completely withdrew from the world after that night. I struggle to even get him to come here for the holidays now. Although he came to visit recently due to a personal matter."

I want to pry, but doubt he'd tell us why Jacob came to visit.

"Why didn't you tell us about Victoria and Marcus if you knew?" I ask instead.

"Because you would have went after my son, of course. He was the closest to them, other than the Barnes boy. But a NFL football star is less likely to be a suspect."

Just telling us his son was paralyzed would have been good enough. But it's like he almost doesn't want to say that.

"You don't even mind giving us that information, do you?" Donny asks him.

"That I wanted to keep my son safe from corrupt bureaucrats cleaning up a mess they helped make? Not at all. There was no obstruction of justice, considering this story was squashed by one of your own when my son tried to tell it. My silence in no way interfered with your investigation of this Scarlet Slayer."

"Only it did," I tell him.

He looks just like Jacob, only an older version of him. Dark hair barely dusted by time, and fine wrinkles that almost look intentional.

"How is that, SSA Bennett?"

"The unsub we're looking for is working off a list of the rapists involved that night."

I see the surprise in his eyes. He's genuinely caught off guard by that admission.

"What can you tell us about Robert Evans? And this time, hold nothing back."

He clears his throat, probably not used to being surprised.

"Robert Evans was a brilliant man with no ambition to be more than a janitor. The pay was good enough, and he enjoyed the hours because it gave him more time with his kids."

He sighs long and hard.

"I worked too much. Jacob spent more time there than he did at home. I never even knew he was in love with Marcus until years after the boy's death. He told me everything one night, broke down right there on that couch, told me how much he hated the whole town.

Then he felt like he was being punished when he was put in a wheelchair."

He's telling us about Jacob and not Robert, speaking of his shortcomings. That's the tell of a regretful father I've heard too often in cases where they've lost a child. Never a case where the son is still alive.

"Robert was a simple man, who never caused problems. But he painted himself an easy target for the sheriff who just wanted someone to pay for his daughter's death. Didn't matter if he was innocent. Didn't matter if he had an alibi. Nothing mattered except one man's revenge. Robert Evans was the most unlucky soul I ever knew."

"Why do you say that?" Donny asks, though it should be obvious.

"He lost the love of his life to two rich drunks. Both her parents and his parents had passed already, leaving him with no help to care for his kids. He lost his life because of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And his kids were murdered for crimes he never committed. Don't see how you can get unluckier than that."

Donny clears his throat and loosens his tie. Every time we hear more about the Evans family, we become a little more invested. It's probably the most heartbreaking shit I've heard.

"What happened after the trial?"

"The trial that shouldn't have happened in a town as small as Delaney Grove?" he asks bitterly. "A trial that shouldn't have happened with a biased judge ruling? Do you realize he could have gotten an appeal with little effort?"

We both nod, deciding to hold our silence as he reins in his temper.

“I don’t know what they did to him. All I know is he sure as hell didn’t hang himself. He’d already had Hannah Monroe contact him, offering to take his case on appeal and wave her fee. She was going to ruin Delaney Grove.”

“What happened to her?” I ask.

“She’s still a hotshot in Manhattan. After he was dead, she moved on, as the sharks in that city tend to do.”

I pick my phone up, and I press play on the recording I made.

“Hush, little baby,” are the first words that play aloud. It’s the same recording from the speakers that took forever to shut up.

His breath catches, and he stares at the phone with an almost unreadable look. Finally, he peers back up, his lips tense.

“That’s Jasmine.”

“Jasmine?” Donny asks.

“Jasmine Evans.”

He stands and grabs another DVD, this one lying in plain sight. He has several that look to be burned at home, all labeled.

When he returns, he hands it to me.

“It’s from that play the year before she died. Everyone in the town was there. Both Evans kids were in it as well. Robert too. It was a big deal to the town, because it was the Founder’s Day play. It was the last year the town celebrated it.”

“Why?”

“The sheriff cancelled it the next year because of something that happened with some of his deputies. The year after that, he didn’t reinstate it. Same for the next. Soon it was a forgotten tradition.”

“What happened?” I ask, even though I shouldn’t have to.

He leans forward, looking me right in the eye. “The same thing that always happens when you have a bunch of men too close to power. They think the sheriff is invincible, and by proxy, so are they. I could give you a list of indiscretions a mile long, but on that particular day, it was a fire that was set. The deputies burned a house down with two people in it because they wouldn’t sell their property for the new town restaurant—a restaurant the sheriff put in after their untimely deaths.”

“What happened to the deputies?” Donny asks.

“Chad Briggs and his brother still work there. Founder’s day was cancelled. Deputies were not reprimanded. The fire was ruled as an accident. It was the catalyst into the corruption that only got worse. The people realized they had to do as ordered, or suffer the consequences. Soon, people just learned to pretend as though Delaney Grove was the sweet little hometown the rest of the world thought it was.”

“That’s why our unsub is using that music,” I say quietly to Donny.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Christopher Denver asks, expecting me to say it again a little louder.

“What did they do to Robert Evans?” I ask instead of answering him.

“You want those answers, you need to talk to someone who knows. That town wasn’t exactly sharing dirty secrets with the one man who tried to defend him.”

He leans back in his chair, studying us.

“Can you at least point us in the right direction?” Donny asks. “Tell us the name of someone who will talk?”

“I could tell you someone who would break easily if you leaned on him. But what good will it do to know?”

“Excuse me?” I ask.

He leans back up, his eyes narrowing. “You can hear all the stories you want. Eye witness testimonies mean dick against an entire police force and a judge. They mean even less when those witnesses disappear or decide to recant their statements.”

“We’ll find evidence,” I say, determined to put an end to this.

I called Collins. He told me the words of an old lady who didn’t even see all the corruption first hand won’t be enough to put the director or Johnson off this case. Then again, I already knew that.

My eyes flick to the console table near the window. There’s a tray of medicines there, and I look back to Denver. “Are you okay?”

His lips tense, and he darts a glance to the tray. “I’ve been sick for several months. Some days are better than others. You’re catching me on a good day,” he says, then grimaces. “I always hoped I’d have the chance to get my best friend some justice. The doctors aren’t even sure what exactly is wrong with me. Sometimes I think it’s my punishment for not getting Robert’s story out there where it could be heard better.”

“Then help us now, Mr. Denver,” I say softly, hating that I’m using a sick man’s guilty conscious against him, but desperate enough to do it all the same.

He studies me for a long moment before I see the concession in his eyes, deciding he has no choice but to trust me and hope for the best.

“Carl Burrows. He used to work at the coroner’s office.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Denver,” I say as Donny and I stand, then hand him my card, which he takes. “Call us if you think of anything else.”

Just as we reach the door, he says, “They say the Scarlet Slayer paints a wall in red.”

I turn, looking back at him as he slowly faces us.

“That’s not something we’ve shared with the public,” I tell him, narrowing my eyes.

“You don’t have to share it. I’m from Delaney Grove. Those rumors of these deaths were spreading like fire before you ever announced the killer’s existence.”

I take a step toward him. He seemed surprised by the kill list earlier, yet now he sounds like he has information?

“You know what it means?”

He nods slowly. “Before Victoria died, she spoke to my son. Told him they’d painted the streets with their blood. Marcus wanted to paint the world with theirs.”

“Who else did your son tell that to?”

He shrugs. “Anyone who would listen, SSA Bennett. If Victoria had lived, she would have come back. She’d be this Scarlet Slayer you’re looking for. That girl’s fire always burned hotter and fiercer than anyone else’s.”

“But Victoria Evans died,” I tell him, pursing my lips. “And this killer is most definitely a man.”

He nods. “I’m aware. Not even Victoria would be able to have physically taken these men down.”

Then why even mention it?

He doesn’t stop us as we walk out, and Donny sidles up next to me.

“Besides Kyle, Victoria never really dated, and no one even knew Jacob ever dated Marcus,” Donny tells me, reading a text from Elise.

“Jacob wasn’t out about being bisexual when he lived in Delaney Grove, so that last part isn’t surprising,” I say absently. “What’s going on with his whereabouts?” I ask.

“Cameras failed us as expected. Low ball cap—predictably. He left on a private boat, apparently. Before we could ever get any cops out there. He told the hotel he had business, but didn’t say where. It’s hard to get anyone of authority to take him seriously as a suspect when he’s not here and he’s in a wheelchair.”

Convenient.

“Are we going to see Carl Burrows?” he asks.

“Yeah. I just want to stop in by the cabins and check on Lana first.”

Chapter 4

History is only the register of crimes and misfortune.
—Voltaire

LANA

For the past hour and a half since she woke up, Diana has been staring blankly, looking into my eyes to see if I still have a soul. I wonder what she sees in there besides a dark abyss.

“I can’t believe it’s really you,” she whispers hoarsely, though it’s about all she’s said since I explained the morbid reality surrounding us.

“They’re going to come for you,” I tell her, watching the cameras from my phone, flipping between different ones nearest to us.

I expected them to come as soon as it was nightfall. Their specialty is suffocating or strangling. Then they lie and say it was a heart attack when someone is Diana’s age. They call it a seizure or something when they’re younger.

“And you’re going to just kill them?” she asks in disbelief, her voice breaking. “Oh, baby. You shouldn’t be scarring your soul with their blood. You should be living the life you almost didn’t have.”

Coldly, I lift my gaze to meet her teary eyes. “They took *everything*, Diana. My brother and father still need peace. Do you remember Marcus? Do you remember the kind, bright soul that always sought to bring forth a smile from a stranger just to put more

good vibes out into the universe? Do you remember what they did to him? Because I can't ever forget it."

She bats away her tears. "I remember." Her voice is barely a rasp by now, but I feel no emotion clogging my throat. I've trained against it. The one moment of unexpected emotion when I saw her has passed, and I'm back in control.

I'm cold.

I'm detached.

I'm the killer right now.

"Confucius said something about digging two graves if you seek revenge. I know your momma always quoted that man."

"Confucius was never brutally raped, stabbed, and forced to watch his brother suffer even worse. I'm sure his viewpoints might have changed. Besides, he wasn't a romantic."

She makes a strangled sound, and I glance back to see her choking back her sobs, as though the image I painted was just too much. She knows the details, but seeing me…*hearing* me confirm the tale… It's hurting her.

However, her morals are still intact.

For now.

"They tried to force Marcus to fuck me," I say with a deadly edge. "And when he refused, they cut off his—"

A beep sounds from my phone, cutting off my words as the silent alert that someone is near our cabins goes off. It could be one of the team members again, but I still check it.

My eyes catch Justin Hollis—a deputy on my list—walking briskly toward the basketball court near the back. It's close to our cabin.

When he steps into the shadows, I cock my head.

I call Jake, putting him on speaker so I can still work the app, and start rewinding the screen, flipping to the next when he's out of view, following his path through several cameras.

"What's up?" Jake asks. "Diana faint?"

Diana's eyes widen when she hears his voice. "Yeah, but she's okay. Justin Hollis is squatting near my cabin. What's up with that?"

He grows quiet for a minute. "I don't know. I had to silence everything earlier. They came to check the cabins again, but didn't come in this time. I just hid, and kept the windows covered. They peered through the one window that shows the kitchen but gives no visibility to everything else."

"I'm trying to track his steps back, but it's taking too long from my phone."

"On it," I hear him saying, and I wait impatiently, my eyes lifting to Diana's again.

She looks as though her world has been turned upside down, and she clutches the bible in her hand. In her mind, there's time to save me, to stop me from tarnishing the rest of my soul with the blood on my hands.

"Found it," he says, then I hear the volume crank up in the background.

The phone is still on speaker, so Diana hears it as well.

"Sheriff said Diana, not them," Justin is growling.

Chad Briggs has a smirk in his tone. "Killing Diana is like killing an ant. More ants are going to come into your house. But if you kill the queen…"

Justin doesn't sound thrilled. "Kill the queen, and the ants disappear."

Who the fuck is the queen?

My eyes flick up to see Diana's wide, horrified gaze. Hearing they want her dead from my lips seems less impactful than hearing it straight from the jaws of the devils themselves.

"Sheriff ain't gonna be happy about this," Justin grumbles.

"Sheriff ain't the only one at stake here. We all need to worry about these guys figuring out the truth. You think you're ready for prison."

"Sheriff can handle this. He's handled all the other things," Justin argues.

I wish I could see the video, examine their expressions, but I don't want Jake to face-time me right now, because he'd have to pause all this.

"He ain't ever handled someone who isn't afraid of him. But if we take out their leader, the others will fall in line. They always do. You cut a head off a snake to end it. You don't just cut off one rat from its food supply."

My stomach plummets like a rocket as I slowly stand to my feet.

"How do we do this?" Justin asks, his voice more determined now that Chad has convinced him this is the answer to all their problems.

"Simple. Block off the road to the cabins. Wait at the courts. It'll give you the element of surprise, and it's just far enough away that the others will never hear or see you if they come back before you finish it."

My heartbeat slams into my throat, and I grab my hood, jerking it over my head as I head toward the backdoor, taking long, quick strides. "They're going after Logan," I tell Jake, panic inching up my spine with paralyzing force.

“Look at camera thirteen,” he says quietly.

I pull up the app, and my feet lock into place as I see Logan being detoured by the roadblocks.

Almost immediately, I break into a sprint, tossing my phone into my back pocket, as I use every burst of speed inside me, my adrenaline making me run even faster.

The whole town will bleed if I’m too late.

The whole fucking town will scream for me.

Chapter 5

It is the flash that appears; the thunderbolt will follow.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

“I’ll run in and see if Craig has anything while you’re checking on __”

Donny’s words end on a grunt, and I turn around, confused as to why he just stopped talking. When I see him on the hard court, a little blood running from his mouth as he lies there unconscious, I grab for my gun too late.

Something hard slams into my head, and I fall forward, disoriented and dizzy, as I crash into the unforgiving pavement below me. My stomach pitches, and my head gains thirty pounds as I try to black out, fighting hard to stay conscious.

A blur of a man’s silhouette steps into my vision, the moonlight not favoring me enough to show me his face. At least not until he kneels down and smiles at me.

Deputy Justin Hollis.

“You boys just can’t learn to leave well enough alone, now can you?” he taunts, grabbing my gun from my hip.

Weakly, I try to fight for it, but my hands aren’t cooperating, and the world is still spinning around me. It feels like gravity has waged a war against my body, pinning me down.

As I struggle up to my hands and knees, Hollis laughs, kicking me in the stomach, sending me spiraling down on my back as my stomach heaves.

I shake my head as his laughter echoes back and forth in my mind, sounding like it's coming from everywhere at once.

"Big bad Supervisory Special Agent Bennett. You don't look so threatening to me. Even the sheriff was worried about you."

The distinct sound of my gun being cocked registers, echoing from all over like his laughter. But before the gunshot can come, I hear a sharp intake of air and a pained yelp escape from him.

The gun falls, rattling somewhere in the distance, and my blurry eyes look up to see Hollis's head snapping back as a figure clad in all black becomes a blurring fury of motion.

My head is too groggy, making the scene nothing but a distorted movie in front of me. The black-clad figure spins, shooting a foot out to the deputy's chest. Hollis cries out, crashing to the ground. And the figure comes down on top of him, raining punches on his face.

Even the hands are clad in all black, so I can barely see what he's doing.

Until he pulls out a knife, holding it at his side.

He leans forward, and I watch as his head comes down next to Hollis's. Hollis cries out as the knife plunges into his side. And I see as the figure leans back up, staring down at him as he thrusts the knife inside Hollis's chest while straddling him.

He twists the knife as Hollis screams, and I hear almost a delicate, feminine laughter floating through the air.

The knife stays in Hollis's chest as the figure stands, and Hollis gurgles on blood, trying to speak. I sway on my side, trying to push

back up before he can come for me.

But I see him bent over. He's small. Very small. And as my vision clears just barely, I notice the small set of shoulders and very small frame.

Small. Small. Small.

That word just keeps replaying as the figure leans down and dips its finger into Hollis's blood that is rushing from his chest. I can't see what the figure is doing in its crouched position, but when it stands, it grabs the knife from Hollis's chest, and then it throws it right into his groin.

One last pained sound escapes Hollis, and the unsub grabs the knife before walking away, disappearing from my sight.

I limply grab for my phone, struggling to form a grip around it when I finally find it. It falls to the ground, tumbling from my uncooperative fingers. My eyes close and open for who knows how long, before suddenly there's a familiar face in front of me.

"Logan! He's over here!" I hear her calling out, cupping my face.

"Run," I whisper. "Run."

Her face is barely visible through the blur, but I can smell her, feel her, and know it's her by the way she touches me.

"I'm not going anywhere," Lana says, checking something on my head.

"Here!" she shouts again to some echo in the distance.

"Logan!" Craig's voice is barely recognizable through the veil of white noise surrounding me. "Get an ambulance out here now."

"Donny!" someone shouts, but Lana never leaves my side.

My head is in her lap, and she's barking out orders, asking me questions too fast for me to answer them.

My eyes finally close as she shouts my name one last time.

Too many thoughts are going through my mind as I play the scene on repeat, trying to piece it all together.

It’s not a man who just saved my life.

It wasn’t a beast at all.

It was a woman.

Chapter 6

Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

“It couldn’t have been a woman,” Donny argues as I wince, sitting up from the ER bed.

He’s sitting down, holding an icepack to his own jaw. He was hit across the side of the face with the bat Hollis used to attack us.

“I agree with him,” Elise says on a sigh. “A woman would have gone for the gun. Not used the knife. And by the way, the sheriff is playing this like Hollis was acting on his own accord, and Johnson is backing him, saying they’d already discussed his possible discord with you being here. The director, of course, is saying it sounds like this is one man’s actions, and that we’re safe. He’s still trying to cover this up, even at the cost of our lives.”

She’s furious, and should be.

Lisa clutches my arm from my bedside, easing closer as she brushes her fingers over my cheek. “We’re going to find out if that’s the truth,” she promises.

I jerk away from her touch, and look to the doorway where Lana is standing with Craig. Lisa’s hand falls away completely as Lana glares icy daggers at her, then her gaze softens as she meets my eyes.

She stays on the other side of the room, and my stomach tightens. She had to see all that. She's probably been scared out of her mind.

Craig gauges our silence, and decides to break it. "Our Scarlet Slayer is who saved you," Craig announces, freezing the blood in my veins.

Hadley stands, going to Lana as my girl's gaze returns to Lisa. My still groggy head is struggling to keep up with everything going on.

As Hadley whispers into Lana's ear, Craig's words register.

"What?"

He nods. "It's confirmed. He even left a message."

He hands me his phone, zooming in on the image for me.

Touch him again, and I'll burn the town to the ground with everyone still in it.

"He used the blood of Justin Hollis to write it," Leonard says from the corner, studying me, his eyes flicking over to Lana, then back to me again.

"The fucking hell?" I ask, confused.

"He's protective of us," Craig says on a sigh. "First Hadley, now you and Donny."

"In short, one of the deputies attacked you, and you were saved by a ruthless serial killer who gets off on being stabby," Elise quips.

I look back at Lana, motioning for her to come to me. She looks hesitant at first, but she finally makes her way to me with slow, measured steps. As soon as she's close enough, my arms go around her waist, and she shakes in my grip, her body trembling as she buries her face in my neck.

“You have to go home,” I say softly, squeezing her tighter. “If the sheriff is bold enough to come after me, he’ll come after you too.”

“Unlikely,” Leonard says, watching us with a curious expression. “She’s actually probably safer here than at home, where Johnson could use her against you. He’s not brilliant, but he’s smart enough to have figured out by now that your attachment is deep.”

And again, my job is putting her at risk.

Lana keeps her arms around me and her face in my neck, her grip tightly digging into my back.

She’d have been so much better off if I’d never come into her life.

It’s like we’ve been cursed from the very beginning.

“I need to go check on something,” Leonard says, walking out of the room.

“Could the rest of you give us a minute?” I ask, looking around at everyone.

“No,” Hadley says with a shrug. “It’s too dangerous. Deputy Director Collins may not see how things have escalated, but we do. We’re taking turns watching you.”

“Leonard just walked out alone,” I point out. “I doubt I’m the only target.”

“You’re the primary,” Hadley says immediately. “You’re the one with the power to stand up to Johnson. He outranks us all, but he’s even with you. Collins had to make a damn good case just to send you along and not let the director bulldoze this case completely.”

Hadley’s pissed. Lana is shaking. Everyone in here is on edge and uneasy.

A serial killer had to save me from a sheriff’s deputy. The world is officially upside down.

Lana kisses the side of my neck, a chaste show of affection as she blows out a long breath.

“And we’re in the sheriff’s hospital,” Lana says quietly.

“I’ve checked everything they’ve done before they’ve done it, just to make sure no nurse or doctor tries to do anything really fucking stupid,” Hadley says with a twisted smirk.

My head hurts.

A lot.

Lana pulls back, wiping her eyes quickly before I can see if there’s a tear there. She didn’t even cry the day after her attack by the Boogeyman.

She clears her throat as Leonard walks back in, and his eyes zero in on her face that is definitely blotchy with tears. I need out of here and time alone with her.

I stand, still feeling a little unsteady. Lana and Donny crash to my side, and they help keep me upright as Leonard walks out and comes back in with a wheelchair.

“Just until you get to the car,” Leonard says with a smile when I glare at him.

Not feeling quite up to arguing or leaning on my girlfriend all the way down, I reluctantly accept the chair. Leonard wheels me to the elevator. As soon as we emerge into the lobby, a SUV pulls up with Hadley behind the wheel.

I’m so loopy, that I don’t know how long it took her to get here or how she got by us.

We ride in relative silence back to the cabins, and Leonard deals with the calls from the hospital about us leaving too soon. No one

argued leaving, considering it might have just been a matter of time before they took me out and made it look like an accident.

“Two per cabin. Take shifts staying awake,” Donny says, taking charge while I’m in and out of it, as we arrive at the cabin and start unloading from the SUV.

“I’ll stay with Lana and Logan,” Leonard inserts.

“I’ll stay with them,” Hadley argues.

Leonard points his finger at Hadley. “You stay with Elise. I’ll stay with them. Logan, sober, wouldn’t want you risking yourself, and as you pointed out, he’s the primary target.”

She starts to argue, but I cut her off. “Go with Elise,” I tell her.

She claps her lips shut, then looks to Lana. Something silent passes between them, and Hadley walks away, glaring at Leonard on her way by.

Leonard helps me inside, and Lana tries to help him. I force most of my weight onto Leonard.

“If he gets sick or starts talking funny, come find me immediately,” Leonard tells Lana as they put me to bed like a fucking baby.

“I will,” she says softly, her eyes distant as she runs her hand over my cheek.

“I’ll stay up until sunrise, then I’ll get some sleep. You stay in here with him, and yell if you need help.” He points at the windows in the room. “Two entry points from outside. Pay attention to them in case they get too bold. Don’t be afraid to use Logan’s gun.”

He puts my gun down on the nightstand, and Lana studies it.

She nods absently, her hand still on me, as though she needs reassurance I haven’t disappeared.

“Keep me updated if any new information comes to light,” I tell Leonard before he walks out.

Lana curls up against me, putting her arm around my waist. Leonard’s eyes drop to her as she slides her leg around me too. I have no idea why he finds her so fascinating tonight.

“I will. Tomorrow, anyway. Not tonight. Your head needs some rest.”

As soon as he shuts the door, Lana exhales heavily, and I pounce.

“I’m sorry you had to get entangled in all this again. I want you to go somewhere safe,” I tell her, kissing the top of her head as she snuggles in even closer.

“No,” she states simply. “I’m not leaving you.”

“You have to. If you—”

“Either I stay here with you, or I find somewhere else to stay in town. Your choice,” she says firmly, a hint of anger in her tone.

“Lana, I just want to keep—”

“There’s no such thing as safe, Logan,” she says on a soft breath. “No such thing.”

I’m too out of it to continue arguing, and my eyes shut without my permission. I’ll argue tomorrow.

Chapter 7

My life is a struggle.
—Voltaire

LANA

Leonard's eyes are on me, just as they have been since last night. He watches me make two cups of coffee, and he watches me fix the cups with cream.

"You want a cup?" I ask the watcher.

"I've already made some, but thanks for the offer."

At first I thought he was suspicious, then he left me alone in the room with Logan and also left me with a gun. Then I thought he was a perv, but he turned away abruptly when he walked in the room this morning to check on Logan and saw me in my panties.

So I don't know why he's watching.

Unless I'm just that fucking interesting.

"So you and Logan are pretty serious, yeah?" he asks, lifting the cup of coffee he's drinking. I'm not sure why he's not crashing. The sun has just peeked out, and he's been up all night.

"I think so. At least, I'm serious."

"You don't think he is?"

I need to learn when to shut up.

"I think he is," I say with a tight smile as I turn to face Mr. Watch Me.

He runs a finger over his lips in a pensive manner. “Any family in the DC area?”

I shake my head and return to my task, stirring both coffees.

“Any family at all?”

I shake my head again.

“This is making you uncomfortable, isn’t it?”

“No. As an extremely private person, I love talking to a stranger about my past first thing in the morning after my boyfriend was attacked in a town full of weak and evil people,” I state dryly, holding his gaze.

His eyes widen marginally. “Sorry. Just making conversation. None of us have great conversational skills. Occupational hazard.”

I shrug it off. “Logan was the same when we first met.”

“He stopped pressing for your past? As I said, it’s an occupational hazard.”

Have I mentioned I hate nosy people?

“I told him the important parts. Not everyone enjoys talking about the past,” I say with another shrug. “I’ve told him more than anyone in years. But he doesn’t push for more than I give. It’s one of the things I love about him.”

We stare each other for several uncomfortable minutes. I’m not sure what he’s trying to see.

“Hey.” Logan’s voice has us both jerking our heads to the bedroom doorway where he’s shirtless and moving toward me. His eyes flick to Leonard. “Anything happen while we were out?”

Leonard shakes his head. “All was ghost-town quiet. The sheriff is standing by his promise that Hollis was a bad seed who acted alone, and that he has no idea what set him off. Johnson says he’s

already vetted the rest of the guys, ensuring us none of them are hostile toward our team." Leonard rolls his eyes.

"Amazing. He managed to vet over twenty other deputies since last night, not to mention an extra five police officers," Logan says with no emotion, but a definite suspicious lilt.

"This is the most fucked up shit I've been involved in," Leonard says, his jaw ticking.

"Leave Donny with Lisa today. You ride with me. I'm going to go find Carl Burrows today and get some answers about Robert Evans."

The glass in my hand almost slips, and I curse as coffee sloshes over, scalding my fingers.

Logan grabs some paper towels, and he brings my wounded hand to his face, inspecting it. I feel Leonard's eyes on us, but I ignore it. I don't know or care what his defect is.

Discreetly, I fire off a quick text to Jake—one-handed and without looking at my phone.

My heart almost thudded out of my chest as I raced through the town last night, running faster than I ever have. When I saw Hollis training Logan's own gun on him, something inside me snapped. The killer came out and reveled in spilling his blood even more than I enjoyed killing Lawrence and Tyler.

If Logan hadn't been hurt, I would have dragged the kill out for days.

"Haunted House is tonight in town," Leonard says randomly as Logan kisses my fingers where the coffee burn has already ebbed.

"And?" Logan asks, looking over.

"And Kyle Davenport will be there. Says he 'ain't missing the only good thing in this fucking town because of some cowardly piece of

shit killer.' His words."

Leonard shrugs, his eyes now not on me for a change.

I knew Kyle wouldn't miss the Haunted House. He always takes a girl in there—whether she wants to be there or not—and fucks her in a corner to the sound of screams that get him off.

He's sick like that. It's one of the things that should have given him away long ago, but I didn't see it until it was too late and I was a victim. People just walk by him while he's hurting someone, thinking it's all part of the 'adult' show of the Haunted House. It's the 'Sin House' after all. It's set up to show all the sins in the dark, demented world just outside the lines of Delaney Grove.

They condition kids to be afraid of leaving early on. The adult house is for sixteen and older, terrifying the impressionable minds from early on isn't enough. They need to get the rebellious teens submitting to the terror tenfold, upping the Haunted House to be over-the-top. Rape scenes are even played out. Sometimes they were real.

Lindy was raped in the Haunted House.

Speaking of Lindy, Antonio is already bankrupt, which was faster than promised. She'll be happy to know he's currently losing all his possessions. His car was taken away just yesterday. I got to watch it live on my phone.

The man who called his wife a whore, even though he knew all Kyle was saying was a lie, is finally getting his piece of justice pie. He just wanted to continue to be a 'highly respected' patron of this town, and he cast his wife aside to suffer alone.

Now it's just a waiting game of making his life miserable enough to kill himself.

“He’s a stupid fuck,” Logan mumbles, running his lips over my forehead. It takes me a second to realize he’s talking about Kyle.

“I agree. But the sheriff is sending four deputies with him. Just letting you know,” Leonard says, but his eyes shift to me for an eerily long second.

I ignore his eyes like I have all morning.

Four deputies? Only two will go in with him. Those can be easily dispatched—well, as long as those two are on my kill list. So far, there’s only one deputy who is innocent of the crimes committed ten years ago, and then the two dispatch officers.

The other two deputies will be outside, watching for any suspicious *man.* They’ll never know.

“Grab some sleep. We’ll go see Carl when you’ve had some rest,” Logan tells Leonard, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“I’ll only need about three hours,” Leonard grunts as he stands.

While he’s leaving us, I study Logan’s temple where he has four stitches.

Logan doesn’t say anything else before his lips come down on mine, surprising me with an intense, deep, bone-crumbling kiss. I lean into him as he lifts me up, putting me on the counter. When he steps in between my legs, I spread them wider in invitation.

Someone knocks on the door, and our kiss is broken, leaving both of us panting as I put my forehead on his chest.

“Yeah?” Logan calls out, staying put where he is.

“Just making sure you’re okay,” Lisa says through the door. “I have coffee if you want to unlock the door.”

She really wants to be cut.

“I’ve got coffee, and I’m fine. Thanks,” Logan says shortly before kissing me again, pulling me to him by my hips.

I break the kiss as Lisa knocks again, but I ignore her calling his name.

“Are you really okay?” I ask him, ignoring the pang of panic for how close I was to being too late.

“Yes,” he says softly, brushing his lips over mine. “Go away, Lisa,” he adds louder.

She huffs loud enough to be heard, but Logan lifts me, carrying me to the bedroom again. Our room is right beside where Leonard is trying to sleep, so I aim for quiet when Logan puts me down on the bed.

I hiss out a breath when he starts tugging my shorts off me.

“Leonard is—”

“Already snoring by now. He sleeps like the dead, and won’t hear a thing.”

I grin against his lips when he kisses me again, and my shorts fall off my legs. I keep kissing him even as he basically tears my panties away. And our lips remain fused together when he finally thrusts in, taking me slowly, longingly, and reminding me how much I love him.

“I love you,” I whisper into the air so quietly that I don’t think he hears it.

I just hope our love is truly strong enough to conquer all.

Sweaty and breathless, he thrusts in over and over, and I claw his skin, holding onto him, needing every second of closeness I can drag out. Our lips clash, unable to find a rhythm for a smooth kiss, and he pumps his hips harder, hitting that spot inside me that sends me spiraling and has me calling out his name.

When his hips still, he nuzzles the side of my face, shuddering as he finds his own release.

“I love everything about you,” he says softly, brushing his lips over my jaw.

Grinning, I hurry to the bathroom to clean up, and he slaps my ass on my way. I’m slowly calming down now that he seems okay.

As I exit the bathroom, the faint music of a familiar song and the distinct voice of a too familiar woman hits me like a ton of bricks.

Hush, little baby, don’t say a word. Momma’s gonna buy you a mocking bird.

I turn the corner, looking in on the living room as Logan studies the TV, and tears fill my eyes as my heart plummets to my toes. My mother’s smiling face is on the screen. She’s happy, oblivious to the harsh future ahead.

I remember this night so clearly. She died before she could see how bad this town got.

And if that mocking bird don’t sing, Momma’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.

She pulls out a gaudy piece of costume jewelry that resembles a diamond ring, and hands it to the young girl at her side. The young girl with bright green eyes and a little tremor in her hand, because she’s on stage and scared. But the girl’s mother soothes her, cupping her chin, making the child focus only on her and not the audience.

And if that diamond ring don’t shine—

The video pauses, and my heart stutters in my chest as Logan swings his gaze to me.

“You okay?” he asks, studying me with a frown.

Clearing my throat, I nod. “Yeah,” I say hoarsely, hearing the strain in my tone. “Who’s that?”

I point to the frozen screen with my mother’s smiling face.

“Jasmine Evans. I’m trying to see anyone in the audience who might have been more enamored than anyone else, since the unsub is using this night to terrorize the town.”

He looks back at the screen, presses play, and I watch my mother sing to the young, innocent child I used to be. I’m smiling up at her on the screen now, no longer aware of all the eyes from the audience. She could do that—soothe me with just her eyes.

A tear trickles down my cheek when she bends, kissing my forehead in the old film. She was the best at this role. It was the same play every year, and my mother spent three of those years on that stage because people were entranced by her voice and emotion.

She should have been an actress and spread the same love and joy throughout the world with just her smile.

I used to want to be just like her.

Until them.

Until they ruined me and turned me into this.

The mirror still shows the same eyes, but all else is different. It’s like seeing a different person. A person who has devoted her life to real justice.

“The film just stays focused on her. I can’t seem to get a view of the audience,” Logan says, interrupting my thoughts as he fast-forwards through the footage of my better memories.

“No one could look away from her,” I say to myself, wiping a tear from my eye.

He doesn’t hear me, and I hold back the inner plea for him to watch the entire thing, to see how incredible my mother was. To get a glimpse of who I might have been.

But I simply bite my tongue when he ejects the DVD and puts in a new one. My stomach roils when I see the footage of my father’s trial replacing the sweet memories of my mother on the screen.

As he watches, I return to the bedroom. It’s like I told Hadley—the mind is just too fragile for some visual stimulants, and I know my limits.

Chapter 8

The secret to being a bore…is to tell everything.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

“Where’s Craig?” Leonard asks, breaking the silence in the car.

“Conveniently, the director called him to aid in a media thing upstate. Johnson is currently handling all media for this case.”

He mutters something under his breath before adding, “It’s pissing me off how obvious it is what they’re doing, yet no one is helping us stop it.”

“We just need evidence. We also need the entire story.”

“It’d be a lot easier to piece together this puzzle if our killer would just spell it all out for us. It’s obvious he wants us to know the truth,” Leonard grumbles.

He’s been lost in thought for most of this trip.

“He wants us to figure out the truth for ourselves. He thinks we’ll be on his side, considering he’s been saving us.”

Leonard turns to face me. “Are you conflicted?”

I shake my head. “No. I understand what happened ten years ago was beyond fucked up, and I have no sympathy to the victims we’ve found so far, but playing judge, jury, and executioner is not excusable. I also know how these cases go. It starts off as revenge, individuals getting targeted. But it turns into a massacre when the

unsub devolves rapidly, and anything at all that's perceived as a threat is killed as collateral damage."

He looks back out the window. He's seen these cases too.

"What if this one was different?"

"What?" I ask, confused.

He faces me again. "There were rare cases where the revenge killers actually killed just those who had wronged them. No one else was caught in the crosshairs."

"Very few," I remind him. "And almost all end with a shootout between law enforcement and the unsub. Still can't play judge, jury, and executioner, regardless."

"Most all revenge seekers are seeking revenge for themselves. It's what causes the psychotic break—being too close to the triggers when the emotions finally take over," he goes on. "We profiled this unsub as being one to avenge for someone else. He could have separation and even be able to form attachments, unlike other revenge killers, since I doubt it's a proxy killer who is suffering a delusional paradigm."

I heave out a long, weary breath. "I get the confliction you're dealing with. Especially in this case, given what we've already learned and now seen. But innocent people will die if we don't stop him. No one has the right to take the law into their own hands," I say calmly, even though a silent argument in my mind contests my own words.

He cuts his gaze away before replying, "They tried to get help. They tried to seek justice. They were denied."

"They?" I ask curiously.

“The unsub,” he states flatly. “I don’t know if I should keep referring to the unsub as *him,* since you said you feel it was a woman.”

“You believe me?” No one else has.

“You saw Hollis. You saw Lana. What made you believe the unsub was a woman when you never saw a face? Men can be small as well, and I strongly believe in counter forensics in all cases with an unsub this organized. He or she could have easily masked their true size and weight with the right counter measures.”

I grow quiet, letting a chill creep in over me. No one at all has even considered believing me.

“Men can be small,” I say in agreement.

“How small are we talking?”

“Someone as short as Lana.”

He clears his throat. “That’s specific,” he says under his breath. “Still doesn’t explain why you think it’s a woman.”

My mind goes back to the blurry images of the small frame taking down Hollis, landing on top of him.

“I swear I heard a feminine laugh. It was cold and taunting, and almost enjoying the killing part.”

He shifts beside me, turning a little pale.

“Really?”

“This unsub may be somehow projecting obsessively onto Victoria or Marcus Evans, creating the illusion of either being them or being involved with them. It would make the most sense, considering we’ve ruled out the few friends they had in this town. So don’t rule out a proxy.”

“An unsub who can fight, kill, and meticulously plan murders with counter forensics is too organized to be killing as a proxy. Killing as a proxy would indicate a psychotic break,” Leonard argues. “And obviously he or she is still rational enough to show patience and control, which would immediately rule out any sort of psychotic break.”

I grow quiet, thinking of all the contradictions this unsub has left us with. It all fits, and none of it fits at the same time.

It’s as though he or she needs their own profile. Even considering it to be a woman is a direct confliction with a female serial killer profile because of the torture.

“Remember the case we worked in San Antonio six years ago?” Leonard finally asks, his tone thoughtful as he stares out the window.

I don’t even have to ask for details to refresh my mind. “The father who killed the five guys who raped his daughter at a frat party.”

He nods, still lost inside his own mind.

“He also went on to the campus police,” I remind him. “He killed two of them before we caught him.”

“The campus police never filed a report. When we interviewed them, they said poor girls get drunk and call rape all the time at frat parties, trying to get a settlement out of the rich guys,” Leonard says, his hands turning to fists. “I have a sister. Anytime something like this happens, I think of her.”

“Caroline can take care of herself,” I remind him. “She’d obliterate any guy who tried to touch her.”

“Which is why it was stupid to rule out a female killer based on the fact these were all fit men who were taken down physically. My

sister has been in twenty different competitions and has won several of them. She could easily overpower any of these guys," he says thoughtfully. "If a woman knew what she was going up against and had the forethought to prepare counter forensics, she'd know our profile would be sexist enough to rule out a female."

My lips purse. I'd argue this if it wasn't for the fact I saw our small unsub. I heard her feminine laughter.

"Lindy May Wheeler was in her kindergarten classes during some of the kill times," he goes on. "I checked last night."

Lindy May was too timid to be a calculated killer. I never even considered her.

"If someone had ever hurt Caroline like this, and she never saw justice, I don't know that I'd be any better than the killer we're trying to catch," he says quietly. "Albert Rawlings let himself be killed when he'd finished. His gun was empty when he pointed it at the police who'd cornered him. He was done. He never planned on killing anyone else. And he forced the police to kill him because he had nothing left to do or live for."

Blowing out a weary breath, I think back to that case. It was a rare instance where there was no massacre.

"Caroline learned how to use her smaller frame and weight to her advantage against a larger opponent, as well as all the weaknesses on a body she could exploit. She also learned a lot of control when learning various forms of martial arts," Leonard goes on. "It's not just a strengthening of the body; it's also a strengthening of the mind. This unsub could have been training her body for the fight, but she might have also been training her mind against the impending

psychotic break. It's obvious she did all her research, so it makes sense."

If that's the case, this unsub is ten times more organized than we assumed.

"The two people missing right now—Kevin and Anthony—are probably already dead if the unsub is here with us," he continues. "She started sprinting through the kills so she could be here with us when the time came."

"Even left one alive to return to," I add.

"So she has enough control to put a pin in her agenda just to join us in this town, possibly even watch over us."

Watch over us…

"Which is another confliction with the profile," I say on a long sigh.

"Exactly. Revenge is more important and the primary focus for revenge killers, yet our girl comes to make sure we don't get caught unawares by a town she knew was corrupt enough to try and kill an agent of the FBI."

"So the truth is more important than the revenge," I say aloud as we bounce theories off each other.

"Or the unsub is firmly grounded in reality and doesn't want to let anyone else innocent die by the hands of this town."

His words speak to a mentality the unsub would be incapable of if this is revenge. Again, nothing but conflictions no matter how we profile.

"Let's focus on what we have. The unsub has been in town for as long as we have, yet has only killed once," Leonard says as I drive. "And that was to save you."

"And Donny," I remind him.

He clears his throat. “The unsub has enough control to let us find out what we need to know, and hold off on killing more,” he adds.

“Only because Kyle is possibly next, and he has around-the-clock protection. He hasn’t even left his home since this started.”

He nods slowly.

“Our unsub is leaving messages to taunt the town, and using the voice of Jasmine Evans to remind them of how the corruption started.”

I take a turn, and he continues.

“I spoke to Lindy May last night,” he says, surprising me. “When I told her what we’d learned about the past, she told me that I only knew about three of Kyle Davenport’s victims. That he was a serial rapist and possibly a sociopath.”

I pull up at the curb and shut off the engine as I turn to face him.

“He’s the sheriff’s son, and they’ve kept us from getting an interview.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “We’re profilers who could see through him. If he’s someone who gets off on raping women…”

He lets the words trail off.

“Then he could be the original killer,” I groan, then curse before punching the steering wheel.

“May be why our unsub has held off on killing him.”

My eyes flit to the innocuous blue house that sets idly between two white ones. This town is outside of the sheriff’s jurisdiction. Something tells me Carl Burrows moved here for a reason.

“Let’s deal with this before we go digging into Kyle,” I tell Leonard.

“Sheriff Cannon and Johnson are going to block us from speaking to Kyle. I don’t get why Johnson would cover up a true killer. Even at his worst, he’s still a fucking agent.”

“Because he fucked up. His ego is more important than justice could ever be,” I say as I get out.

Kyle would have been nineteen at the time. Nineteen seems too disorganized to be the killer from back then, but he fits the profile in every other way.

Unless Lindy May is right and he’s a sociopath. We’re looking for a psychopath. Sociopaths can’t imitate empathy or anything else. Psychopaths can.

As we walk up the sidewalk, I notice someone peering out of the window, watching us as we approach the door. The curtains pop closed and sway from the disturbance, and the door swings open before we even make it to the stoop.

He’s short, has a touch of oriental in his bloodline, given the shape of his eyes and cheekbones. His hair is dark and long, tied back in a ponytail. He looks like he doesn’t get out too much either, given the disarray of his wrinkled clothing and the pungent smell of body odor I get a whiff of from here.

“Are you SSA Logan Bennett and Agent Stan Leonard?” he asks as we step onto his small stoop.

Creasing my lips to hide my surprise, I hold up my ID, as does Leonard.

Burrows adjusts his glasses on his nose as he reads our names, then he looks up and then gestures for us to hurry inside. I resist the urge to cover my nose when we walk in. Old food is lying haphazardly around, covered in flies and sealed in aquariums.

Various other aquariums have other things inside them, though my stomach is reeling too much for me to focus on it.

Leonard coughs and covers his nose.

“Your sense of smell is the weakest sense. Give it a few minutes, and you won’t smell it anymore,” Burrows assures us as he leads us through his house.

“What is all this?” Leonard asks, coughing back a gag.

“I study the decaying process and the insect activity that follows. It’s part of the forensics program I run to help identify time of death in hard to date cases.”

“In your home?” Leonard asks, gagging again.

“My lab has several other experiments going on, and I can monitor things better from home anyway.”

“How did you know we were coming?” I ask him as we move through his kitchen, where several more ‘experiments’ are underway.

It smells like death met a rotten asshole and had five puke babies.

Burrows shudders, popping a piece of nicotine gum and chewing it frantically.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” he asks us seriously, looking around nervously.

Leonard tilts his head. “No, why?”

“Because I do. I’m a man of science, but I believe there are too many unexplained variables in the course of a lifetime to believe things are as cut and dry as science implies. A psychic actually solved one case I was involved in one time.”

Confused, I lean against the wall, letting him ramble.

“He said the killer had one eye. He saw the killer through the eyes of the dead victim, and he described him down to the eye and snake tattoo on his neck. Police found the guy, and they also found his next victim in the trunk of the car. She was still alive. And no, the psychic was in no way linked to him. He actually helped solve many cases. He called himself a medium, but I still refer to him as a psychic. Because psychics see shit the normal person can’t, right?”

I look over to Leonard, and he looks back at me.

As one, our gaze swings back to the looney toon doctor who has apparently spent too much time in solitude with rotting food. I’m not sure what an extended period of time in an environment like this would do to one’s psyche. But I bet we’re looking at the product of that answer.

“Why are we talking about psychics?” I ask him warily, trying and failing to follow his thought process.

“I tried calling him today. He said he’d need a victim to touch or something involved with the killer. I had him over, and he touched my wall. He told me nothing about the killer. Instead, he told me SSA Logan Bennett and Agent Stan Leonard would be on their way. Said you’d be here within ten minutes. He said to tell you everything I knew about Robert Evans.”

Leonard immediately pulls out his phone. “What’s his name?” he demands.

“Neil Mullins. He’s clean. He’s not your guy. He’s a true medium, and he helps solve cases that can’t otherwise be solved. But he said he refused to be involved with this one, because the killer is after souls too dark for him to save. He said there are souls begging him

to help the killer, and the darker souls were trapped by the lighter ones, being held down. He's only had that on a very rare occasion."

Leonard lowers the phone, eyeing Burrows like he's lost his mind.

"You can check him out. He's been helping the FBI for a really long time," Burrows adds.

Leonard walks away, probably going to do just that and find out if this guy has any ties to Delaney Grove or our victims.

We told no one we were coming here, other than our team.

"Why your wall?" I ask Burrows.

He points above my head, and I turn, stepping back to see the red words that have been hiding behind me.

"It started appearing one letter at a time this morning right in front of my eyes," he says on a shaky whisper.

The time for secrets is over. Tell my story. Save your soul.

"I never wanted to keep Robert Evans's death details a secret. That was all the sheriff and Doc Barrontine. Not me. Not me," he says rapidly, his fear, caffeine and nicotine causing his words to rush together.

"What details?" I ask, turning to face him.

"I don't have any proof. I remember the case. I was doing my residency there. That case derailed my ambitions to be a coroner and turned me into a forensics scientist. Science isn't politics. It's organically dirty, not sullied by people. It's simple math and truth, and all I have to do is deliver the facts. I never wanted to lie, SSA Bennett. I swear to you that's the truth."

"He checks out," Leonard says, sounding confused as he walks back in. "Hell, he's been in Mexico helping solve a string of murders near the border for the past two months."

A medium. I've worked with them before, and they're always crooks or attention seekers who do more harm than good by filing away unfounded facts that derail or sidetrack the investigation.

Yet this guy knew us by name? Hell, Elise doesn't even know Leonard's first name. He keeps a lid on that, because the name came from his father, and there's a lot of beef there.

"We'll look into him more later," I say, gesturing at the message above us.

Leonard's breath catches.

Our killer knew we'd come here. He might not have named us, but he knew we'd come today.

He's watching us.

That's how he knew Donny and I were being attacked.

That's how he's leaving these messages without being seen.

"I know it was the ghost of Evans. I watched that appear just this morning," Burrows rambles on. "He left these," he says, picking up a pack of small nails.

I hiss out a breath. "He left these? You're a forensics scientist! You should know not to touch evidence," I growl, grabbing a glove and an evidence bag.

He tosses them to the top of the microwave carelessly, scratching nervously at his arms. "Ghosts don't leave prints," he says, chewing endlessly on that gum.

"Tell us what you know about Robert Evans," I say to the fidgeting scientist who is popping yet another piece of nicotine gum into his mouth.

I label the bag, and Leonard snaps a picture of it and the words over the doorway.

“Those are the exact same nails they used on him.”

A piece of the puzzle falls into place. “What?” I ask, confused.

I realize there are a mixture of nails in the bag, and not just the small ones. Longer ones like we found in the stomach of one victim are also in here.

“They fed him nails. Made him swallow them,” Burrows says, swallowing hard like he can taste the nails. “Sheriff Cannon shoved the nails into Robert’s mouth himself. Robert was crying, begging them to stop, still pleading his innocence. I tried,” he says quickly, looking me in the eyes. “I tried to stop them. One of his deputies pistol whipped me and left me bleeding in the corner.”

He swallows the gum, and he pops in two more pieces, chewing just as vigorously as Leonard slowly lowers himself to a chair.

“The nails sliced through his esophagus. He was spitting up blood and screaming in pain. They took out their batons and did terrible things to his backside then. They used the batons to rape him repeatedly, held his face against the table as he bled out from both ends. The sheriff then beat him the rest of the way to death once everyone had their turn at depravity.”

He chokes on his gum, and he spits it out into his hand, leaving a slobbery, sticky mess until he dumps it into the trash.

“I told the leading agent back then. Johnson was his name. Miller Johnson. He said it was small town justice, and he had real killers to track down.”

Leonard and I exchange a look, and fury creases his expression. *This* is what Miller has been covering.

“He knew,” Burrows goes on, biting his nails now as he shifts his weight from one foot to another and back again. “He knew before it

happened. There was no surprise on his face when I told him. They came to me later that night, and they told me if I wanted to tell what I saw again, they'd repeat the performance on me. I left town, finished out my residency elsewhere, and moved into the field of forensics. Bugs are safer than people."

Leonard blows out a long breath, and I suppress my urge to find Johnson and beat the actual fuck out of him.

"He was innocent, you know?" Burrows says, peering over at me again. "Evans, I mean. He didn't kill those women. Couldn't have. The serial killer was left handed, and Evans was right handed. His left hand was broken after a kid slammed his hand in a locker as a joke. Kyle Davenport, to be more specific."

My blood chills more.

"Victoria Evans broke up with Kyle because of that. She yelled at him in front of the school. Three months later, Robert Evans was convicted of those murders. Quickest trial process in the history of murder cases. And two kills occurred the very week after his left hand was broken. He couldn't have been the murderer. But that didn't matter. They wouldn't listen to the science. They only listened to that pompous prick Agent Johnson. Sheriff Cannon just wanted someone to persecute."

He pops in a fresh piece of gum and wipes his hands on his wrinkly, smelly shirt.

"Who else would know about what happened to Evans?" I ask him.

"No one who would talk. Most of the deputies were involved. And Kyle Davenport, of course. He was there. I heard rumors he did

basically the same thing to the kids, only he didn't bring the nails for that night."

Kyle Davenport seems to be at the root of every problem.

"Any chance he was left handed?"

"Kyle?" Burrows asks, his face paling. When I nod, he barely whispers, "Yes."

Nineteen. Nineteen is just too young of an age to be so methodical as the original killer. Each kill was filled with rage, according to the reports. A temper tantrum could send a sociopath into a homicidal rage, if Lindy was right and not just abusing the word she used to describe him.

If he'd been ten to twenty years older, he'd fit the profile perfectly.

"We need to find a way to speak with Kyle Davenport," Leonard says grimly.

"Right now," I add.

"I'll call that medium on the way back to Delaney Grove," he says as we head toward the door. "And I'll send Hadley over here to see if she can pull anything from the house," I say on a sigh, closing the door to Burrows's home behind me.

"Doubtful. Our unsub never leaves any trace."

"Is that all?" Burrow shouts from behind us, and I turn to see his head poking through the door.

"For now."

"Can I get a hotel room? I don't feel safe right now."

Since I don't feel like making a scientist see a ghost story as ridiculous, I just nod.

Leonard seems distant, thoughtful even.

"What?" I ask him as we get into the car.

I don’t crank it, because I lift my iPad, bringing up pictures from the previous crime scenes.

He turns to face me. “We haven’t know we were coming here for too long. Our unsub would have had to hit sometime between our decision and our arrival at the home today.”

I nod slowly. “I thought I had something figured out, but apparently that was wrong, because now it’s impossible,” he sighs.

“What?” I ask, curious, my fingers hovering over the screen.

“Nothing that sounds sane anymore. Guess it was all just in my head. What are you looking for?” He gestures toward my iPad.

“The unsub knew Donny and I were being attacked. The unsub knew we were coming today. The unsub has known every move of his or her victims. This unsub is a watcher. There are eyes on us somewhere, and—”

My words cut out when I notice the small holes. I barely remembered them because they seemed so unimportant.

“Each house has these in almost every room,” I tell Leonard. “Except for some of the later kills the unsub sprinted through.” I gesture toward the small holes the size of a nail head.

“Too small to be a camera,” he says.

“We’ve already suspected the unsub of a much higher intelligence. What if she has this sort of technology? It’d explain how she managed to save me in time last night.”

“You’re just saying *she* now,” he notes.

“Everything in me is saying it was a woman.”

“I believe you,” he says absently.

“You lack the conviction in your tone that you had on the way down here.”

I put the car in drive and push my iPad away. Knowing the unsub is watching us is actually a good thing. Hadley can tap into the video stream if she can find the signal, and possibly even back-hack the unsub to find her.

“Like I said,” Leonard mumbles under his breath, “thought I knew something else.”

Chapter 9

There are truths which are not for all men, nor for all times.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

Two deputies block us the second we step up on the front porch of Kyle Davenport's home.

"Sorry, Agents, but no one is going in without the sheriff's permission," the one in front of me says.

Chad Briggs. I remember him.

I just smirk.

"Unless you guys want me calling more of my guys in because you're impeding a federal investigation, I suggest you step out of the way."

Briggs takes a step toward me, a dark challenge in his eyes. "SSA Johnson is the lead on your end. If he wants to come chat with Kyle, I'll step down. But we're taking the threat on his life seriously, and you're not stepping—"

His words end on a grunt when I grab his wrist and twist, sending him face first into the side of the house. Leonard pulls his gun when the other deputy stupidly tries to make a grab for his own weapon.

"Let me be very clear here," I say to Briggs, wrenching his arm tighter behind him and making him cry out. "I'll speak to whoever the fuck I want to speak to, considering your guys tried to take me out last night. And if you're smart, you'll keep your mouth shut until I'm

gone. Or I'll call in every fucking favor I'm owed inside the FBI to get an entire army of agents in this town, telling them about how the corrupt little fuckwad county deputies are trying to take down a federal agent. Now, do you want to back down, or should I start making all those phone calls."

He stops struggling, and I feel him go rigid.

"Yeah. Think about what you'd do if one of your guys was targeted by an outsider. I have friends like that too, Deputy."

He curses, and the other guy turns and heads inside, calling for Kyle as Leonard holsters his weapon.

Briggs rubs his newly injured wrist, and I nudge him, forcing him inside in front of us. I'd rather talk to Kyle alone, but I don't want them calling the sheriff in like an attack dog before I get a few words in.

"Kyle!" the other deputy shouts again.

"Yeah. Yeah. Coming," says a voice from down the hall.

Kyle Davenport emerges, wearing nothing but a towel, and an arched eyebrow. "The fuck are you?"

He's leaner than the other victims, but still solid, as though he works out but doesn't want bulk. His hair is dark and hanging almost over his dark eyes. He's tall, a lot like me.

"How about I ask you some questions," I say with a smirk.

"These are some of the FBI guys," the other deputy grumbles.

"Thought Dad said to keep those fuck sticks away from me," Kyle drawls, completely unaffected by our presence.

He drops to a chair, still just wearing a towel.

"What you want with me?" he asks indifferently.

“We actually know quite a bit about you. Just wanted to get a read on the man who raped and murdered two kids when he was only nineteen. A man who also participated in a brutal assault a few nights before,” I toss out there.

Kyle’s lips twitch, but both deputies gasp.

“Hell no! You said you just wanted to talk. Not come in here and accuse him of murder,” Briggs shouts, lifting his phone.

Kyle just eyes me, his head tilting carelessly. He thinks he’s untouchable. Not even a flicker of emotion is on his face. He’s a sociopath. Not a psychopath.

He’s not our guy.

“I have all I need, Deputy,” I say as I stand.

They immediately start calling the cops, but Kyle speaks just as I get to the door.

“That sweet little brunette in town… That your girl, *Agent?”* Kyle asks, smirking at me when I turn around.

“Yeah.” The word is said with ease, not letting him see the rage simmering close to the surface.

He licks his lips, still smirking. “Better keep her close. Girl like that might get snatched up in a town full of bachelors.”

He expects me to lash out, probably wants me to. The veiled threat is meant to rattle me for his pleasure. It takes every ounce of effort I have not to let him win.

“Funny. I was just thinking how Lana would probably make you wish you’d never been born,” I say carelessly.

Leonard relaxes at my side, following my lead as he forces his posture to exhibit a calmness.

“Women love me,” Kyle goads. “They love everything I do to them. I bet she’d like it too.”

Leonard steps in before I can lose my cool.

“I guess you don’t watch the news, do you?” Leonard asks him, holding the door open for our exit.

“Not much time for the news,” Kyle drawls.

“Figured,” Leonard goes on. “Or you’d know that Lana is the one who killed the Boston serial killer known as the Boogeyman.”

Kyle’s smirk vanishes, and he studies us, probably searching for a lie.

“With his own knife,” I add, holding a smile that relays a darkness I’m not used to feeling.

“After he attacked her,” Leonard goes on. “He was twice her size and had raped and murdered several women. She beat the shit out of him and stabbed him, ended his life when he came for her.”

With that, Leonard walks out, and I force myself to do the same. Yeah, he exaggerated the story, but Kyle wasn’t smirking when I turned back around.

“He won’t touch her now,” Leonard says quietly.

“I should get her the fuck out of this town,” I say in a tone just barely above a whisper as we get into the vehicle, not looking back.

With all the driving, it’s already getting late now. The sun isn’t far from setting, and all I want to do is hold Lana against me and feel her safe.

“Kyle Davenport may or may not have been our serial killer back then, but I guarantee you he’s going to be one soon, if he’s not already,” Leonard says as we drive back toward the cabins.

“And he just threatened my girlfriend.”

“Like I said, he won’t do anything. Telling him she’s not some weak girl he can dominate didn’t settle well with him.”

“And if he perceives it as a challenge?” I point out.

“He’s not interested in a challenge. He wants easy,” he says on a sigh. “Lana is safer with us than alone somewhere else right now.”

I shift in my seat, driving faster through the town. “My job keeps putting her at risk.”

“Occupational hazard,” he says grimly. “She can handle it, Logan. She may be one of the few who can.”

“But how selfish is it of me to ask her to handle it?”

He doesn’t get to answer, because we’re pulling up at the cabin where the sheriff and Johnson are standing outside and waiting on me. Lana is guarding the door, her hip cocked as she smirks at them when we get out.

“Sheriff, you can say all you want, but you’re not getting by me without putting your hands on me. If you do that, I’ll press charges for assault. I don’t care if it’s your cabin. There’s a little thing called the law that you can’t search this place when it’s occupied by guests, unless said guests give you permission. I can pull it up on my phone for you, if you’d like.”

She’s poised, staring them down, and Johnson’s jaw is tight.

“You have no right to—”

“What the hell is going on here?” I demand, stepping up on the porch.

Lana wags her finger at the sheriff when he tries to barge by her. Somehow, she manages to block his path, despite his size.

“Don’t want to touch me sheriff. My phone is recording every bit of this, and I’ll make it go live.”

He looks around, and she smiles. “I’m not stupid enough to leave it in plain sight.”

“I said what the hell is going on!”

I step in front of the sheriff, shielding Lana. “You crossed a line today,” the sheriff growls. “And I got a call that you were seen buying drugs off Lenny Tolls, the local dealer. So I’m here to search your room. When I find something, I’ll be shipping your ass back to your superiors to deal with.”

“You’re fucking kidding me with this, right?” Leonard snaps.

Unbelievable. They’re getting desperate and overreaching now that I’ve talked to his son.

“I already told them that if they let Elise and them search their guys, they could come in and look,” Lana states with a sweet smile but daring eyes.

The sheriff glares at her, and my hand goes to her hip, trying to tug her back. I don’t want him viewing her as a target, damn it.

“Why would I let you fucking search me?” the sheriff barks.

“Because if you have something you plan on planting in here, then it’d be smart to have you searched. If you have nothing to hide, then why not let them search you?” Lana goes on, refusing to just shut up as she shoulders her way to my side again.

“You need a leash on her, Bennett. Now step aside if you have nothing to hide,” Johnson barks.

Lana starts to open her mouth, and I slide my hand over it, tugging her closer. She doesn’t fight me, but she does lick my fucking hand like an errant child.

“Let them search you, and I will,” I say with a shrug.

Lana relaxes at my side. She's fucking brilliant and seriously observant.

Leonard restrains a grin.

"I'm not letting you search me," the sheriff growls.

"Then I'm not letting you in here."

"It's my motherfucking cabin."

"That the bureau has paid for and leased it until this case is solved. It's listed under my name. To gain access, you need my permission, or a search warrant, that will have to go through several channels, considering I'm on an active case that involves corruption in this town. You'd be surprised how many people would come pay a visit when accusations like this so conveniently pop up."

The sheriff takes a step back, his eyes narrowing to slits. He points a finger at me. "Stay the fuck away from my son. This ain't over. I'll get you out of my town, boy."

"It's SSA Bennett to you, Sheriff. Good luck with that. I'll be busy proving you're a corrupt, murdering, lying son of a bitch while you work on getting me out."

He pales a little, and Lana smirks against my hand; I can feel it. Apparently she's proud.

She should be.

He could have caused a shit-ton of problems with false bullshit getting planted in here and 'found' by him.

Johnson glares daggers at me.

"This is *my* fucking case! You're only here as a courtesy!" Johnson snarls.

"This is *my* fucking team. You're only here because you're covering your ass. The director can only do so much for you,

Johnson. It's only a matter of time before people take notice of the attention he's paying you and this case. Don't push your luck."

He curses, and I watch as he and the sheriff turn and walk away. Leonard visibly relaxes, then looks over at Lana.

"How'd you know what he was going to do?" he asks her.

She shrugs as I release her mouth completely, and wipe my wet hand on the leg of my jeans.

"Saw it on some crime episode one time. The bad cop got rid of the good one by framing him with drugs. Figured it was a good possibility in a town like this, and I didn't want to risk it."

Elise steps onto the porch. "Hadley's inside with a camera. She recorded the entire thing. Since Lana is staying here as well, she had the right to block their entry. She did good."

Elise says this as though she's surprised.

I cup Lana's chin and tilt her head up before staring down at her eyes. "Don't fuck with either of them. The last thing I need is a target painted on your back."

"I wasn't fucking with them. I was simply stating my rights as a citizen of the United States," she says innocently. She even bats her fucking eyelashes, and Leonard snorts, turning away as his body shakes with silent laughter.

"I'm serious," I tell her sternly.

She continues to bat those eyelashes over faux innocent eyes. "I'll never just bend over and take it, SSA Bennett. Unless I'm bending over for you, of course."

Leonard does lose it now, laughing as he walks away. I groan as her lips etch up in a smile. Lisa mutters something, surprising me with her presence as she steps away from the side of the cabin.

Lana battles a smile unsuccessfully, and I roll my eyes.

“Hadley, you’re staying here tonight. The rest of us have somewhere else to be. Keep your eyes open,” I tell her while tugging Lana against me.

“Always got my eyes open, Bennett,” Hadley quips as she stands and walks toward the door.

As she steps out, I push Lana against the wall and crush my lips to hers, shutting her up before she can talk more. She moans into my mouth, gripping my shirt to pull me closer.

And I decide my plans can wait.

Chapter 10

Chance is a word void of sense; nothing can exist without a cause.

—Voltaire

LANA

“Do you believe in coincidence?” I ask Jake as I prop my feet up on the dash of his car.

We’re lurking in the car, parked in the shadows, and watching the long line form for the one-night-only Sin House. You’d think people would realize this little one-night show gets more action than anything in town all year long. It should attest to the fact the sick people around here are dark and demented from years of oppression.

“Coincidence? Yes.”

“Coincidences as big as ours?”

He sighs hard. “What’s this about, Lana? You’re seriously starting to worry me.”

I toy with the ends of my hair, staring down at it while we wait.

“Marcus always believed that nothing happened by chance. That everything was interweaved in fate’s plan, and that there was a purpose for everything.”

“What purpose is there in what happened ten years ago to your entire family and the only man I’ve ever loved?” He asks the question calmly, but he’s good at hiding his anger.

“I didn’t say it was a good purpose,” I tell him softly, reaching over to lace our fingers together.

He squeezes my hand and inhales deeply.

“If it hadn’t been our family, it would have been another,” I go on.

He lays his head back, staring down the end of his nose at the ever-growing line to the Sin House.

“What would Marcus say the reason was?” he asks, though his voice is rasp.

“You knew him just as well as I did. If not better. You tell me,” I go on, squeezing his hand this time.

His lips tense for a moment, then finally he speaks. “If he’d survived, you and I wouldn’t have had the anger to dig into the darkness and do what it took to reap revenge. If your father hadn’t been targeted, another man and his family would have been.”

“And not everyone has the ability to go dark enough to slice men’s cocks off several times and torture them for days without losing all sense of humanity,” I add with a shrug.

He laughs under his breath, shaking his head.

“Yes. He’d definitely point that out, and he’d say it almost just like that. He’d also say that no one would have the determination to see it through like you and me. He’d point out that I learned code for this very reason. That I learned tech for this very reason.”

My eyes settle on Logan as he walks by, looking around the line like he’s searching for someone or something. We’re perfectly hidden here amongst the other cars, and there’s a sensor to alert us if someone gets too close.

My bestie is awesomely paranoid like that.

“He’d tell us that Kyle Davenport might be the worst fucking person in the world and get away with it if I hadn’t been the one to survive and come back to collect his debt,” I say more seriously.

“And he’d say that the sheriff would get away with just as much, and no one would ever stand up to him,” he adds, the same serious tone.

“What would he say about Logan?” I ask as Logan lifts his phone, probably trying to find a teammate.

They’re waiting for Kyle, probably planning to watch him and see if anyone pays him any attention. I’ve already laid eyes on him. He’s right in the middle of the line, waiting his turn.

My stomach roils every time I see his face, so I refuse to keep looking. This will be the hardest one to find control. I’ll want to slice the flesh from his body over and over and over… Rage will be evident.

Unless I completely skin the fucker.

The haunted house is not really a house at all. It’s four large trailers that have holes cut in the fronts and backs, and they’re wedged together on the street, supported by blocks underneath. They’ll be wheeled back tomorrow, stored away until next year.

I doubt there will be a next year.

Kyle runs a hand through his dark hair, squeezing the ass of the girl with him who doesn’t look happy to be with him. He was too rough all those years ago when I stupidly dated him. I can only imagine he’s worse now, given the shiner on her eye.

Forcing my eyes away, I turn to Jake, waiting for him to answer. He looks lost in thought, and I start to think he never heard me.

“He’d say it was too coincidental not to mean something,” he finally answers, the words sounding almost reverent.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are the odds of you running into the lead FBI agent on your case? And falling for him? And him falling for you? Your paths were meant to cross, but he wasn’t meant to stop you, or he already would have. Even I, a man of pure science, cannot belittle what you have by labeling it with mere coincidence. Maybe he was meant to drag out your humanity the most right when you needed it.”

His eyes soften as he looks over at me.

“I’m sorry. I know each kill dulls you more. You got the worst end of this job. Just helping what little bit I have has seared pieces of my soul that I can’t get back.”

My lips purse as I resume watching Logan. “He makes me feel,” I say, though it’s something I’ve said many times before. “My soul actually feels restored with the kills as long as I have him afterwards.”

“He keeps you grounded and firmly attached to reality so you don’t end up like the profile.” He reaches over and squeezes my knee before kissing my cheek.

I give him a brittle smile as he presses his forehead against mine.

“He gives you a reason to want a future,” he adds quietly. “And through him, you found a piece of yourself you thought you’d lost. That’s given me hope for a future one day too, Lana. So maybe Marcus was right. Fate is a fucking cold-hearted bitch, but everything has a purpose.”

I snort and wipe away a tear, while he smirks and looks straight forward, leaning away from me. The lost, pained look in his gaze lets

me know he's thinking of all he and Marcus might have been, even though he says he never thinks of that.

Too many tears have fallen after I swore I'd never let another tear fall. I guess Jake is right about Logan bringing back out my humanity.

He can't stop me from being a monster though.

If he was meant to stop me, he already would have, just like Jake said.

Kyle steps closer to the front of the line, and Chad Briggs moves with him. His second deputy accompanying him is Trevor Byron. Two more are stationed near the front, where the Sin House ends.

Those two will survive.

For tonight, anyway.

They're on my kill list, but I think it'd be a little overly ambitious to try and take out five in one night. After all, I'm just one little girl.

Smirking, I watch as they get closer.

"Show time," Jake tells me, handing me the wig/mask.

I'm already dressed in my jumpsuit. The padding will disguise my build and my weight. I pat my pocket, checking for the syringe. It's still there.

Jake and I will have to tag team Kyle, to ensure Logan doesn't catch me elbow-deep in his blood.

"Think you can get your car around there without anyone seeing?" I ask him.

"I think no one will say a word," he taunts, arching an eyebrow.

"Let the sheep change shepherds," I say as I get out of the car, tugging the mask on.

Everyone is dressed in so many costumes, that only a few even notice me as I pass by. I can't hide my height, but after saving Logan last night, that doesn't really matter anymore.

He saw me.

Well, he saw most of me. I worried he saw more, but he was so concussed he didn't get a good look. I risked it all to make sure I saved him.

It's hard to fight and keep your face hidden, but obviously I managed.

I still wonder what he would have said or done if he'd seen me and knew the killer of one's nightmares was the one to save him because she loves him.

I take the side door, and no one even questions me, considering my costume. No one ever asks questions in this town. They just go with the flow, as their conditioning tells them to do.

The throngs of people divide for me, screaming as I split through them. Everyone loves a good scream, and as I pop out of the shadows, more of those screams find my ears.

It takes me a moment to find the corner Jake has set up, and I nudge a girl out of it, letting her think I'm taking over as part of the plan. Gotta love disorganization. Popular as it is, it's still just put on by the high school, and has no organization extending beyond the original setup.

She leaves, carrying her fake axe with her, and I plug in my power saw.

Trevor is the first one I see, and I rev the saw, listening to some of the ones in front of him scream in terror, even though they think it's all fake.

The dingy room is lit by a strobe light that flickers amongst the fog machines and red lights in the background. Trevor steps aside, waiting for Kyle and the others to catch up. I smirk behind the mask before grabbing him.

“Let go, fuckstick!” he snaps. “You’re not supposed to put your hands on people.”

Oh, how I wish he could see me smile.

Screams erupt from all around as I slam a knife into his chest and toss him into the corner. People burst out laughing as he gurgles on blood.

“That’s so fake!” one teenager shouts. “Nice try, Deputy Byron. Stick to your day job.”

As the deputy continues to bleed out, I catch a glimpse of Kyle in the back, unsurprisingly lingering by the ‘whore house’ stand that’s off to the side. My current box is labeled the ‘liar’ box.

We picked it on purpose.

I toss a sheet over Trevor as blood continues to plume and spread across his chest. He stares up in shock as I cover his head, tucking him in for a long sleep.

He’ll bleed out in front of everyone.

But that’s not my main event.

Chad Briggs comes into view just as I rev my power saw, and more screams erupt all around me as I pretend like I’m getting too close to the line of people. I cock my head from side to side, going with creepy overload.

Just as Briggs nears, leaving Kyle to dawdle at the whore house box a little longer—watching two girls make out while fake blood

drips from their nipples through their white shirts—I rev the saw again.

Briggs eyes me, confused as to why this particular costume is in play. I walk up to him, and he smugly holds his ground while more people rush by, screaming like I'm an insane serial killer.

Well…

With one fast, unexpected yank, I toss Chad to the ground, and everyone around us erupts into frenzied screams. Chad's eyes widen, and a curse spills from his lips when realization sets in seconds too late.

"You can't see me," I tell him as I dig the saw into him, turning it on full power.

A bloodcurdling scream erupts from his lips as the saw powers across his chest, slicing through flesh and spraying out blood that splatters against people in the line.

"Holy shit! That looks so fucking real!" one guy hoots.

I smirk, digging the saw in deeper, slicing it across his abdomen, spilling his intestines for all to see.

Everyone starts rushing by us, screaming as they point and take pictures. It's sad that the world thinks visual effects are this good. Little do they know they're witnessing a murder.

As Chad chokes on his blood, Kyle nears, and I lean down to whisper my favorite part.

"I'm Victoria Evans. The daughter of the man you killed. The sister to the boy you let die. The victim you turned into a monster. And I'm going to fucking kill you all."

He tries to form words, but I stand, watching with sick fascination as he makes a pathetic attempt to hold his intestines inside his body.

Kyle pales, the girl on his arm stumbles back, and I walk right toward him.

He's seen the real stuff. He knows this isn't fake.

He tries to turn and run, but I sling out the saw, catching him right in the back of the head.

Pity it's not on.

It hits him hard enough to knock him to the ground, and his girlfriend screams and sprints through the massacre.

I grab a bottle of lye as I drag Kyle by the foot toward the door.

"Best. Liar Box. Ever! Holy shit! We'll never top this next year!" one teen shouts in complete awe as Chad continues to silently mouth for help.

I toss the lye I brought onto the sheet by the door, drenching Trevor in it.

More screams erupt from under that sheet as the scent of rotting flesh and lye collide and permeate the air.

My eyes start burning, but the mask I'm wearing under the mask —yes, a mask under a mask—prevents most of the fumes from getting inhaled.

Others, however, start rushing out, screaming in real fear when they feel the burn.

With all the commotion, no one notices me dragging the unconscious Kyle to the box, where there's a hole cut into the floor. No one sees me push him down in it as the screams continue from Trevor.

No one notices who it is the person in the mask is dragging down under the traveling house of horrors.

I drop down into the hole, seeing no one's feet rushing away. Yet. Wheels roll up from behind, and I check my phone, watching the cameras as Logan speaks to Leonard.

The two deputies at the end are suddenly rushing into the house when the girlfriend runs out alone. It's now or never.

I quickly roll out from under the trailer, and I drag Kyle with me. He's out cold when I see the backdoor of a car opening. A few eyes swing toward us, and I hold my finger over my lips, the universal hush sign.

A woman pales and turns away, her entire body freezing. She doesn't make a move or say a word.

Jake's mask is on, and he turns around in his seat, grabbing Kyle's arm and helping me shove him into the vehicle. I shove the syringe into his hip, making sure he stays out.

We don't speak, and I let him go as I turn and walk away like I didn't just help kidnap the sheriff's son. I can't wait to have five minutes alone with him.

As sirens wail and the craziness gets crazier, I hear Logan shouting for someone, and I know they've figured it out.

Now the fun begins.

Like the killers do in the movies, I disappear calmly into the woods, and no one follows me.

Something tells me Delaney Grove will never view a Haunted House the same again.

Chapter 11

Common sense is not so common.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

“How the fucking hell does a killer walk by us, come inside, and kill two officers, before stealing the sheriff’s son, yet no one sees a damn thing?” Donny hisses, covering his nose.

If our unsub wanted to ruin the crime scene, she did a damn good job by dumping out a tub of lye.

I’m not sure what was here before Kyle Davenport stupidly went in, and what the killer brought with her.

“You sons of bitches go see my son today, and now he’s missing!” the sheriff bellows as I try to piece together the gruesome attack.

Chad Briggs. I spoke to him earlier. Trevor Byron is—*was*—familiar as well.

Chad was sawed open right in front of a crowd who watched with rapt attention, assuming he was just part of the show. Trevor was stabbed then doused in lye.

“He’s now targeting anyone in the way,” Lisa says as she pulls off her glove, staring in disgust at the parts of the body of Chad Briggs we were able to retrieve. Trevor’s body can’t be touched until the hazmat suits arrive.

Chad Briggs has been hollowed out, all of his insides spilling when we had to lift him to carry him outside for proper examination. We don't have a M.E. here, but they have their own coroner—who I don't trust.

The sheriff has already called in a canine unit, and most of his deputies are in the woods, trying to follow the blood trail the unsub left behind.

"I think this was planned," Leonard interjects. "Chad Briggs was an officer ten years ago. So was Trevor Byron. They were a part of what happened to Robert Evans."

"Just a coincidence," Lisa says dismissively.

"She could have hurt the girl with Kyle, who alerted the other two what was going on. She didn't. So she's in control of the kills," Leonard argues.

"She? Now *you* think it's a girl too?" Lisa groans. "We can't do this to our profile, or what's the point in profiling."

"Not adjusting the profile makes it just as pointless, and you start thinking like Johnson," I point out.

She glares at me, and I shift my attention to Elise. "Anything?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing of any use. People saw a guy in a Michael Myers mask in the 'liar' section, and thought Trevor Byron was part of the show. Same for Chad Briggs. Some even thought Trevor was a terrible actor, not even realizing he was dying. Others thought the 'special effects' with Briggs was amazing."

"Michael Myers?" Leonard says, stepping closer.

She nods.

"How'd they know it was a guy if the unsub was masked? And what about height and weight?" I ask her.

“The guy was dressed in full-on Michael Myers gear. Mask, hair, clothes…everything. I guess they assumed it was a guy. And no one was paying attention enough to get a height estimation. I got everything from five feet to six and a half feet. Some said it was a big guy. Some said he was skinny.”

“Balls of stone is what it takes to devise a plan as brazen as this,” Leonard says quietly.

“It fucking took you long enough!” I hear the sheriff snapping.

I look over as the canine units arrive, and he starts directing them. If they find Kyle, it’ll be a small miracle. By now, the unsub is possibly already at play.

I glance over, studying the faces of everyone standing behind the caution tape. The girlfriend looks a little bruised, but those bruises were there before the unsub came in.

It took her longer than it should have to get help. The unsub had time to drag Kyle out of this place. She most likely used the hole cut into the floor.

This was all thought out, and somehow the unsub overlooked the girlfriend? Doubtful.

Leonard follows me as I make my way toward the girl who is chewing her nails, a blanket over her shoulders as she sways from side to side.

“Ms. Blanks?” At her name, she pops her head up, looking directly into my eyes. “Do you care to come talk with us?”

She nods dully and moves under the tape, coming closer to us. She’s not in shock, despite what she saw.

“Ms. Blanks, I know the sheriff already talked to you, but if you could tell us anything you saw, it’d be greatly appreciated,” I say

softly, trying to sound calm and approachable, unlike the madman who shouldn't be directing this manhunt.

"It was dark. I just saw blood, and guts, and that crazy guy threw his saw at Kyle. It cocked him in the head. I thought he was going to get me next."

"But that didn't happen," Leonard says soothingly. "What happened next?"

She nibbles her lip. "I ran out, but turned around and saw him dragging Kyle. People were stepping over him and stuff, laughing or screaming. No one knew it was real, but I did. Some people panicked when they saw Chad, because it was gross. They started to question it, but still didn't say anything aloud. I finally got out when I saw him continuing to pull Kyle, and told the other two deputies where they were inside."

"You didn't see the escape hole? It wasn't covered or anything," I point out.

"I was too scared to focus," she says, not meeting my eyes.

I exchange a look with Leonard. Her not telling them about the hole would lead to them coming all the way through the setup backwards, fighting against hordes of people who would slow them down. She saw the hole. She elected not to mention it, but still told what was going on to clear herself of any wrongdoings as far as the sheriff was concerned.

"Thank you for your time, Ms. Blanks," I say as Leonard walks away with me.

"I almost think the girlfriend wanted Kyle gone," Leonard says under his breath.

I look around, surveying all the faces that don't seem the least bit upset.

"Someone here saw something," I say to him, looking back at all the people whispering amongst themselves, but not saying anything to us or the sheriff's men.

"Loyalties are shifting," Leonard says quietly.

"What?" I ask with the same hushed tone.

He gestures around. "These people have been conditioned from speaking out for years and years, finding punishment instead of reward. Finding terror instead of pride. Now this masked crusader comes in and is calling them out on their lies, killing the corrupt ones who've oppressed them for this long. They're loyalties are shifting to our killer instead of their oppressors. Before long, they'll develop a hero worshiping complex and consider the killer to be a vigilante speaking out against injustice."

"Our killer is doing much more than speaking out against injustice," I say on a sigh.

He nods. "Killing was the only option for our girl. Because speaking only ever got these people killed or worse," he states flatly before walking away.

I'm starting to question *his* loyalties. Out of everyone, Leonard is the last one I thought would feel too much empathy for our killer.

And we need to stop calling her *our* anything.

Enacting possession or ownership makes the empathy ties stronger, and he's been referring to her as *our* girl or *our* killer all day. Knowing she's a female fighting against rapists also demands more sympathy and empathy. It's fucking with our heads, more so him than me.

But even I'm struggling to give a damn about finding Kyle before it's too late. I haven't even called Hadley out yet to run the forensics.

Deciding to force the issue, I text her, asking her to join us, and get a message back immediately that she's on the way. I also text Lana.

ME: You okay? Hadley has to come here, so I can send someone else.

LANA: All good. No need. I have to go home, deal with something tonight, and then I'll be back. My house was broken into and Duke called to ask me to come see if anything was taken.

The fuck?

ME: A homicide detective is calling you about a possible burglary?

LANA: The cops couldn't reach me on my phone, because my house number was the number the security company had. Duke had my cell, and he knew I was out of town. It'll be a quick trip. Promise. Love you. <3

I want to tell her to stay gone, but the sheriff might really do something stupid like stage a break-in and go after her. Hell, for all I know this is part of his retaliation for his son coming up missing four hours ago.

His deranged mind believes I'm somehow involved. What if this is all a trap?

ME: Stay. Don't go. I have a bad feeling.

LANA: Already on the road. Stow your bad feeling. Duke will be there, and I'll deal with all the insurance stuff. Don't focus on me. Worry about your case.

"Everything okay?" Leonard asks me.

"No. Lana is too fucking stubborn," I groan, putting my phone away. I'll call Duke later.

"Just curious, how much do you know about Lana?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugs. "No reason." His face changes as he looks at something in the dirt, and he kneels.

"Were there any cars parked over here tonight?" he asks.

"We taped this side up, not allowing cars to pass."

His eyes dart up to the path between the trees. It's big enough for a small car, but…

"The blood trail led into the woods," Elise says, interrupting my thought. "All of it was blood from the two victims he killed, but that's what happens when you saw a guy to pieces and stab another."

"Kyle Perkins didn't go into the woods. There'd be drag marks," I say, finally getting my head on right.

"The killer went into the woods, but not Kyle," Elise says, confused. "How?"

Leonard pales as he and I look at each other.

“Because our unsub has a partner.”

Chapter 12

Clever tyrants are never punished.
—Voltaire

LANA

“You sure you’ll be able to sit in on this?” I ask Jake as I walk in, pulling my sweatshirt off.

“Waited too long, and I’m pissed off enough to handle the gore tonight, Lana. Just looking at him makes me want to kill him. I’ll be fine.”

“It’ll be the worst,” I remind him.

He rolls his shoulders back. “I’ll let you know if I need a break. But I doubt I will for this one.” His jaw tics, and I nod, looking idly at the selection of shiny knives that are just waiting to turn red.

“What vehicle did you drive?” Jake asks me randomly.

“The Lexus you parked at Lindy’s old house.”

“No one saw you?”

I shake my head to answer his question.

“Logan?” he asks.

“I’ll tell him I took the bus until I could call a cab.”

My eyes lift to his. “Why the third degree?”

He purses his lips. “They know you have a partner now. It’s just a matter of time before they unravel the whole thing, Lana.”

He holds up his phone as the cameras catch them all heading into the thick of the woods. Dogs are going crazy, but they won’t find

anything. Everything was tossed into the water after I saturated the clothing and mask in bleach.

“We knew we couldn’t afford the time to leave behind fresh drag marks. It was inevitable they’d learn of a partnership,” I say casually, moving toward the viewing window.

Kyle is banging against the one-way glass that serves as a mirror from his perspective. In fact, the entire box he’s screaming inside is full of this glass, other than the ceiling, which is actually a mirror. The walls are bulletproof, practically impossible to break, despite his frantic punching and kicking.

His hand is a bloody mess from trying to punch through it, and I smirk. Maybe I know he hates small spaces and planned this beautiful killing spot two years ago. Maybe I built this underground tomb full of mirrors just for him.

Just for his death.

Jake already stripped him of his clothing, leaving him completely naked and vulnerable. The sight of Kyle’s naked body makes my stomach roil.

“Was Duke suspicious?” Jake asks as I flip on the intercom switch, allowing us to hear the endless threats spilling from the lips of my next victim.

He doesn’t know how empty those threats are.

“No. The police called him when they couldn’t reach me immediately, since he took it personally that the Boogeyman attacked after he let his guard down on his quest to a bigger, better case. His guilt-induced involvement actually helps us, because I had to see him, and he’s far more reliable as a witness to my

whereabouts than any regular cop. He's watching my house, convinced I'm inside right now."

"And if he decides to knock and check up on you?"

"You're showing signs of the paranoia we promised to discuss if either of us suffered from it," I say, turning to face Jake. "Paranoia evokes recklessness."

"That's a logical question," Jake says, clearing his face of all emotion, hiding the inner panic I know is there.

I turn down the intercom as Kyle threatens to tear a spine out.

"If he knocks and I don't answer, he'll call." I wag my phone at him. "And I'll answer. If he asks where I am, I'll tell him I went for a run to clear my head. Which I did run right through the trails in the back of the woods. We're two miles from my house. I can easily run right back. I bought that house for this reason, even though I only moved in not too long ago. You know all this already, so why the freak-out?"

He blows out a harsh breath as Kyle starts throwing himself against the glass in a desperate attempt to break it. He simply bounces off, not even making so much as a crack in the resilient surface.

"Sorry," Jake finally says. "It's just, things are starting to go wrong. First, Logan sees you, but doesn't see your face by some miracle. Then you deliberately find him when you shouldn't have been able to, and get him an ambulance. He suspects a woman, Lana. You told me that. And now they know you have a partner. It just feels like everything is going to end before we're ready."

I put a hand on his shoulder, giving him a sympathetic half smile. "I get it. But he could have died if I hadn't saved him, and we ran the

risk of the partner thing with no drag marks. It was the only way to get Kyle, though. Breaking into his house would have been twice as hard with all four deputies inside."

He sighs harshly.

"If your life had been at risk, and Marcus was the one reaping revenge for me, he'd have sacrificed it all to save you. Just as you would have for him."

His gaze softens, and he leans forward, kissing the top of my head. A brotherly show of affection. "If it was Marcus doing this, I'd still be at his side," he whispers softly. "I'd be helping him. Can you say the same for Logan?"

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I fight back the emotion that tries to surface as I turn away, watching as Kyle staggers back from another failed attack on the glass.

"I should get in there and get started before he kills himself. That would suck all the fun out of this," I say calmly.

As I turn to head toward the door, Jake calls after me. "I worry that when the time comes, Logan isn't going to choose you the way you keep choosing him, Lana."

I keep my back facing him as I stand in the doorway, trying not to let the words sink in.

"I worry that he'll never understand and only see the fault and not the good. I worry he doesn't truly love you enough to give you what I would give Marcus. And I worry that you'll let him kill you before you fight to stay alive. Every day, I worry more. Because I love you like Marcus loved you. You're my only family, Lana. You're all I have. And Marcus might actually rise from the grave to kill me himself if I see this happening and do nothing about it."

A small smile tries to form as a tear rolls down my cheek.

“Marcus would have chosen you over me,” I whisper hoarsely.

“I doubt that, Lana. And I’ve already failed you once. I failed you worse than I ever could have imagined.”

“You didn’t fail me, Jake,” I say without turning around. “We were failed by everyone else.”

I twist my head around so that our eyes meet, and add, “But you? You’re the hero in all the fairytales that doesn’t expect the heroine to put out.”

He bursts out laughing, and I flash a smile before walking away. The smile falls the second I’m not in sight, and I put a hand on my chest, fighting the pain I don’t want him to see.

So much we learned. So much we know. So much we have going on at once.

And all I can think about is what Logan will do if he learns the truth.

Once again pulling up a façade of composure, I push through the door, and the killer inside me emerges, turning my heart to ice and my nerves to steel.

Kyle doesn’t even notice me until the door shuts and seals with a lock, the sound echoing around us.

His murderous gaze swings to me, but then he falters, his eyebrows raising in confusion.

“The fucking feds? The fucking feds are responsible for this?!” he shouts. “I’ll have you all on a fucking platter when my father finds out about this.”

A dark grin slithers across my lips like a serpent’s ominous smile.

“Oh, the feds have nothing to do with this, Kyle. Don’t you remember me?” I ask, my tone light but taunting as I take a step to the right, moving idly through the mirrored room.

He cocks his head to the side.

“You’re that fed’s girlfriend. Surely he’s not stupid enough to piss me off and leave me all alone with someone so fragile.”

His eyes drop down my body, the look in his eyes all too familiar as his gaze sweeps over me, leering, contemplative, calculated. “You really don’t want to do this, SSA Bennett! You have no idea what I’m capable of!” he calls out. “Playing games with me will end badly,” he goes on.

A voice comes over the com, as Jake decides to play a part.

“Actually, the feds are hours away, Davenport. Hope you don’t expect Daddy to save you tonight.”

Kyle tenses, looking around. He recognizes Jake’s voice, yet hasn’t placed mine. Well, that’s just insulting.

“Jacob Denver?” Kyle asks, confused as he looks around. “The fucking hell do you think you’re doing?” he demands, slamming his fist against the glass.

“Helping me reap a debt that’s long overdue,” I answer, smirking when his dark glare returns to me.

He tilts his head, and he starts coming right at me. “You want to fucking play? Let me show you what a mistake that is,” he growls.

“Please try,” I mock.

He lunges suddenly, and I dart to the side, bringing my foot up just in time to connect with his stomach. He barely gives himself time to recover before he’s grappling for me again, but it’s like watching a child fight with a teenage bully—the teenage bully being me.

With quick succession, I deliver one blow after another, my fist colliding with his nose; my knee making contact with his ribs. His cry of pain is like sweet music to my demented ears.

As I spin, my foot comes around, catching him on the side of the face hard enough to cause blood to fly from his mouth. His body spirals around and he collides with the glass, leaving a bloody smear before dropping to the ground.

As he spits up his blood, he glares over at me.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The music starts playing through the com; my mother’s voice wafts over us, serenading this moment with past memories that have his eyes widening and his features paling.

That song is what the Scarlet Slayer has been tormenting the town with. He’s starting to figure things out slowly.

He scrambles back, crab-walking right into the wall where he has no more room to run.

“I’m the girl you thought you broke,” I say quietly, taking a step toward him as his body seizes in delicious fear. “I’m the girl you took too much from.” Another step from me, and a pained sound from him as he tries to stand, but falls back down in his haste. “I’m the girl you thought you killed.”

He finally gets to his feet, and my fist shoots out, connecting with his face over and over as he weakly tries to shield himself.

I finally grab his hair and slam his face into the glass, knowing Jake is on the other side and enjoying this like I am.

“I’m the girl who finally ends your reign of terror.”

“No,” he groans, wincing when I slam his face into the wall again. Then I grab his hair, jerking his head back, letting him see the bloody

reflection of his face staring back at him.

“I’m going to let you watch every fucking second of it, just like you did for Marcus.”

He cries out in pain when I wrench his arm back hard enough to dislocate it from its socket, using just the right angle.

He turns and tries to hit me with his good hand, but it’s a pathetic swing that I dodge with too much ease.

“So weak,” I taunt. “All those women were hurt by such a weak man.”

His eyes darken, and a sick smile spreads over my lips as a knife slides to my feet, accompanied by the sound of the door shutting and sealing again.

“I think I’ll join you on this one,” Jake says as he nears.

Kyle dives for the knife, but I pick it up and kick him away, ignoring the burning tears trying to breach my eyes. I’ve envisioned this moment for so long, but he’s so much weaker than I remember.

I remember the strength he held us down with. His words coming back to me as Jake wrestles the screaming Kyle to the ground, restraining his arms just the way he held us restrained.

“Oh, you’re going to love this, baby. Just like you used to.”

I grab the knife, and I slam it down on one finger, listening to the ripe screams that follow. A shudder slithers through me, the high of revenge oozing through my veins with a tangible presence.

It takes a little effort, but the knife finally cracks through the fragile bone, and another bloodcurdling scream is released into the box.

Jake smirks as I hold up the first finger.

“Hold her down! Hold Marcus down too. This is going to be fun.”

“This is going to be fun,” I say, echoing his words from the past as I shove the finger into his mouth and hold my hand down as I clutch his nose. I straddle his body to hold him steadier, and listen as he gags and chokes on his own finger that I cut off mid-knuckle.

He fights it hard, but the instinct to swallow finally overrides all else, and I release him after his throat works painfully to take the finger down.

As soon as I release him, he vomits, turning his head to the side as tears run down his face.

“Don’t get sick, Victoria,” Kyle taunts as I retch, spilling my guts on the pavement, then forced to wallow in it as he holds me down for Lawrence to have his turn. “We’re just getting started.”

“Don’t get sick, Kyle. We’re just getting started,” I say, slicing through another finger, taking one more digit that once held me in place.

As he cries out, more memories assault me, and tears of pure hatred skid down my cheeks unexpectedly.

“The daughter of a whore and a fucking pussy. You see, I know your dad never had the balls to kill those women. I just don’t care. Now take it, Victoria. Take it and shut the hell up.”

“Take it!” I shout, slicing through another finger. “Take it and shut the hell up!”

Jake holds him down harder as I work through all ten fingers, then tie up the damage, preventing him from bleeding too much.

Kyle is a sobbing mess, but I wasn’t lying. We’re just getting started.

“Your turn, Tyler. Saddle up. It’s bareback and fun tonight,” Kyle goads, grabbing my naked crotch and then slapping it. “It’s getting a

little worn out."

"This is for me," I hiss, slicing the blade down his torso, scooting back as he screams in agony. The slice is just shallow enough to burn like fire but not deep enough to bleed too much.

Another memory surfaces, one that has my heart being suffocated and squeezed to death.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Carlyle. But it seems like the damage done to your internal organs and the life saving measures they took at the hospital have prevented you from ever being able to have children. They were forced to perform an emergency hysterectomy."

More tears cascade down my cheeks as I slice him to the side, slowly flaying a piece of flesh from his body like the monstrous pro I've become.

"This is for my father," I tell him, carving another section.

"Your father was weak. He cried as my dad's guys took turns. Oh, let me tell you everything they did and how your father cried like a little bitch."

I peel back a square of flesh, removing it from his body. Barely any blood flows because of how perfectly executed it is, but he still screams and cries, because it burns like hell.

He'll be skinned alive before I'm done.

"His ass is tighter than her cunt, if anyone wants a turn on that. He's a fucking faggot, so he's enjoying it," Kyle says while laughing.

"Did you get shit on your dick?" Morgan taunts.

"Nah. Just needed to feel something that worn out whore can't provide. She stopped being tight the first time I shoved my dick in her."

Another piece of flesh is carved away, and Jake continues to restrain Kyle as my tears grow more fervent and feverish, burning my own flesh.

“I took your virginity a long time ago. It’s only right that I take this too,” Kyle says, flipping me to my stomach as I cry out, forcing the tears back as he pushes me up on my knees and spreads my butt cheeks.

“Please don’t!” I scream.

“Beg, whore. Won’t do you any good. No one cares.”

“Please stop!” Kyle cries out as I wave another square of flesh in front of his eyes.

“Beg, whore. Won’t do you any good,” I whisper darkly. “No one cares.”

His eyes try to shut, but I grab his jaw, forcing them to open and stare at the mirror above our heads.

“We have a long way to go,” I tell him calmly. “And you’re going to be awake for all of it, even if I have to sew your eyelids open. So you choose if that’s necessary or not.”

Tears pour from his eyes for a different reason than they fall from mine. Mine fall from ten years of anguish that I’ve suppressed. Ten years of hatred I’ve confined. Ten years of pain I’ve ignored.

This is the monster that led the charge, and he’ll die by my hands.

My tears fall for freedom.

They fall because he’ll no longer haunt my nightmares. I’ll lull myself to sleep with the memories of the screams he shares so freely.

“Don’t worry, Victoria. You won’t die yet,” Kyle says as he slides the small knife over my body, leaving behind a faint trail of blood. “We still have all night.”

My knife slides down as I climb off his body, and it nicks the limp flesh between his legs. Unlike Morgan, he’s not a sexual deviant. He’s just a sick son of a bitch who happens to have sociopathic tendencies.

He freezes, his eyes widening in horror, knowing what’s to come.

“Don’t worry, Kyle. I’m not ready for the grand finale just yet. We still have all night.”

“Now everyone will know you’re the whore. The whole town will see what you really are.”

“You’ll never get away with this!” my brother shouts, but Kyle ignores him, speaking to me as though I’m the one who shared those words.

“It’ll be like this never happened, Victoria. Because you don’t matter. And my father will still be the one they all fear, while you rot in your grave with your faggot brother and pussy father.”

I lower my voice as I stare into his wide, terrified eyes that are still streaming with unrelenting tears.

“But tomorrow? The whole town will see what you really are. A weak, pointless man they once feared. Now I’ll be what they fear. And your father’s turn is coming. Then the two of you will rot in your graves, while I walk away from all of this, knowing the better monster won the war.”

As another scream pierces the air, my tears slow down, the memories ebb, and the coldness only Logan can thaw washes over me with a choking hold.

Kyle Davenport won’t last the whole night.
But I’m damn sure going to try and take as long as possible.

Chapter 13

Injustice in the end produces independence.
—Voltaire

LOGAN

I'm half asleep when I feel a body sliding over mine and lips strumming my cheek. At first, I just lie there, feeling the warmth of the other person, but then my eyes fly open and my hand shoots out, ready to slam into—

My eyes widen as Lana catches my wrist with a stronger grip than I thought her capable of, and yanks her head back, her eyes widening in shock as she barely dodges my swing.

"Fuck!" I shout, jerking upright as she straddles me. "I'm so sorry! What the hell? I didn't—"

She starts laughing, confusing the hell out of me.

"I guess that was a stupid way to wake you up when you didn't go to sleep without me," she says, smiling now as she drops my wrist and tosses her arms around my neck.

I'm almost shaking with how close I came to nearly hitting her. Thank fuck she has good reflexes.

"Damn it, Lana, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," she says, grinning as she brushes her lips over mine. "At least I don't have to worry about some other woman seducing you when I'm away."

I groan, returning her kiss as my body continues to quake. “You’d never have to worry about that anyway. I told you I don’t love easily,” I murmur against her lips.

She kisses me harder, her fingers threading through my hair. Just as she starts grinding against me, my door swings open, and a feminine curse is spewed.

“Sorry!” Lisa’s voice is like a wet blanket over both our libidos.

“I’ll bet,” Lana grumbles, looking over her shoulder as I sigh and hold her to me. She doesn’t even make a move to get off me, which is fine by me.

“What?” I ask Lisa, who has the grace to look embarrassed.

“Really, I’m sorry. I didn’t know Lana was here.”

“So it’s okay for you to walk into my boyfriend’s room without knocking if I’m not here?” Lana asks her with an eerily cold tone.

I frown, looking at Lana’s face. It’s devoid of all emotion, and it’s as though she’s hiding the anger she’s feeling too easily. What the hell?

Lisa draws my attention when she rolls her shoulders back, a smirk coming over her lips.

Ah, hell.

“I guess old habits die hard, considering I used to walk into his room all the time. Sometimes we forget we’re not together anymore.”

Fucking immature bullshit.

“*I never* forget,” I decide to point out, only to keep Lana from thinking otherwise, because she should honestly know I’d never do anything with Lisa.

Lana doesn’t move, her posture never changes, and for some reason, a twisted grin tugs at one corner of her mouth.

“Do you now?” Lana asks quietly. “I suppose I could remind you some time.”

Hadley clears her throat, glaring at Lana as she shoulders by Lisa and walks on into the room. I’m really glad everyone is seeing Lana on my lap while I’m in bed with nothing but a pair of boxers on.

Great professionalism.

“Lisa, you really shouldn’t try to piss her off when you don’t even have any true interest in Logan,” Hadley sighs.

She casts a warning glare at Lana for some reason, then directs her attention to me.

“Sheriff called a town meeting in the park. Said he wants everyone there. They’re about to send every single citizen in town out on a search for Kyle, now that there’s daylight.”

Kyle was taken right after sunset yesterday, and in a vehicle. There’s no chance of us finding him in the woods, but the sheriff refuses to believe a car was involved because *nobody* says they saw a vehicle.

I think he underestimates this town’s fear.

I also think he overestimates his son’s value to this town.

“In that case, do you think you two could get out of here so I can get some clothes on?”

Lisa snorts. “Like I haven’t seen you in less.”

Lana’s smile only grows, but it’s actually kind of creepy, as though she’s plotting something nefarious for Lisa.

“I’ll get her out of here,” Hadley says to Lana, then points a finger. “Nothing happens.”

Lana shrugs and turns to face me, while Hadley berates Lisa. As their voices fade, Lana gets more comfortable on my lap, and I kiss

her before she can say anything.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur against her lips as I break the kiss. “Lisa’s a bitch.”

“She’s just used to women *and* men letting her say whatever she wants with no consequences. I’ve dealt with the mean girl types before. All bark. No bite. But lots of tears.”

I tilt my head, studying her. She seems…off. As though she’s distanced herself somehow.

“Hey, you okay?” I ask her seriously, searching her eyes.

It’s like they’re colder. Almost eerie.

“Long night,” she says on a sigh, running her finger down my cheek. “But I’m feeling better by the second. It’s like you’re magical or something, reminding me I’m human.”

I have no idea what that means, but it’s obvious she’s hurting and trying to close herself off right now.

“What happened?” I ask, cupping her face.

Her eyes instantly glisten as they warm, and she blinks rapidly like she’s holding back tears.

“Nothing,” she says with a brittle smile. “Just not a lot of sleep. I wanted to get back to you as soon as possible.”

I kiss her again, feeling her slowly relax in my arms, as though she’s shedding whatever wall was weirdly between us for a moment. Her kiss is searching, as though she needs something only I can provide. But before I can deepen it, my phone goes off, reminding me there’s a lot of work today, and I’ve only had about two hours of sleep.

Groaning, I break the kiss, resting my forehead against hers. “As soon as this day is over, we’re going to resume that kiss. Hadley has

a lot of forensics to go through in the far cabin today. Stay with her."

"I love how protective you are," she says softly.

Her eyes meet mine, and I try again to decipher what's going on in her head. It's like she's waged a war with herself, but she's not telling why. I almost want to ditch this day and just spend it in bed with her, wishing I could offer her the same escape she's so often given me.

"Go," she says on a sigh as she stands, straightening her red shirt. She's worn red almost every day since we've been here. Or maybe it has been every day.

"Why so much red?" I ask her, fingering the hem of her shirt as she stands.

"I just tossed a bunch of clothes in my bag. Apparently I picked stuff from my red section."

She flashes a smile, rolling her eyes.

"You have a red section?"

"I have a massive closet. Has to be organized somehow."

She skips out of the room, and I stand, running a hand through my hair. I don't even have time to take a shower to wake me up, since my phone won't shut the hell up.

As I leave the cabin, I glance down, catching a glimpse of Lana as she disappears inside our temporary headquarters.

Leonard is waiting for me when I get outside.

"Problems?" he asks, his eyes on the far cabin where Lana and Hadley are inside.

"Lisa."

He snorts and gets in, and I start pulling out.

"Lisa looked pleased with herself when she left."

“She’s a pain in the ass.” Quickly, I also tell him the details of the wonderful fucking morning I’ve already had.

“What’d Lana do?”

“Smiled at her and made a snide remark, but there was no bite to her tone. It was actually sort of weird. There was no aggression. Almost any other woman would have flown off the handle if my ex stalked in and stirred shit like Lisa did. Then again, Lana always surprises me with her reactions.”

“Takes a lot control to not react in the heat of the moment,” Leonard says, though it sounds like he’s saying it more to himself than me. “Can I ask you something?”

I shrug.

“How do you really feel about our killer? If you found out her identity today and heard her out, would you really be able to lock her away, knowing there’d never be any justice without her?”

My brow furrows. “Justice isn’t torturing and killing a bunch of people, Leonard.”

“Pretend you’re not FBI for just a minute. Pretend you’re a person who has witnessed the worst in humanity, and seen good in the monsters.”

“I’m not following,” I tell him as we pull up to the street that is blocked off. Cars are everywhere, so we’re forced to park at the rear.

“My sister’s best friend, Katie, once dated a drug dealer,” he says randomly, and I twist in my seat, arching an eyebrow at him.

He stares me in the eye as he continues. “He never sold to kids, always held his distance from the drug life when he was home, and if any of his guys sold to a kid, their bodies would be found floating in the river, minus their heads, hands, and feet.”

“Awesome choice in men,” I say, confused.

He rolls his eyes. “At first glance, anyone would say that. But not one kid in his city could get their hands on drugs. No outsiders would even sell to a kid from that city for fear of what he’d do to them. But Katie? He never touched her. In fact, he fucking worshiped her, treated her like a queen, and every day he came home to her, swearing she saved him from his demons.”

“Where are you going with this?” I ask, still confused.

“Katie was oblivious to what he did for a living, even though most of the city knew. She was always safe. The cops turned their heads, simply because if you get one dealer behind bars, another one pops up, and this guy wouldn’t deal to kids. Better the devil you know and all that.”

He blows out a heavy breath.

“He eventually got picked up on a misdemeanor, because not all cops believed in the ‘devil you know’ logic. Two weeks after his lock-up, Katie found out the truth. She felt betrayed. She was furious. She broke things off, and a new dealer moved into town. Within three weeks, ten kids between twelve and fifteen had died of an overdose.”

“So you’re saying that it’s better to let one dealer keep doing illegal shit as long as he’s not selling to kids?” I ask, still wondering where any of this is coming from.

“I’m saying, bad shit is in the world. But some of the monsters have morals, where others are pure evil. Katie moved on after a few months, found a guy with a nice normal job and life. He went to work at the accounting firm, but when he came home, he’d beat the hell out of her. She left him twice, and twice he hunted her down and

made her pay. She pressed charges, and the cops let it slide, since he had no priors and Katie had been involved with a known drug dealer."

His lips tense, and I bristle.

"I had to step in when my sister called. I threatened the piece of shit, even used my status as leverage. Didn't stop him. And the cops didn't arrest him even after he put her in the hospital with half a dozen broken bones."

"What happened?" I ask, leaning forward.

"The drug dealer ex got out of jail after a year. He found Katie, and the cops found the abusive accountant. Well, they found his body floating with no head, hands, or feet. They also found the new dealer in the city a few weeks after that—same shape, if you know what I mean. Katie is married to him with three kids, and he still treats her like gold, while running a business that makes most furious. Katie learned that what you do for a living doesn't determine if you're a monster. And a killer can sometimes be more gentle than a man who's never killed before. I guess I'm saying I wouldn't fault our killer, because she could be worse, and these people, Logan… These people are fucked up. And how do you arrest an entire law enforcement department?"

I settle back in my seat and stare out my window, letting his words slowly register.

"Why did you tell me all that?"

He pushes his door open. "Katie subdued the real monster by loving the man and accepting all of him. I'm saying I hope our girl has someone doing the same for her, otherwise, she may lose herself to all of this. And it won't be the ending she deserves."

I should kick him off this case for admitting that. He wants her to get away with it.

For some reason, I just get out of the car instead, and keep my mouth shut.

Donny approaches, and Leonard stiffens, possibly worried that I'm about to announce the fact he's compromised and shouldn't be on this case.

"What do you have?" I ask him.

Leonard relaxes as Donny answers. "Kyle Davenport is one twisted son of a bitch," Donny says under his breath.

"I'm well aware. I mean, what is the sheriff speaking about?" I ask dryly.

"Wanting to find his son, and reminding the town he owns everything here, so if someone is helping the killer hide, they're going to regret it. He blatantly threatens the entire town, abusing his authority, and Johnson is letting it go. I can't even process this."

"Kyle Davenport really is sick," Lisa says as she joins us, her eyes finding mine and holding my gaze.

"So are you," I growl. "Ever try that shit on Lana again, and I'll make sure they demote you to some bullshit unit that deals mostly in paperwork and isolation."

Her eyes widen, and everyone around us shifts awkwardly.

"What about Kyle?" I ask Donny, moving my eyes away from Lisa.

Fuck it. I'll have her ass shipped to another unit regardless.

"You mean other than he vanished into thin air? Well, let's see, over five women have already told us this morning what he did to them in the Haunted House over the years. The girlfriend met us in

private, saying usually he makes a second girl join them on the nights he gets really drunk. She's broken up with him three times, and has ended up in the ER three times."

Leonard's gaze swings to mine, and my lips tense. Something tells me he already knew that.

"So he's an abusive bastard with a fetish for raping women. We can all agree that he doesn't deserve to keep breathing clean air. Now I'm asking if there's any news about him."

They all shake their heads, and I walk around, wondering if anyone on the team is willing to put this girl behind bars if we manage to find her.

I even question it myself.

But this is a proxy killer. Has to be. No one was personally invested in these people enough to have revenge on a personal level. That makes her twice as dangerous, because she'll find another target to obsess over, and she'll eventually kill innocent people for minor infractions.

It sucks.

It really sucks.

But she can't just walk away from this.

She'll probably end up in an asylum as opposed to prison, but she sure as hell is too dangerous to leave on the streets, no matter what personal quandaries we're all suffering over this.

The entire team is compromised by this point, because the victims make it hard to be compassionate. It's the future I'm most worried about.

"Now get out there and find my damn son, or I swear this town will never sleep again!" the sheriff shouts, his face red as a bloated

tomato on the verge of exploding.

“We need to deliver our profile to the psych hospitals in the surrounding areas,” I say as the people listen to the sheriff rant for a few more minutes.

“If our unsub was mentally unstable, they wouldn’t have the control to pull this off,” Leonard argues.

“A partner changes everything. There’s always a dominant in the partnership. This time, however, the dominant figure isn’t the actual killer.”

“Then who is?” Elise asks.

“Send someone back to Jacob Denver’s house. Something was off when we paid him a visit,” I tell them.

“It can’t be him,” Leonard sighs. “This partner would have had to be able to aid in painting these messages and all the other crazy shit. Jacob isn’t physically capable of any of that. You saw the medical records.”

“Our—I mean *the* killer, wouldn’t have needed Jacob’s help for that. He could have just masterminded all this,” I point out.

Leonard gives me a grim look before shaking his head like he’s disappointed. Then he walks away.

“What’s his deal?” Donny asks, confused.

“He’s having a rough day,” I lie, unsure why I’m even lying.

Just as the crowd is about to disperse on a fruitless trek through the woods to look for Kyle, the church bells blare their song.

My brow furrows, and I tilt my head, wondering why bells would sound at six-fifteen in the morning. Usually they only chime on the hour.

There’s a large, curious looking tarp-like bag hanging from the bell tower of the church.

There’s a suspicious looking rope tied to one of the clock hands on the tower, and I watch as it clicks down to six-sixteen, and something suddenly swings out of the bag.

A collective gasp sounds out seconds before screams break across the park. People heave, spin away from the sight, and several start running like fire is on their heels.

The sheriff staggers, his eyes wide, his skin pale, and his legs weak. He crashes against a deputy who helps steady him. The deputies who aren’t stunned to their spots are racing toward the church, along with Lisa and Donny.

Even my stomach roils as I stare at the tower in complete horror.

I’m not sure if it’s Kyle Davenport I see hanging, considering there’s not a piece of flesh to make him identifiable, but everyone here has the same conclusion.

Even if we can’t identify him, we all know it’s him.

The rope holds his neck, and his naked, fleshless body dangles from the tower as the bells chime on. If she wanted to make a statement that would incite a full-blown panic, she just won that war.

Then again, the mastermind probably planned this.

They knew this park would be crowded down with people at this time, even though the meeting was impromptu. They know the sheriff. They knew what he would do before he even did it.

The castrated corpse sways, crashing against the brick on occasion. And I can’t look away.

Who is capable of something this depraved and dark without being psychotic?

“Still think she should have a happy life?” I ask quietly as Leonard swallows audibly.

“I expected him to be found in the worst condition,” he says on a breath. “He orchestrated it all.”

I shake my head. “This is someone with a psychosis so deep, they feel they have the right to do this, even though they themselves were never wronged personally.”

“And if your sister had ever been subjected to Kyle Davenport, would you feel this was too much?” Leonard asks, a hard edge to his voice.

“I don’t have a sister,” I say before walking toward the chaos.

Elise hobbles up next to me, and I slow down so she doesn’t have to struggle to keep up. “You think this was the endgame?” Elise asks, looking over at the gruesome sight before flicking her gaze back to me.

It seems unlikely this was the end, considering the unsub isn’t displaying the usual signs of devolvement.

“I honestly don’t know.”

Lisa comes jogging up to us, her color curiously puce. She looks like she’s on the verge of being sick.

“Skinned and castrated?” I ask her.

She nods, swallowing hard. “All ten fingers are missing as well.”

That should have been a given.

“There was one new thing besides the complete flaying,” she says, grimacing.

“What?”

“The eyes were sewn open.”

Chapter 14

It is dangerous to be right when the government is wrong.
—Voltaire

LANA

“You can’t hurt Lisa,” Hadley tells me as I throw another knife into the picture of the offending bitch she speaks of.

It hits right between her eyes, and I go to pull it out.

“I’m getting out my anger. Not plotting her murder,” I say dully.

“You’re throwing a knife at her face.”

“Her picture,” I correct.

I feel her glare, but elect to ignore it.

“Do I want to know how you got so good with knives?”

I line up my next shot and take it, landing the knife in Lisa’s throat. Oh, how I wish. Too bad that’s not going to happen. After all, I can’t kill someone for simply pissing me off.

Unfortunately.

“Come on. Logan doesn’t want you left alone, and apparently I have a crime scene to go investigate,” Hadley says on a long sigh.

“It’s Kyle Davenport, and he was skinned alive before dying. There. Your job just got easier,” I state dryly.

She strangles on a sound, and I turn to face her.

“Need me to recite some of those details of all the horrible things he did to wipe that horror off your face?” I ask.

She shakes her head vigorously. “I can’t stomach hearing anything else that psycho has done. I just… You skinned him alive?”

I nod. “Yep. I was careful to remove the skin piece by piece and only the top layers, so that he didn’t bleed too much during my fun.”

I pull my knife free from Lisa’s picture, then grab her picture—that I printed off from Hadley’s computer—and toss the annihilated photo into the trash, covering it with some other rubbish.

“That’s not creepy at all,” Hadley mutters.

“I torture and kill men. Being creepy should be a given.”

She studies me, and a frown creases her lips.

“You’re even colder than usual.”

“Usually I have more time with Logan after facing the worst side of me to do what needs to be done. *Lisa* was eager to interrupt that this morning, and it’s fortunate I have my killer on a leash. She pushed at all the wrong times. I need cooling down periods after going that dark. It’s how I keep my sanity. I’ve had to raise the timelines, losing a piece of myself with each kill.”

I follow her out, and considering the jammed up streets, we elect to walk, moving briskly down the sidewalk.

“I’m worried about you, Lana. You’re telling me you’re losing yourself and struggling with not murdering Lisa.”

I roll my eyes. “If I was going to kill her, I would have already done it while everyone was distracted with Kyle’s flayed body.”

She gags, and I smirk.

“Seriously. You’re normally not this cold and detached,” she says as we walk toward the town where the chaos I unleashed is fully at play.

I wanted to see the looks on their faces when they discovered Kyle, but knew it wasn't smart to be present. Jake and I drove like hell to get back in time to hang the body, and I still haven't slept.

"I'm almost done," I say as I ignore the tremor in my hand.

Killing Kyle the way I did… Digging deep enough to give him the true torture he deserved over such a limited amount of time… A lot was taken out of me. I felt rushed, and I made him pay for it.

I don't regret anything but not having more time to draw out his suffering.

"She's a bitch, I know. But she doesn't deserve any of your stabby urges."

I hold my hands up innocently, absently listening to the sobs of the people I may or may not have scarred for life. As of this morning, they no longer fear the sheriff who has *always* protected his son. Now they fear the one person who can break the untouchable.

They belong to me now.

The flock have a new shepherd to fear. *Baa, bitches.*

"I'm not going to stab her. Promise."

My emotions aren't in check the way they normally are. They're all over the place, and the memories I've controlled with each kill ran awry, stirring up all the feelings I iced so long ago. It's killing me not to go for the endgame now. Not to hit the sheriff before the shock of his son wears off.

I want him to marinate in his grief for longer than a few moments though. I want him broken before I arrive for the next phase.

"You got sloppy with counter forensics. You should have dragged him."

"I'd have been caught."

“They know you have a partner.”

“I’m aware.”

I grin over at her as she rolls her eyes, and I force the composure that normally comes with so much ease. It’s fractured right now, and I don’t have time to regroup before it’s time to bring out the arsenal.

I have to strike soon, just not *too* soon.

I pop a piece of gum into my mouth, and Hadley groans when she sees Lisa talking to Logan and Leonard.

“Please behave. This is a crime scene, and you can’t give me another one.” Her tone is joking, but also serious.

“I’ll be good,” I say with a dark smile, my eyes on Lisa as I picture what her screams would be like.

I really need to get my control back before I cut her a little.

That would be bad.

“Witnesses are all around,” Hadley says in a singsong voice.

I keep staring at Lisa as she tries to touch Logan. He wisely backs away, not letting her touch connect with his arm. His back is to me, but Lisa spots me, and a devious smile curves her lips.

Oh, I could so teach her a lesson.

Hadley starts getting worried again, stepping in front of me to cut off my vision.

“Don’t, Lana. I’m onboard with your crusade, but I’m not cool with petty cattiness.”

My eyebrows go up, but before I can speak, Lisa’s voice interrupts.

“It’s sad that she has to hurt the team by needing a constant babysitter,” Lisa says, because she’s stupid enough to provoke someone who could kick her ass for hours and never grow tired.

“Go. Away,” Hadley snaps, glaring at Lisa.

Lisa snickers as she starts walking by, and I spit my gum out. Because I’m an awesome aim, it lands right in the back of her hair, hitting hard enough to imbed in there *real* good.

Lisa gasps and grabs the back of her hair, whirling around with wide eyes that look ridiculous paired with that gaping mouth.

I grin and wag my fingers at her before walking again, moving toward Logan.

Hadley groans while running to catch up with me.

“Now *that* was petty,” I quip, grinning proudly.

Oddly, I don’t feel so stabby anymore. I doubt I could spit gum out at all my impending victims and feel free, but with Lisa, it seems to do the trick.

I should buy more gum.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Hadley hisses, but I can tell she’s biting back a smile that matches my immature one.

“Better than sending her roses from a serial killer.” I shrug, and Hadley’s smile vanishes.

“Too soon?” I ask, playing coy.

She flips me off and walks away just as Logan walks up, eyeing the interaction between us.

“You’re not Hadley’s friend until she flips you off at least twice,” he says, cupping my chin and tilting my head back.

“Then we must be besties because she uses that gesture quite often with me.”

He smiles, but I see the heaviness in his eyes and how weighted he feels. Kyle’s body was too much for him, and I knew it before I delivered it to the town.

He doesn’t understand.

Jake’s words try to climb into my head, but I ignore them, forcing myself to focus on the here and now.

“As soon as this case is over, I’m taking a long, overdue vacation and turning my phone off for at least a week. We’ll go somewhere they can’t find us,” he says, running his lips over mine.

I entertain the illusion, distancing myself from reality as I stay the Lana Myers he loves, and not the girl he’s chasing.

“I’ll take you up on that, SSA Bennett.”

He grins against my lips, but a loud shout has us breaking apart.

“My son is dead, and you’re making out with your girlfriend after they just cut down his body!” the sheriff shouts, outraged as he charges Logan full speed.

Two deputies charge us as well, but Logan’s fist shoots out, connecting with one face before he lands a hit to the sheriff’s stomach, halting the attack as the dickheaded man doubles over.

My instincts take over before I can refrain, and my hand flies up, slamming into the throat of the third man before his punch can land on me. He coughs and his eyes bug out, and Leonard tackles him to the ground, while Donny wrangles the other one back.

Leonard’s eyes meet mine, and for a brief moment, I panic. My movements were precise, showing far more experience than Lana Myers should have.

“Nice reflexes,” he says, giving me a tight smile as he cuffs the man on the ground.

Logan spins the sheriff, shoving him into a tree and cuffing his hands behind his back.

“Get your fucking hands off them!” Johnson shouts, charging toward us. “You can’t arrest the sheriff!”

“He attacked a federal agent,” Leonard says. “Just as they did.”

“I didn’t,” the one under him groans.

Leonard makes him cry out in pain as he tightens the cuffs more. “No, you tried to attack a *defenseless* woman.”

I really don’t like being called that. It’s rather insulting.

I turn around, walking away before Johnson pisses me off too much. Logan is one hell of a fucking trigger for me, because I want to blow Johnson’s head off even as he and Logan argue, their voices raising.

The war has started, and it’s not too long before Logan is sent away. We’ve guessed their every move. We’ve already hit checkmate, but they still think it’s the middle of the game.

I can’t blow it all by stabbing Johnson right between the eyes in the middle of the park full of badges and witnesses.

So I walk away. I count to ten. Then to two thousand. I jog. I run. I fucking meditate.

But the urge to kill those sons of bitches is still raw and raging inside me. I’m fighting to hold back my urges until the endgame. Right now it feels almost impossible.

For once, I’m worried about my sanity.

So I call the only person who cares enough to help talk me down.

“Talk me down,” I say to Jake, my heart thumping heavily. “Talk me down now.”

“Ducks have corkscrew penises,” he says as my footsteps pause. “Come on over. I’ll show you some pictures. Nasty little fuckers.”

I roll my eyes, finding myself smiling for no reason at all. “Do I want to know why you know about this?”

“I have a vast amount of useless, sometimes disturbing knowledge for purposes such as this. The more random, the better to throw you off your game with, my dear.”

“I don’t want to see corkscrew penises.”

“Then I’ll pull up a blue waffle for you. Come over. Now. Before you do something stupid.”

“What is a blue waffle?”

I can almost hear his mocking grin. “You’ll see. Guarantee you won’t be thinking about killing for a while. Your mind will need to be bleached.”

“The things I do to stay sane,” I grumble, changing course as I go to investigate this blue waffle thing.

Chapter 15

It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished, unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.

—Voltaire

LOGAN

“Hey,” I say, relaxing when Lana answers the phone.

I don’t blame her for bailing on the madness that followed the sheriff’s unprovoked attack, but I’ve been worried since she hasn’t answered her phone for the past few hours.

The sheriff and his deputies are cooling down back at their station. Johnson won the war on the arrests, but he’s running out of juice. This is one more strike against him in the file Collins is currently preparing.

“Hey,” she says softly, her voice like a soothing balm.

“Where are you?”

I look around the cabin, finding no sign that she’s been back.

“I went for a run. I was getting…annoyed. I don’t like being annoyed,” she says sadly. “I hope you’re okay. I didn’t want to call until I knew for sure you weren’t around any of them.”

“I’m fine, Lana,” I say with a smirk. “Trust me, I can handle a few backwoods cops and an outdated agent with superiority complexes.”

“Don’t underestimate them.”

Her voice comes from behind me, and I toss my phone to the bed when I see her standing in the doorway, her chest rising and falling

rapidly as a small sheen of sweat beads at her forehead.

“A body drops from the tower, and you go for a run,” I say on a sigh, not realizing how tense I was until this moment.

“They were attacking you. I knew if I said anything, I’d just make it worse,” she says as she pulls off her jacket and steps farther into the room. “And I suck at biting my tongue.”

My grin etches up as I move in closer, tugging her to me by her waist.

“I can handle my own battles, so you can use your tongue for better things,” I murmur against her ear, feeling her smile even though I can’t see it.

I start kissing a trail down her neck, and she presses her body to me.

“I’ve needed this,” she says, her arms tightening around me in an embrace.

As much as I’d love to do something more than hug, I realize it’s sort of what I need in this moment too. Mostly because she’s fucking ridiculously brave enough to wander around a town where a man was just skinned alive. Why can’t she be normal and lock herself inside this cabin?

I’m getting an ulcer over her.

“We’re getting away as soon as this case is over. Just you and me and a beach far, far away.”

“I know you said a week but…maybe longer than a week?” she asks, leaning her head back. “My treat?”

“I can’t take more than a week at a time, given our current work load. But maybe soon. And I’ll pay for it.”

She rolls her eyes before her head finds my chest, and she continues holding onto me.

“I love you,” I say softly.

Her arms squeeze me tighter as the chatter outside the window grows restless, everyone waiting on me.

“I love you too,” she says on a long sigh. “I take it you have somewhere to be?”

“Sort of have to find the guy who just skinned a grown man alive.”

She nods and steps back, wiping something away from her eye. “Right. Sorry.”

“You okay?” I ask, lightly gripping her chin and turning her to face me.

She peers up at me, her eyes hesitant. She never asks for anything, but always gives so much. Yet I see a question in her eyes, and I’m willing to do whatever she wants. Even if it’s getting the hell out of here and abandoning this case.

Then again, I still have a lot of justice to find in an extremely unjust town, while pretending to focus only on the current killer. Although, considering Johnson and the sheriff are already plotting my demise, I suppose I could give up pretenses. They know by now I’m doing more than gathering some background that could point to our killer. Hell, I’ve basically announced it.

I’m building a whole fucking case against them.

It’s just really hard to do without any physical evidence.

“What do you need?” I ask her when she grows silent.

“This afternoon, if you get a chance, do you think we could spend a couple of hours together?”

It’s the first time she’s ever asked that. Usually it’s me asking her to bend her life around my crazy schedule, not to mention put up with possible death threats.

“I can take off the entire afternoon,” I say, strumming her cheek with my fingertips.

I really can’t afford it right now, not with Johnson scheming with the director as I speak. But I won’t tell her that.

“Just a couple of hours,” she says with a small smile. “I know you have a lot on your plate.”

The chatter outside keeps growing louder, and I bend to press a kiss to her lips.

“I’ll be back at seven, and then I’m all yours for the rest of the night.”

She closes her eyes as I touch her, as though she’s absorbing the feel of my hand on her cheek.

“Okay,” she says softly, her eyes opening to reveal those haunting green eyes that have forever been seared into my memory.

I kiss her quickly, and head for the door, feeling like I’m doing something wrong. Never once, until now, has she seemed so vulnerable.

When I reach the outside, there are people lined up all around, everyone talking at once. What the hell? How long was I inside? This wasn’t going on when I came in.

“What’s going on?” I ask Elise.

She turns to me with a stoic expression.

“Apparently the amnesia is gone, and suddenly everyone wants to tell the tale of what happened ten years ago, along with everything

that's been going on before and since then. We're going to be taking statements for the rest of the night."

People are lined up all the way down the street, and I run a hand through my hair. I turn to see Lana standing on the porch, her eyes settling on the long line of people who are ready to spill the secrets they've kept for so long.

That coldness is back in her eyes.

It's as though she resents them right now.

Fear is always a good motivator to make people grow honest.

I turn back to Leonard, and he gestures me toward him.

"I'm supposed to ride with Donny to the M.E. to get the report on Davenport," I tell him.

"I'm taking his place. He's going to help with this mess and deal with the deputies who keep showing up and trying to squash the line. Unsurprisingly, no one is backing down. I guess they fear a killer who has the power to skin a monster more than they fear the men who've had them cowering for who knows how long."

I shake my head, leaving behind the mess.

As soon as we're in the car, I crank it and start driving.

"Did you get ahold of Jacob Denver?" I ask.

"He's in California on business, according to his answering machine."

"You don't say," I murmur. "How very convenient. Look into it and see if there's proof."

"Alan confirmed the plane ticket was used and someone checked into a hotel under his name in California. He's pulling security footage, but we both know that a ball cap will obscure most of the visible for a guy in a wheelchair. I'm guessing he planned this out

carefully if he's involved. His alibi will check out, even if it's not really him."

He raps his fingers on the dash like he's nervous, and I give him a sidelong glance.

"What's wrong?" I ask, curious.

"I have a feeling you're not going to like the next part I tell you."

"What part?"

He turns to face me, and I pause at a stop light.

"Alan has been getting watched closely by the director, so I had an old friend do some extra research. I found out that Jacob Denver has another business he's basically a silent partner in."

"Okay…"

"Remember how I told you I had a theory, but thought I was wrong? But then we found out our unsub has a partner?"

"Sure. Why is this making you so nervous?" I ask, confused.

"Does the name Kennedy Carlyle sound familiar for any reason?"

I think of it, trying to mull it over. "The name Carlyle does… Shit. That was the name of the drunk drivers who were behind the wheel of the car that killed Jasmine Evans."

He nods slowly. "They orphaned a daughter who was young. Same age as Victoria, actually. Their birthdays were even close together. Her name was Kennedy."

"What does this have to do with anything?"

He raps his fingers harder, acting more nervous than I've ever seen him before.

"At first I thought it was just serendipitous. I visited the hospital to ask about Victoria Evans, but when I said a sixteen-year-old girl involved in a car crash on that date, they said they'd already spoken

to one FBI agent about her. I got confused, until they handed me a file on Kennedy Carlyle instead of Victoria Evans. They couldn't show me much, but they hit the highlights."

"You've lost me, Leonard," I groan.

"Hadley Grace called them about Kennedy. Pretty typical of her."

"Why?"

He suddenly climbs over the middle, his hip smashing into my shoulder on his way to the backseat.

"What the actual hell?" I harp, swerving when he hits my shoulder again.

"Sorry!" he calls out as he settles into the backseat. "Just wanted to make sure I'm out of hitting range."

My eyebrows hit my hairline.

"Look, it sounded absolutely absurd, but I struggle to believe in coincidences," he rambles on.

"Leonard, I swear, I'm this close to losing my fucking patience." I pinch my fingers together to show him exactly how little patience is left.

"Hadley always researches any girl you're involved with," he finally says.

"I realize everyone thinks I get around a lot, but I've never heard of Kennedy Carlyle," I tell him dryly. "And I don't get around nowhere near as much as the rumors like to say I do."

"She was in the hospital the same night as Victoria Evans—the same night she and Marcus Evans died."

"And?"

"And I found that really coincidental, considering her parents were the reason Jasmine Evans died. So I dug into it a little.

Kennedy Carlyle changed her name a long time ago. Ten years ago to be exact. She also left the hospital against doctor's orders the next day after her life-saving surgery."

"Damn it, Leonard!" I shout.

"Fine! Fine." He takes a long breath. "Before I tell you this, you should know there is no romantic involvement with any other man going on. I researched that very, *very* thoroughly. In fact, she's had very few romantic involvements over the years."

"Why do I give a damn?" I groan.

His eyes dart around the car as I glare at him through the rearview mirror.

"She left with Jacob Denver. The two of them own a buy, sell, and trade store online. And Kennedy Carlyle now goes by Lana Myers."

My blood seizes in my veins as all the oxygen leaves my lungs painfully. The car skids to an abrupt halt, and Leonard catches himself on the back of the seat in front of him.

"Seatbelt," he mutters, grimacing. "Why didn't I think of a seatbelt?"

But my ears are thumping wildly with the drumming of my over-stimulated heart. My hands grip the steering wheel too tightly as I stare ahead but see nothing.

"She loves you, Logan. I think you should know that before you react at all."

Something ignites loudly, and a hissing of fire drags me out of my head for a brief moment as a fire lights and slithers over a wall at the town hall. People trip and stare—gawk, actually—as the words appear, written in fire this time.

Run. Before the town burns to the ground. Run. Run. Run.

“No,” I say quietly, shaking my head. “No. There’s no way it’s Lana.”

“I thought that at first,” he says too quietly. “Then I read the reports on Plemmons from the autopsy. Lana had a few bruises. Plemmons was loaded down with them. A man who had easily subdued so many women in the past just ran over a knife after taking a beating? We just never looked into it, because—”

“Hadley,” I say on a rasp whisper.

“Yeah. Hadley. And then there was the pedophile who hurt—”

“Hadley,” I say again, feeling the binds of betrayal squeezing tighter and tighter, almost as though it’s becoming a tangible noose around my neck.

“Yeah,” he whispers, so much pity in his voice. “Obviously she believes in whatever Lana has told her about this crusade. After what Hadley went through, it’s not surprising. I understand it too, but…I don’t understand how she can be a proxy but not be suffering any signs of psychotic breaks. I feel like I’m missing something.”

My chest gets heavier and heavier as the truth slowly creeps into my every bone, robbing me of my ability to use any of my motor functions.

“She does love you,” he says quietly from the back seat. “I’ve seen it, Logan. She risked it all to—”

“*Stop* talking,” I say on a rasp, unable to say more when my throat knots up.

Cars pass us as we idle in the middle of the street, and I continue to stare aimlessly.

Every morning I woke up and spent the day worried about her safety, dreading every second away. And every night she laid down

with her secrets, possibly laughing at me.

“You’re a profiler,” Leonard says, ignoring my demand for silence. “You know what she feels isn’t imitation. Don’t do anything stupid, Logan. You may be the only thing grounding her to reality, and if you love her… Just remember the story about Katie.”

I snort derisively as my heart kicks my chest.

“Stop. Talking.”

Instead of driving to the M.E., I turn around and drive back to the cabins.

“Don’t tell anyone else yet. I want a confession,” I say with a deadly calm tone.

“I said don’t do anything stupid, Logan.”

My hands grip the wheel tighter, betrayal continuing its course through my bitter veins.

I’ve loved a killer who I knew nothing about. I’ve loved a girl who was obsessed with a dead family to the extent of killing, or manipulated by a man who preyed on her psychosis.

One way or another, I’m finding out tonight.

Chapter 16

Tears are the silent language of grief.
—Voltaire

LANA

I'm just stepping out of the bathroom, adjusting my towel, when Logan steps through the bedroom door, scaring the shit out of me.

"You gave me a heart attack," I groan, gripping my chest. But then my lips turn up in a smile, despite his very serious expression.

"Come back for the circus outside?" I ask, adjusting the towel.

"Everyone is gone. There was a new message in fire this time. I'm sure everyone all over town has said something to someone else. Things get around fast in a small town."

"Small towns everywhere have that nasty little habit," I chirp, swallowing anything else I might want to say on the matter.

He continues staring at me, his serious expression growing foreboding.

"Are you okay?" I ask, getting worried.

"Yeah," he says, stalking toward me.

I don't have the chance to ask more, because he's suddenly on me, his lips crushing mine in a painful kiss. There's no finesse or tenderness the way there usually is.

It's hard, demanding, almost punishing, but I kiss him back, clinging to him. I'm not sure how he already got some free time, but I'm all for it.

“I love you,” I say against his lips, which earns me an even harder, just shy of painful kiss as he lifts me and drops me to the bed, coming down on top of me.

He doesn’t return the words, possibly because he’s too busy tearing his clothes off, frantic to have me. When his lips find mine again, it’s no gentler.

He shoves my legs apart with the same rough vigor, and then he thrusts in. I cry out in surprise, thankful that I happen to get wet easily around him. That could have hurt otherwise.

And he thrusts in harder, and harder, and harder… It just goes on and on, his hips thrashing angrily to no rhythm.

“I love you,” I say against his ear when he breaks the kiss and drops his head beside mine.

Again he doesn’t return the sentiment, and he continues to fuck me wildly, violently, furiously. As good as it feels, a hollowness forms in my chest, a dull ache growing and expanding over me.

I cling to him harder as a tear falls, realization slowly sinking in. He grips my hips, arching me up, taking me like I’m his to own…his to break.

Another tear. And another. Not from any physical pain, because there’s only intense pleasure. It’s because you don’t have angry sex unless you’re angry, and Logan is furious.

And he’s using me.

One last time.

Punishing me.

Because he knows.

But he still doesn’t know the whole truth.

Tears slip free faster, and I take it. I wish it didn't feel so incredible, but the flesh enjoys it even as the heart shatters beneath it.

I cry out, unable to help myself when an orgasm tears through me. Even as I cry from emotional anguish, the physical pleasure still forces my body to shudder with desire.

As he stills inside me, my heart pounds, shattering more and more with each passing beat. I knew it would hurt.

I knew it would devastate me.

I had no idea it would strangle me with a heavier hand with each passing second.

"You know," I whisper softly, the broken sound of my voice nearly scratching my own ears.

He pulls off me as abruptly as this all began, and my hands are jerked above my head. I don't even fight as I stare at him, watching him refuse to look at me as my hands get bound to the wrought iron headboard with his handcuffs.

My tears fall without mercy, embarrassing me, humiliating me, robbing me of any dignity I might find in this moment.

And he leaves me naked as he stands and pulls on his clothes, not saying a word until he's fully dressed.

He still doesn't look at me.

"I shouldn't have done that," he says bitterly. "Then again, I also should have known I was sleeping with a killer for the past several months."

Finally, he levels me with cold blue eyes that lack a single ounce of warmth.

There's pain, and then there's agony.

It’s been a long time since I felt the agony I unleash on my victims.

But I feel it now.

It’s bone-deep, gut-wrenching, and powerful enough to pulverize you from the inside. Naked and cuffed to a bed as I cry the painfully hot tears, I try to ignore the agony that continues to rip through me with a relentless force.

But it’s useless.

I’m still too raw from the wounds I opened up last night.

I’m too in love to pretend I don’t care.

And the heartache is too real not to feel it through every cell of my very existence.

I no longer wish to be a romantic. Because it hurts too fucking much.

“Logan, I—”

“You’ll shut the hell up right now, Lana,” he snaps, his eyes glistening with his own unshed tears. “I loved you. I cared about you. And you? All you fucking did was lie! You used me!”

I start to speak again, but he grabs my mouth, painfully pushing it closed. The worst thing he could do is what he’s doing now.

Silencing me.

It was the worst part of it all.

Being silenced, because no one wanted to hear.

Now the one person I’ve opened myself up enough to love is silencing me.

I grasp for anger; I search for the cold; but I’m greeted with nothing but more misery and tears as they cascade with too much freedom.

But he's cold. He's like ice. Yet says what I felt was a lie.

"You're sick. You need help. And I honestly have no fucking clue what to do with you right now, because… You know what? You figure out why. You made this mess, threw me in it without giving a damn about how it would affect me, and you can stay in here and stew on what's about to happen."

He turns abruptly, and I rein in my words.

"Kennedy Carlyle," he says under his breath. "Un-fucking-believable."

It's on the tip of my tongue to explain everything, but that coldness finally washes over me, stealing some of the pain as I close my eyes and search for it…beg for it.

Jake was right. Logan never would have chosen me.

He just proved it.

He didn't even ask.

He didn't even care.

As he slams the door and storms away, I slowly open my eyes, staring at nothing as I slide my wrists down the pole. My body works on auto-pilot, my foot finding my purse and dragging it up.

I never take my eyes off the wall as more of the coldness creeps in, rushing through my veins with renewed purpose. I want to be numb, but that will take a while. It'll take more kills than I have time for today.

It'll take more of my soul that I just got back.

As I find the lock pick kit and work it up to my hands to find the proper tools, I continue staring ahead, not needing my eyes for anything. I'm not usually too good at picking locks, but apparently having your heart ripped out is some extra incentive to get it right.

As soon as I’m freed, I slowly climb out of bed, dress myself, grab my things, pack my bag, and casually walk out of the cabin like there’s no reason to be in a hurry. My mind is almost blank. Even as fresh tears fall, the coldness grows stronger.

As soon as I make it to the newest place Jake has set up since abandoning his father’s hunter’s cabin, I find my best friend.

His eyes come up, and his features pale as I drop to my knees, my body giving out as it starts to shake with the silent pain I’m working so hard to suppress.

I thought love would rip my heart out.

I thought it would set me on fire.

Instead, it turned me into ice.

End of book 4