

# PAINT IT ALL RED

MINDF*CK SERIES

S.T. ABBY

# Paint It All Red

Book 5 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.

*Love is not supposed to be beautiful. It's supposed to be a raw, gritty struggle that forces you to face the most vulnerable parts of yourself, so that when the good times come, you can savor and enjoy them, fully appreciate what they're worth. Otherwise, you take it all for granted.*

*—Lana Myers*

Fuck the list. It's time for the endgame.

# Chapter 1

*We are rarely proud when we are alone.*
*—Voltaire*

## LOGAN

Hadley jumps when I sling open the door to her room. She jerks out her earbuds, clutching her chest with her free hand.

“Cheese and rice, you lunatic. Don’t scare someone like that when there’s a serial killer literally in our backyard.”

“Or living just a few cabins down, right?” I ask dryly, though there’s an edge to my tone that has her entire body stiffening.

She doesn’t even have to say the words, but I want to hear them.

“You knew?” I ask her quietly, my tone full of disbelief and heartbreak.

Everything hurts right now, even as I fight off the onslaught of emotions. In this unit, you train against showing emotion at all costs. I’ve never found that to be harder to do than today.

Her lips move for several seconds before words actually start coming out.

“Logan, I’m sorry, but—”

“You knew!” I shout with accusation, as my fist slams into the wall, and my entire body heaves for a breath of air that doesn’t feel lined with lead.

“Logan!” she yells, but I turn around and face her, slowly regaining my calm. “Listen. It was complicated, and she—”

“We’re done, Hadley. You and me. I’m fucking done with you,” I say on a broken promise.

Tears immediately spring from her eyes.

“Are you serious?” She has the nerve to ask that with incredulity in her tone.

“Yeah. I can’t be friends with someone who could watch me fall in love with someone like that and *not* tell me the truth.”

Her eyes narrow, and her lips tremble. “Someone like *that*? Someone who would kill or die to keep you safe? Someone who loved you so much that she almost gave up her revenge?”

“Her revenge?” I ask bitterly, shaking my head as I turn and stalk away. “It’s not *her* fucking revenge!”

I slam the door behind me, and stalk next door to where Leonard almost falls off the chair when I burst in. “Shit! Easy, man. I’m trying to find some more info on Ken—”

His words die when he sees my face. “Oh shit,” he says on an exhale.

“Yeah,” I say, dropping to a chair and grabbing the bottle of whiskey he has hanging out of his go-bag. “She admitted it.”

“She what?” he asks, shocked.

“She basically admitted it. I couldn’t stick around for a full confession.”

“Where the hell is she?”

I run my sleeve over my eyes, then turn up the bottle.

“Cuffed to my bed,” I say when I lower the bottle.

His eyes grow wider.

“I have no idea what to do right this second. She’s fucked my head up so much that I can’t bear turning her over to anyone in this

town or the FBI. But I know I have to do something. Since I don't know what, I cuffed her in place."

It's a terrible fucking way to stall, but it's the only solution I currently have.

He scrubs his face before shoving a file at me.

"I can't find anything at all in her history—besides drug use—that would make her willing to do anything like this. She's been clean for years though, and I haven't noticed any track marks. And she's not delusional or suffering a psychotic—"

"Hence the fucking reason I don't know what to do," I growl. "She's lucid, well aware of her surroundings, too fucking smart to be too stupid, and definitely not the type to be easily manipulated by anyone—not even Jacob Denver."

I laugh humorlessly as a memory surfaces. She called him Jake, even fucking told me *Jake* was her bisexual *business* partner. I never pieced the shit together. Because I was too blinded by everything I felt for her to even *consider* such a possibility.

"Here's the file," he says quietly. "Have a look at it. Maybe it'll help you figure it out."

I jerk the file from the tabletop, and I flip it open. I'm immediately grimacing when I see the folder, because of the grizzly pictures. But there's one thing that doesn't make sense.

"What the hell?" I ask quietly.

Blue eyes. In the picture they have on file *before* the accident, Kennedy Carlyle looks nothing like Lana Myers. And her eye color was blue—no contacts.

I flip the pictures, finding the photos taken for the police report of Kennedy's damage. I know Lana's body too well, and the marks in

the picture, though somewhat similar, aren't exact.

A chilling sensation creeps up my spine as sickening possibilities start to unfold.

"Any chance you have the file on Victoria Evans?" I ask calmly, keeping my voice steady.

He hands it to me immediately.

"Why?"

I take a quick, steadying breath before I open the file, and a pair of haunted green eyes stare back at me with a face that doesn't match Lana's, but still carries some resemblance.

My heart sinks to my toes as I flip open the pictures, finding the ones they also sent to the police. Nausea almost overwhelms me when I see the marks aligning perfectly with the scars I know by heart.

"Oh shit," I say on a hissed breath.

"What?" Leonard demands.

My eyes pop up as regret wells and explodes inside me, shaking me to the core.

"Lana Myers is not Kennedy Carlyle."

He looks genuinely confused, and I hand him the same folder.

"Lana Myers is Victoria Evans."

He drops the folder like it's on fire as his eyes jerk up to meet mine, wide with shock.

Somehow, probably with some help from Jake, she went in as Victoria Evans, and left as Kennedy Carlyle. Considering I can barely stomach looking at either of their badly crushed faces in those photos, it's not a surprise that he did it with such ease.

"That changes everything," he says on weary breath.

He breaks out his laptop, and I lean back, my anger slowly fading as my mind starts to work. I stopped at that coffee shop by chance, because our usual spot was too crowded. I pursued her, wanted to earn her trust, even saw something in her I needed for myself.

Every smile before me was probably rare. Every smile with me was given freely with genuineness. Every touch was hungry and full of emotion she struggles to show.

She trusted me.

“You may very well be the damn reason she’s not suffered a break,” Leonard hisses, still typing away on his laptop.

I take another shot of liquid courage and stand, but Leonard catches my wrist.

“These images don’t match up on the computer.”

“What?”

He points to the files. “I got copies of their paper files. You know I’m old-school. But on the computer, the images are swapped.”

I look on the screen, and sure enough, Victoria Evans has the wounds of Kennedy Carlyle and vice versa. Green eyes meet mine from Kennedy’s file.

“Jake could change what they had in the computers, but not before they started a physical file,” I whisper to myself.

I’d have never known.

“What are you going to do?” Leonard asks me.

“Tell Hadley not to say anything. I can’t talk to her right now. And you don’t say anything either.”

He almost smiles, but stops himself. He’s been advocating for her from the sidelines, and I’ve been on the verge of removing him from this case.

All along, I was in love with the girl who wants this town dead.

I jog back to my cabin, swing open the door, and practically sprint to the bedroom. That's when my heart sinks.

The handcuffs are tossed on the floor, along with the sheet. And everything Lana brought is gone.

I swallow against the knot in my throat, slowly lowering myself to the bed.

She saved my life.

I cast her aside.

It takes me a minute to realize I've been gone for over an hour, even though it feels like only minutes. I gave her too much time to disappear.

I grab my phone and dial Leonard as I walk outside.

"I need to know any ties to this town that they still have."

Typing rattles in the background. I'm tempted to ask Hadley, but after what I just said to her, I doubt she'd be likely to help.

"Christopher Denver owns one of those hunting cabins in the woods. I'll text you the location."

I hang up and immediately change clothes and shoes. You can't run through the woods too well in a suit.

I dart out of the house seconds later, reading the text with the location. More memories flit through my head as I run.

Lisa fucking taunted her, practically tried to provoke Lana. Lana could have destroyed her.

Or Victoria, rather.

She left the argument with Johnson and the sheriff earlier because they were pissing her off, and she was afraid of what'd she'd *do*, not what'd she say.

Seeing the sheriff had to be hard on her, and she asked for two fucking hours, as though she needed me. And I came back, fucked her, then unloaded mayhem, as if I was daring her to show her true colors.

I walked out when she simply cried. The cold-hearted killer who tortured and slaughtered the monsters from her past… I made her cry. She never even got angry.

There are so many unpredictable variables about her, and I have no idea what to do.

As soon as I reach the cabin, I pull my gun from my ankle holster, holding it at my side. After two quick breaths, I kick in the door, but stop moving, my gun still at my side and not aimed at anything.

Jacob Denver is sitting on a couch like he's been waiting for me.

I cock my head, my eyes narrowing, and he sits comfortably, completely relaxed.

My eyes dart around, seeing the empty cabin and bare walls. He speaks as I clutch the gun with both hands, ready to aim it at him if he gives me a reason.

"I knew you were coming," he drawls, leaning up. "So put your gun away. If I was a threat, you'd already be dead. Fortunately for you, I happen to enjoy breathing, and I'm not sure Lana would be okay with me retaining oxygen if I laid a hand on you."

I cut my gaze toward him, releasing the gun with one hand, while holding it with the other.

"Where is she?"

He snorts derisively. "You came alone, which means you haven't told your team yet. Well, other than the Leonard guy whose cabin you charged into then ran out a little while later."

“You’re watching us. Big surprise. I already knew this. Where *is* Victoria?”

His eyes widen marginally. “Oh, so you’ve figured out the truth now instead of slamming her with accusations and silencing her. Little late, don’t you think?”

There’s a harsh bitterness to his tone, like he hates me and has been waiting to be proven right.

“Her name is Lana. Victoria Evans was killed by this town. She *can’t* be Victoria Evans. She had to reinvent herself just to find the will to go on. You called her sick, but you have no idea what you’re up against. You have no fucking idea what she survived.”

His words grow angrier with each new sentence, and he slowly stands.

I grip the gun tighter with one hand, watching him warily.

“Looks like your legs work just fine,” I quip, eyeing the man who has played the world.

He taps his legs. “They work better than your mind.”

“I thought she was Kennedy Carlyle, and had developed an unhealthy obsession with the Evans family due to the two coincidental times their paths crossed with death. And—”

“Kennedy Carlyle was a self-absorbed drug addict, who, quite frankly, was a motherfucking menace to society. It was only a matter of time before she got as high as her parents got drunk and killed someone. As fate would have it, she only killed a tree the night she also killed herself. Seemed like a waste of a perfectly good identity and funds for someone who needed to survive.”

“I assumed it was you,” I say calmly. “The one who changed her world.”

“Falsifying hospital records is actually easy, as long as you know where to start,” he says, once again tapping the sides of his legs that he fooled the world into believing were useless. “She needed a legitimate identity; she needed money; she needed a chance. If they’d found out she survived, they would have come. And back then? They would have killed her with almost no effort.”

He blows out a breath, trying to calm his anger. I continue staring, letting him speak, trying to figure all this out as he does.

“When she told me she was screwing around with a FBI agent, I almost had a fucking brain aneurism,” he says, looking away while laughing humorlessly. “I’d killed myself trying to make sure no one ever figured out who she was.”

His eyes meet mine again.

“Then we talked face-to-face, and she fucking smiled when she said your name. She smiled like there was hope.” He swallows a knot. “I forced her to separate the kills by a month, telling her it was more cautious, when really—”

“You worried when this was all over, she’d no longer have a purpose to stay alive.”

His eyes glisten, and he clears his throat, nodding stoically.

“I was stalling,” he says quietly. “But after she met you? I saw so much fucking hope. As of today, I saw an empty shell. I wanted to be wrong about you, SSA Bennett. I went along with all her changes to our plans. Do you know why she refused to let you hear the story from Lindy?”

I tilt my head before putting my gun in the back of my pants.

“She wanted us to hear the story when we got here. She wanted it to have maximum impact.”

He stares me hard in the eyes. “She wanted it to have the maximum impact on *you.* To hell with all the others. She may still want revenge, but everything else has been centered around you. She practically prayed the Boogeyman would come after her, just so she could kill him and end the threat he posed to *your* life. And you treat her like a monster. Why? Because she kills? Do you treat your military like monsters? Do you stare at your own reflection with such disdain? Because I’ve seen your file. You’ve shot and killed thirteen serial killers since your career began. Those were real monsters, just like all the men Lana has dispatched.”

I stagger on my feet, struggling with that thin line between madness and sanity.

“But she’s supposed to what? Just move on and forget it happened?” he goes on. “Because the law says it’s wrong to exact revenge on monsters unless you have a badge or a government decree?” He takes a step toward me, holding his finger in my direction. “This is a girl who spent *years* training, learning control to keep her mind sound. Something our military or law enforcement doesn’t even require. These men? They destroyed her entire family. They destroyed her. Two fucking kids!” His voice breaks, and he turns around, putting his back to me when his emotions get the better of him.

I don’t even know what to say. Anything but agreement would result in a possible violent outburst from him, and for some reason, I can’t bring myself to fully agree aloud either.

I’ve always been on one side of the law, working tirelessly for justice through all the proper channels.

But Lana tried. Jake tried. They were denied.

“I loved him,” he says as he turns back around, unshed tears battling to drop from his eyes. “I loved him and treated him like my dirty little secret in public, while loving him with all I had behind closed doors. Marcus accepted the scraps I offered, because he loved me so much he couldn’t let me go, even though he deserved better.”

Tears fall from his eyes, and he bats them away angrily.

“There wasn’t a time in all these years that I questioned what I’d do for him since failing him so terribly when he was still alive. I took him for granted. I took what we had for granted. I never realized how very fucking rare it all was or how quickly it could all be gone.”

He slowly drops to the couch again, his knees seeming to give out.

“Lana… I never thought she’d love anyone the way I loved Marcus. I thought they’d broken her. I thought they’d stolen every last shred of her heart. The only thing keeping her alive was the fire inside her that burned with pure, unadulterated hatred.”

He looks up, meeting my gaze once again. “She loved you. She had two visions of how this would all go. One ended with you loving her as much as she loves you, and you’d stand by her no matter what, feel her pain as if it was your own. Unfortunately, you chose option number two, proving me right, even though I desperately wanted you to prove me wrong.”

I still can’t find the right words, and he continues to have tears drop occasionally as he glares at me with nothing less than contempt.

“Real love? The kind Lana gave you? It’s the kind of love that looks beyond one’s offenses against others and only calls to the

soul. Lana saved a child. Lana risked *everything* to save you. Lana saved countless women by killing Plemmons. Yet you still view her as a monster by not meeting your generalized populous version of morality. In your eyes, it's better to forever be the victim than to ever feel peace again, because a real monster might die at the hands of someone who won't show mercy."

"Where's Lana?" I ask softly, trying not to agitate him farther.

"If Lana wants to be found, she'll let you find her. Knowing her identity won't stop her. In his life as a selfless, loving, incredible person, Marcus only ever made one selfish request. I'll go to the grave before I deny him that request, and so will Lana. Revenge, that's all he wanted he wanted from her. And revenge he'll have."

"Where is she?" I ask again.

"She let the story fall into place, guiding you to the truth slowly, letting it sink in…all the torture she endured. All the pain her family faced. She changed absolutely everything to accommodate her hopes for you. Way to fuck it all up."

"Where is she, Jacob?" I growl.

He eyes me, and a smirk crosses his lips. "I prefer Jake," he quips. "And you've already lost. Lana and I worked tirelessly for a long time to profile this entire town, deciding each and every possible path the key players would take. We've prepared for every outcome, and we stay ten steps ahead. Knowing our identity won't help you. In fact, tell them it's Victoria back from the grave with my help? The entire town will erupt in panic."

My jaw tics as I stare him down.

"Where. Is. She?"

“That’s no longer your concern,” he says dismissively. “I only came here to make sure her words were spoken, since you did the worst thing you could possibly do. You silenced her. You refused to listen. Now I have to pray I’m enough of a reason for her to want to live.”

I lift my gun, aiming it at him, even though I have no intention of actually pulling the trigger.

“Where is she? I won’t ask again.”

His eyes grow colder. “As I said, we’ve prepared for every possible outcome of every situation.”

He raises his hands slowly, like he’s going to put them behind his head, but instead, he puts something in his ears.

“I should mention, I even estimated the amount of time this conversation would take.”

Before I can even question that, a high-pitch, piercing noise attacks my ears, and I drop the gun to clutch my head that seems to be wobbling like a drum under attack. I’m forced to my knees as the sound grows excruciating to my ears, and my eyes screw shut as I fight to stand back up.

Just as suddenly as it began, the noise stops, and even though my hearing might take a few minutes to get right, I feel instant relief. My eyes fly open to see that Jake is already gone, and I look at the box on the wall that just brought me to my knees.

He really has fucking planned everything down to the last detail, just as Lana has. Only she had hoped for a different outcome.

My mind feels like it’s gone through a mind-fuck blender. Up is down. Right is left. Good is bad.

Before I can stop myself, I slam my fist into the wall, ignoring the searing pain that shoots up my arm when my knuckles strike the unforgiving wood.

I learned to control all my emotions long before I joined the FBI. I learned to hide the anger. Learned to be stoic. Learned to taper any sort of feeling that was too strong.

But not today.

I fall apart, tossing everything in the cabin as my heart gets yanked out of my chest, and I lash out for the first time in over fifteen years.

## Chapter 2

*By that sin, fell the angels.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LANA

Alyssa Murdock grimaces as she takes a sip of her drink, unaware that I'm watching her through the trees. Every time her shirt rises up, I see the bruises on her back.

Hearing it and seeing it are two different things.

Very few of my victims have children. Alyssa is the only offspring who isn't an adult.

At eight, she's still a child, with far too many bruises in her history, and too many scars on her heart. Despite the shit-hand life has dealt me, I never once felt the strike of my father's anger. He never hit me. I was doted on and loved. As a child should be.

But Greg Murdock has hit his daughter too many times.

He gets bumped up on the list because of that.

Turning away and leaving her to hide her bruises in front of her friends who are playing on the treehouse with her, I pull my hood back up and leave my lurking shadows.

Hadley's number silently flashes on my screen again, and I ignore her call once more. My eyes flit over her text, and a twinge of guilt hits me, even though no other emotion is infiltrating the barrier I have in place right now.

**HADLEY: Logan knows!**

I know she's worried, which is why she keeps calling. But right now, in this moment, I don't trust myself to speak to anyone.

Since Jake left earlier, my tears have all dried up, and my heart keeps garnering a new layer of ice with each passing moment.

I'm back in survival mode, shutting off everything to keep from drowning in the pain. If I allow myself to feel right now, I'll never stop crying.

And there is no time for tears.

**ME: I know. Look after yourself. Don't worry about me.**

**ME: And thank you for accepting me and understanding.**

My finger hovers over the option to send that last message, but I finally press it and turn my phone off, removing the battery. Then I head back toward the house we've commandeered, courtesy of the Dalia family that only lives here during the Christmas season and summer.

It's secluded, the house hidden from the main road by a veil of thick trees. Only a slender driveway leads to the home, and we have sensors in to alert us if anyone passes over them.

The end is coming.

But I almost don't even care anymore.

My dispassion is just one repercussion of turning numb to survive.

A car rolls by me as I walk down the long driveway, and I glance over, seeing Jake's eyes meet mine through the window. I cut my gaze away, because he's searching me, watching me, worrying about my intentions now that the light is officially gone.

My brother sacrificed his own life to save mine. Even without Logan standing by me, I owe it to my brother to survive, regardless if it is a soulless, empty existence. I just don't have the drive to make that my ultimate goal any longer.

My main priority is to see this through, grant my brother's dying wish, and finally lay to rest all the misery from the past.

Jake drives on, parking at the end of the driveway, and he gets out, heading straight toward me.

"So you disappeared into the woods again?" Jake asks.

"I did some recon. Hitting Murdock tonight."

"Tonight?" he asks, a worried note to his tone.

"I need something to stab, and he needs to be stabbed. Seems like we could help each other out," I tell him dryly.

He grabs my arm, halting me from walking by, and I stare into his concerned eyes.

"Lana, take a minute and regroup. Logan—"

"Logan is a guy who was never meant to be in my life," I answer coldly, ignoring the trickle of pain that slowly starts sparking across my heart.

I suppress the urge to rub my chest, knowing it would give me away, and I walk inside the house with Jake following me. When I turn around, I hate what I see.

So much pity is staring at me right now through my best friend's eyes.

“You should see this,” he says, pulling out his phone. “I spoke to Logan.”

My eyes widen, and my mouth falls open. “What?! Why would you risk that?”

“I didn’t risk anything, and for you, nothing is too big of a risk. He wouldn’t hear your words, so I made him listen.” He turns and walks away, but I follow on his heels.

I blink back the tears I’ve barely been staving off all day. “You had no right,” I growl.

He spins, facing me as he walks backwards.

“He figured out all the good parts by himself by the time he found me. Don’t worry, Lana. I’m playing the game your way.”

My feet freeze to their spot, and that coldness reforms, stealing away the tears that almost fell. It’s as though Jake sees it, because his face falls.

“I’m not playing a game, and there’s no longer a prize.”

He groans as I pass him. “Damn it, Lana. That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“I do know it. I need to go for another run, and then we’ll talk about tonight’s murder.”

He grabs my wrist, and I react, slinging him around and coming down on top of him as he crashes to the living room floor. He grunts as I pin him, working all my muscles to hold him in place.

“How is it that we both took all those damn classes, but you’re the fucking master and I still feel intermediate.”

Despite my best efforts, my lips twitch as the shield around me thaws a fragment.

“For the same reason I took all those same tech classes and can barely work my smart phone, whilst you create virtual empires.”

He smiles up at me, and I climb off him, helping him to his feet. When his smile starts to slip, I know the seriousness is about to come back.

“There’s something you should see.”

Curious, I follow him as he grabs his phone from the ground, where it fell during his takedown. As he lifts it and moves his fingers rapidly over the screen, searching for something, I stare idly through the window.

Delaney Grove was once my home. Then it became my hell.

Now I just want out of here because it’s nothing to me anymore.

But it was something to Marcus.

To my mother.

To my father.

Their bodies are all buried here, just like Kennedy Carlyle is. Although her tombstone actually says Victoria Evans.

What a fucked up mess we wove so delicately.

It was a fool-proof plan. I thought the worst thing I could do was go insane from the dark depths I had to reach. Turns out, falling in love was truly the worst. The darkness is just my twisted little friend.

“Here,” Jake says, pressing play on his phone.

He sits down as I study the screen, seeing the time stamp on the video being almost an hour old. It doesn’t stop my heart from pounding just seeing Logan.

He slams his fist into the wall, and I grimace, ignoring the heat of my tears as they beckon to fall. From there, he loses it, slinging a

chair across the room. One thing after another gets smashed as he yells at nothing and no one.

He grabs a bat from the corner, and he slams it into the window, busting it out. Then he takes the bat to the rest of the room, smashing anything he can break as he loses all control.

I slowly back against the wall, and my body slides down it until my ass touches the floor. And I watch. I watch the man who never loses control have a meltdown.

This is my fault.

I should have walked away.

“He loves you,” Jake says, clutching my shoulder, no longer sitting as he crouches beside me.

I move away from his touch as Logan continues to annihilate the room, destroying anything that will break.

“He doesn’t love me like I love him,” I say hoarsely. “I love him enough to burn the world to the ground in his name.”

I touch the screen as Logan’s warpath comes to an end, and his chest heaves as he drops his head back, staring up at the ceiling. Finally, he stalks out of the cabin, his mask of composure back in place as he slams the door behind him so hard it simply bounces open again.

“He just loves me enough to feel betrayed,” I add on a rasp whisper.

Jake goes stiff beside me, and I hand him his phone as I wipe away a stray tear.

“You didn’t give him time, Lana. Maybe now—”

“Now what?” I ask, exasperated. “Don’t you think I’d love to ride off into the sunset with him? I’m not being stubborn, Jake. You’re

constantly worried about my hold on reality because of the dark places I have to go to finish all these kills. But you're the one being irrational right now. Logan found out the truth. He fucked me and left me cuffed to a bed, and when he left…there was nothing but disgust and pain in his eyes."

I choke back a sob, refusing to fall apart again right now.

Jake's eyes are full of tears as my lip trembles, but I go on. "He's so pure. So good. So honest and genuine. So gentle and kind. It's all those qualities that made me fall in love, because he was everything —*everything!*—I'd always wanted in someone. And he loved me. Yet, I wanted to taint the very things about him that made me fall in love, just so I could selfishly take him to the dark with me and keep him. It was wrong."

"It's not selfish, Lana," Jake argues gingerly.

"You haven't found love since Marcus, even though Marcus only ever wanted that for you. His note begged you to move on and find love. His words beseeched me to burn down this fucking town. You haven't done your part to ensure his last request, because you've been too busy helping me with mine. Maybe it's time to break up this partnership so you can finally have that chance."

Anger flashes across his eyes, and he pushes to his feet, coming to get right in my face.

"We swore we'd never do this to each other, Lana. Never push the other away no matter how intense the world around us got. You don't get to fucking send me away because you're hurting. Got that? You don't get to use Marcus against me *ever* again. Understood?"

I swallow the knot in my throat as tear after fucking tear escapes my eyes, and I nod weakly, hating myself for doing that. Jake's arms

go around me, and I immediately wrap my arms around him in return.

We stand there, fixed in an embrace, and for a brief moment, he feels and smells just like Marcus always did. I close my eyes, pretending for a second that my brother is back, holding me to him, regretting the weight he put on my shoulders.

He wanted happiness for Jake. He wanted wrath from me.

He thought Jake too kind for such a task.

He knew the anger would burn harshly in my broken heart.

He knew I was a monster before I did.

My face is pressed against his chest as the illusion of it being Marcus slowly starts to fade. It's just as comforting knowing it's Jake. He's been my brother for ten years.

Turning my head so that my cheek is cushioned by his chest, I stare at the monitor with Logan on the screen. He's in the town square now, no longer looking like a betrayed man.

He's talking to his team, but the sound is muted, so I don't know what he's saying. It was over an hour ago that he had his meltdown. By now, he could be sending them to find me.

"Sometimes, I wonder what my brother must have thought of me to know I'd be able to do all of this," I say softly.

Jake's arms tighten around me. "He thought you were the strongest person he ever knew, and he raved about your fire all the time, Victoria," he tells me.

I shake my head. "Never call me that again," I whisper.

He kisses the top of my head, sighing harshly. "We can stop this anytime you want. You've more than fulfilled the promise you made."

My eyes lift to another screen where Sheriff Cannon is holding a private meeting with his deputies. My eyes narrow, because I know they're plotting.

"No. I can't. If I don't finish this today, someone else could face the pain we did. They'll never stop, and no one else will ever stop them. If I stop now, it was all for nothing. I need there to be a reason why this happened to us, even if that reason is simply because I'm the only one capable of being sick enough to finish this once and for all."

As I push away from him, Jake grabs my wrist, turning me back to face him. When our eyes collide, I see the steely glint in his gaze.

"*You* are not sick. Marcus was right—you're the strongest fucking person I know. You're not sick, Lana. You're a fucking dark angel that can set the world free from this *sick* town."

I offer him a brittle smile, giving him the illusion that his words have helped me. Doesn't matter what I am. Doesn't matter who I am.

All that matters is that I finish my mission.

Avenge my family.

And burn this town to the ground.

I don't need to feel love in order to be a monster.

I just need to remember.

It's not hard to do with the sun getting close to setting. The dark sky always calls to the memories if I allow it. For once, I let them in.

*"No!" I shout, reaching for my father as Deputy Murdock restrains me, almost ripping my left arm out of socket to jerk me back. "He didn't do this! He couldn't!"*

*"He's always with us at night!" Marcus shouts, battling his own fight with Deputy Briggs as he wrenches Marcus's arm behind his*

*back and slams him into the wall.*

*"It's okay, kids," Dad says, tears pouring from his eyes. "Don't fight them. I'm okay. It'll all be okay. There's no way they can convict me of crimes I didn't commit."*

*"Good thing we can convict you of crimes you did commit, you evil son of a bitch," Sheriff Cannon growls, slamming his fist into my father's stomach so hard that my father buckles at the waist and collapses to the ground, his hands cuffed behind him.*

*Marcus and I both scream in vain, begging them to stop the sheriff when he kicks our father in the face while he's down. Dad flips to his back, blood pooling from his mouth after the strike.*

*He's trying to be strong in front of us, but a small sob escapes him when the sheriff kicks him again, this time right in his side.*

*"Easy, not here," SSA Johnson says, smirking at us as we continue to try and break free from our holds. "But you should know, there is evidence to your father's crimes."*

*He bends, crouching beside my father.*

*"You're never going to see freedom again, and I'll make sure of that, no matter what I have to do," Johnson says acidly, a sinister grin on his face.*

*Murdock slings me back against the wall when I try to break free again, and I cry out when his weight comes down on top of me. "Maybe I should teach him a lesson and let him watch all the sick things he did to our women..." His words trail off as he brushes my hair to the side, and I go rigid against him. "Using his daughter," he adds, his voice an eerie promise.*

*"No!" Dad shouts, earning another kick from the sheriff.*

*“Do that, and I’ll arrest you myself,” Johnson growls. “We’re after Evans. Those are just kids. Now come on. We have our man. We still have a long road ahead of us.”*

*“Or we could just end it now,” Briggs says, still holding Marcus.*

*Murdock continues to restrain me, still pressing his disgusting body against mine.*

*“We do things my way,” Johnson growls. “You’ll have your vengeance. But for now, we do things my way.”*

*My father is beaten and almost incoherent as they jerk him to his feet. His head hangs as I cry, begging once again for them to listen to the truth. To HEAR me. But no one listens.*

*No one cares.*

*Johnson and the sheriff drag my father out the door, and I watch my life get ripped apart.*

*Murdock pulls me back, creating a small separation between me and the wall, then shoves me hard back into it. I get dizzy and taste blood in my mouth.*

*“This isn’t over for you two,” he says, a dark gleam in his eyes.*

*Briggs tosses my brother to the ground, and I rush to his side as he slowly lifts up. Briggs and Murdock laugh on their way out, and I hold Marcus’s hand.*

*“They can’t convict him. This will all be a nightmare soon,” my brother promises as he sits up, his eyes hard and determined as he looks at me. “I promise, Victoria. We’ll prove him innocent.”*

Innocence didn’t matter in the end. Not with the DNA evidence.

“Holy shit,” Jake says, drawing me out of my own head as he sits down in front of the far monitor.

My eyes widen in disbelief as Dev Thomas steps out of a small Honda, standing to his full height as he looks around at the church in front of him. No doubt he heard about Kyle.

“What’s he doing here?” Jake asks.

“Only one way to find out,” I say with a smirk.

I spared him, given what I heard from Lawrence and Tyler, and the fact Dev never really participated in the night’s festivities. But why would he come to town if not to join in on the manhunt?

“You going to him?” he asks as Dev steps inside the church where we have no cameras.

I don’t have to answer that. Murdock will have to wait a few hours to die.

“Be careful. I need to back up the footage to see what Logan has told the others.”

“Just call Hadley,” I say to him instead, looking over my shoulder.

“You sure we can trust her?” he asks, his lips tensing.

“You don’t have to trust her. Just trust that I wouldn’t jeopardize your safety.”

He sighs while nodding, and he grabs a phone.

“I’ll drive to the edge of town, just in case.”

I walk out as he carries on with his task, and I hop in the car with the darkly tinted windows. I drive fast out of the forest, and don’t slow down until I hit the town limits. It’s not like the cops are worried about speeding right now, since the sheriff is on the warpath to avenge his son’s death.

It broke him when his daughter was killed. She was put on public display, which is what led to us being raped and beaten in the streets.

I hope it fucking kills him to lose his son. Displaying him to the town was a nice touch to recognize his afore mentioned grief. His daughter was a bitch and a snob, but she didn't deserve to die.

Kyle? Kyle deserved more than he got.

I park near the pharmacy, and I walk the two blocks to the church, carefully gauging my surroundings to ensure I'm not being set up.

When I'm positive no one is focused on the church, I step in through the back and creep inside. I'm happy to report that I don't burst into flames, so maybe I'm not completely consumed by evil just yet, despite the fact I desecrated the church bell tower with Kyle's mostly skinless body.

As I reach the main part of the church, I stop, staying behind the curtain that leads to the stage where my mother once performed for the town plays.

Dev is on his knees, his hands folded in prayer, and his eyes are closed as tears leak from his eyes.

Well…that's unexpected.

"Please forgive me of the sins committed when I was last in this town," Dev says hoarsely. "Even though I don't deserve it. Give me the strength to do what needs to be done now, and keep my sister safe from any harm or retaliation."

I cock my head, studying him. My eyes flit around the room next, still expecting a trap. No such thing looks to be in place.

To be absolutely certain, I text Jake from my burner phone that I've swapped to.

**ME: You got eyes on the church?**

**JAKE: No one is on their way there. The feds are all in the square, and they're talking about going door to door to unearth new evidence about the original killer. Johnson, Cannon, and the deputies are all at town hall talking about who you might be and how to draw you out. Coast is clear.**

**ME: Original killer? Why?**

**JAKE: They want to figure out who it really was. For now, their focus has shifted. Looks like Logan kept your secret…as long as Hadley didn't lie to me and they aren't setting up a ruse.**

**ME: What are they asking?**

**JAKE: They found out the first killing was on the anniversary of your parents' first date. And they also learned the women had all the same features as your mother.**

I clutch the phone tighter in my hand, and I blow out a weary breath, deciding not to question it. I don't need distractions right now.

I pull up the mask of a cold-hearted killer, settling into my role with familiar ease. It's easier to be this version of me. The version who doesn't care or flinch.

Dev's eyes stay closed, and I hop down to take my seat on the edge of the stage, sitting right beside the pulpit—*still no flames*—and approximately seven feet in front of Dev.

He continues praying for a minute longer, and when his eyes open, he stumbles back to his ass, shocked to see someone in front of him.

“Hello, Dev. Long time no see.”

The color drains from his face. “Victoria,” he whispers, surprising me.

I hide my surprise. “You’re the first one to recognize me.”

He swallows audibly while nodding slowly. “I knew it was you when I heard about the killings,” he goes on, slowly shifting back onto his knees, but not attempting to stand. “Marcus swore you’d rise from the dead as an angel that night. He always knew this day would come. And your eyes… Your eyes give you away.”

I roll said eyes, and I lean forward, studying him with a careless coldness.

“I spared you, and you come to this town right as Kyle is flayed and hung from the tower of this very church. Why are you here?”

His lip trembles, and his hands begin to shake in fear. I like that fear.

“I came to do the right thing. To tell them—”

“To tell them a dead girl rose from the grave to exact revenge?” I drawl, a dark, taunting smile curving my lips.

“No!” he says, panicking a little. “No,” he says again, quieter this time as he looks around.

I glance at my phone, using the app to show me the cameras, flicking from screen to screen as Dev recovers. I give him my attention again when I see no one is near me.

“I came to tell the feds what happened,” he goes on. “I heard there was a divide, and that Johnson was getting worked against

from the rest of the feds."

My lips twitch. "Ah, I see. Well, they know what happened."

"Diana told me she called them."

My small smile falls. Diana? She's stayed in contact with him?

Ignoring the bitter sting of betrayal, I continue to focus on Dev.

"So you've come to tell them the story they've already heard?"

He slowly shakes his head. "No. I've come to tell them the rest. The parts they don't know. The part about Kyle's mother."

My breath hitches.

"I also plan to tell them who the real killer was, Victoria. I want them to clear your father's name, and give your family the rest it deserves. Then your soul can be at peace."

I laugh humorlessly. "You think I'm really a ghost who has risen from the grave?" I mock.

He shakes his head. "I think you're selling your soul to the devil for revenge, and I'm trying to help you before it's completely gone. I want to save you."

More laughter slips out of me, this time mocking him. "If you wanted to save me, you should have done it ten years ago."

I hop off the stage, and he tenses as I pull out a knife. "I'm already too far gone now, Dev. You had your chance. Instead, you watched from the sidelines as they tore my soul from my body. It was anger or brokenness. Which path do you think I chose?"

His lips purse. "No soul is above saving, Victoria. No—"

I throw the knife, and he screams while diving away as it slams into the wall beside him, nowhere even close to his body, despite his attempt to flee. I find that a little humorous.

The knife is stuck in the picture of Sheriff Cannon and the plaque that praises him for donating so generously to the church. It's right between his eyes, and I never had to look to aim it that well.

Once again, the color drains from Dev's face, because he sees proof I'm no longer the weak little girl they let bleed on the streets.

"I'm stronger. Faster. Smarter. And far more lethal than anyone in this town. If I wanted you dead, you'd already be dead. Kyle had the sheriff's love and his protection. Yet I flayed him and hung him from the tower for the entire town to witness his demise. Don't piss me off, Dev. I'm not the girl you turned your back on ten years ago. This girl will carve out your spine if I find your back to me again."

He gulps as I walk over to pull the knife out of the sheriff's head, and I look over my shoulder at him.

"And never call me Victoria again, or I'll cut out your tongue like I almost decided to do already. I'm still not certain you're in the clear, so don't remind me about you again. Understood?"

He nods, tears falling from his eyes.

I walk by him, and he shudders in my wake as my icy breeze follows me.

"I'm sorry," he says as I pass him. "I'm so sorry."

My footsteps pause, and I clutch the knife tighter, willing myself not to lose control and kill him when it's unnecessary. It's hard to forget his part in that night when he's so close.

"Just remember I can't be stopped," I say without turning around. "Don't make me regret showing you mercy when I've withheld it from all others. Jason's time is coming too. Don't make me return for you as well. And your father is still on my list."

"My mother and sister are innocent," he blurts out immediately.

I stay facing the door. “Your mother’s innocence is debatable, but she’s not on my list. Your sister was always sheltered from the *rumors* when she went off to college. For her own sake, make her less naïve, Dev. It’s a cruel world to those who don’t believe such evils exist. I would know.”

I walk out without saying another word, and I tuck the knife back into my boot before anyone sees me.

That was not what I needed.

I don’t want one of *them* trying to save my soul when they’re the reason it’s so damaged. I don’t want one of *them* trying to preach to me. The hypocrisy is too laughable to even dwell on.

Feeling a chill on my back, I turn, seeing Dev coming after me, and I stop on the sidewalk, cloaked in darkness in this section with no lights.

“I’m going to the feds, but I wanted you to know it was for the right reasons. Can I ask where you’re going?” he asks softly, timidly, like a lamb protesting a lion’s grip.

“To kill someone,” I say flippantly.

He blanches, then looks down at the ground. “You didn’t ask who the original killer was when I said I knew.”

Turning around again, I start walking quickly into the night before calling over my shoulder, “Because I already know.”

## Chapter 3

*To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it.*
*—Confucius*

## LOGAN

I hate myself. I hate this fucking case. And I hate everything that is standing between me and Lana right now.

“I fucked up,” I say quietly to Hadley as I drop to a chair in her cabin.

“I’ll say,” she mumbles.

“I don’t know what to do right now, but I shouldn’t have done what I did. I didn’t know she was Victoria when…”

I blow out a long breath, letting the words trail off, unable to finish them.

“When what?” Hadley prompts, leaning up.

“I fucked her out of anger, and then cuffed her to the bed, left her naked and exposed, and didn’t let her speak.”

Hadley goes stiff beside me.

“You didn’t,” she says in a harsh whisper, her teeth grinding.

I clench my hands together, lacing my fingers with each other tight enough to cause pain. “I thought she was Kennedy and obsessed with Victoria Evans. I had no idea she *was* Victoria Evans. I’d have handled *everything* differently. I’d be no less confused, but I sure as fuck wouldn’t have done that to her. I thought she’d been playing me. I was hurt. I felt duped. And—”

“And obsessed proxies are unstable and unable to love without fixation,” Hadley points out grimly. “But she’s not an obsessed proxy. She’s a scarred girl with more shit in her life than any one person should ever have to endure. And you just took your turn shitting on her. Great job, Bennett. Great fucking job.”

She stands, and I curse while standing with her. “I realize I fucked up. I’m trying to fix it, Hadley. But I can’t find her. That’s why I’m here.”

“Define your version of fixing it,” she says, eyeing me suspiciously.

“I have no idea just yet. It’s not like I can simply condone all she’s doing. And it’s not like I can lie and say I don’t understand it either. I feel…fucked up,” I groan, putting my head in my hands.

She leans up, her eyes on mine. “I realize I’m not the Boy Scout you are, but—”

“Don’t do that, Hadley,” I interrupt, my jaw ticking. “Don’t act like being conflicted about torture and murder means I have a stick up my ass.”

She collapses back against the chair, releasing a tortured breath.

“My stepfather was a monster, and my mother and her shrink convinced me I was a pathological liar for seeing him as such.” Her random, yet pained comment has me tensing. “Seventy kids in total that we know about, Logan.”

Her eyes tear up, and she clears her throat.

“I was conflicted too. Then I realized there were only sixty-nine pictures.”

“Your picture was missing,” I say quietly, but I already knew this. I just didn’t piece together at the time that it was my girlfriend sparing

Hadley the indignity of the others seeing it.

“She didn’t want me to see the vulnerable little girl I was because she was afraid it would break me. Lana has lived through more pain than most people can endure. The physical pain alone from the numerous surgeries she needed to rebuild her facial structure was bad enough. Imagine the psychological toll that took on her. She lost her family. She lost her home. She gave up her identity so that it couldn’t be taken away. She’s stronger than you’re giving her credit for, and yeah. Maybe I’m a sick motherfucker, but I’m on her side.”

I scrub my face with both hands, staring at nothing as I try to process everything around me.

“It took me a minute to wrap my head around it, which is why I’m not punching you for doing the same. It’s also why I let you in here after you said you were done with me,” she adds.

Her lips quirk, and I run my hand over the stubble on my jaw, thinking about the way Lana would do that to me when she first woke up. She constantly touched me, as if checking to make sure I was still real.

“You were everything to her,” Hadley says quietly. “I’ve never been loved like that. She saved your life, Logan. This town tried to kill you, and she saved you. Personally, I think it’s over-the-top to stab a guy for the man you love, but still perfectly affective.”

Usually I appreciate her dry humor. Not so much today.

She rolls her eyes when I don’t crack a smile. “You need to pick a side soon, Logan. You can’t hang out in limbo. I chose mine, and it’s her.”

“So you’ve been falsifying all your forensic reports on—”

“Haven’t had to. Lana is too good to leave behind trace evidence.” She sighs as she stands. “But I would have. Yes. As far as risks go, you’re the only one she’s ever taken. You’re the one string to unravel all she has worked for since the night they shattered her and her brother. Are you going to take that away?”

“According to Jake, that’s not possible, no matter what I choose,” I state bitterly, wondering just how close he is to Lana. I don’t doubt her words when she said there was nothing sexual going on—for some reason I trust her on that, even though she told me that before I knew he was helping her slaughter ghosts from her pasts.

“He doesn’t know you or how good you are,” Hadley says as she starts grabbing her laptop.

“Do you know where she is?”

She looks me in the eye. “I have a hunch. I’ll share it with you if you pick the right side. Let me know what you decide.”

I follow her out, determined not to let her out of my sight, when a guy walks up. He’s familiar for some reason, and I watch his hands that are nested in his pockets. With his shoulders hunched forward and trepidation in his eyes, he looks too meek to be a threat.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for SSA Bennett. My sister said you guys were camped out here.” He darts a glance around.

“I’m SSA Bennett,” I say warily, my hand leisurely hanging out on my gun holster, as my fingers slowly click open the strap that tucks my weapon in.

He pulls his hands out of his pockets, letting them dangle by his sides.

“I’m Devin Thomas.”

His name tells me why his face is familiar.

“You really shouldn’t be in this town right now,” I tell him, my jaw ticking.

Every fiber in me is fighting to restrain the urge to pummel his face into oblivion; a dark, protective side emerging on accident and surprising me. Knowing Lana was Victoria is changing everything about this case, making it personal. I didn’t know to what extreme until this moment.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” he says grimly. “I have information you need.”

My eyes narrow. “You’re too late. We have tons of statements about what the thirteen of you did that night.”

He grimaces before running a hand through his hair. “That night has haunted me every waking and sleeping moment for the past decade. I may not have committed the same sins, but I was just as guilty. And if the Scarlet Slayer decides I need to die, I won’t blame her in the least.”

“Her?” I muse, my lips twitching when he pales.

Lana has already paid him a visit, it seems.

“I mean, *him*. Her. Whatever. Anyway, I came to tell you about Jane Davenport. I know you already know about that night.”

My eyebrows knit together. “Kyle’s mother,” I state flatly.

“Can we go inside?” he asks, looking around warily at the woods that surround us.

I gesture for him to go inside Hadley’s cabin, and I glance around, seeing Leonard. I nod for him to join me, and he jogs up.

“Who’s that guy?”

“Devin Thomas.”

He sucks in a breath, and we both enter the cabin as Devin takes a seat, rubbing his hands together nervously. “Why haven’t you arrested anyone? If you knew what we did, I mean.”

“Words mean nothing without any physical evidence. But if you’ll sign a confession, I’ll gladly take you in.”

I smile darkly, and he swallows, nodding.

“I’ve turned my life around, but if I feel as though that’s what God wants me to do, so be it. For now, let me tell you about Jane.”

“What about her?” Leonard asks, sitting down.

Devin eyes him, but finally faces me again. “The first several women found in the original killings had no DNA evidence on their bodies. Johnson came during the middle of those, and after he pretty much decided Evans was the killer, DNA evidence suddenly started turning up at all the new scenes.”

“You’re saying he falsified the evidence?” I ask flatly, not surprised. I’ve already had my suspicions. “How’d he get Robert’s semen inside the bodies?”

“Jane Davenport,” he answers immediately. “The sheriff had his claws deep in her. He hated that woman, and as punishment for hiding his son for so many years, he kept her here. Threatened to kill her if she ever left. And she knew for a fact it wasn’t a bluff.”

“That doesn’t explain anything,” Leonard points out.

Devin nods. “Jane was the town outcast. The only person who was ever nice to her was Robert Evans. He was nice to everyone. He loved his wife so much that he could never move on after her death. But even a man who loves a ghost still has needs, if you know what I mean.”

Leonard leans up, and I lean back.

“You’re saying they had a sexual relationship—Robert and Jane,” I surmise.

“The whole town knew about it, including Victoria and Marcus. Victoria wanted him to be happy again. Marcus was adamant that his father should stop hiding the relationship. Kyle? Kyle was furious. He already hated Robert because he was one of the few around here who would stand up to him. Victoria soon after humiliated Kyle. He thought he was the guy no girl could turn down, and she broke up with him very publically because of his treatment toward Robert.”

He sighs harshly, shaking his head.

“I was so desperate to fit in back then. I thought it was just petty stuff, no one would get hurt. Kyle was always a bully, so it was either be his friend or be his enemy. No one wanted to be his enemy. His father would ruin them and their family if they stood against Kyle. Just look at Lindy Wheeler and Robert Evans. Those are just two examples.”

He gives us a rueful smile.

“So what part did Jane play?” Leonard prompts.

“Kyle bragged that night,” he goes on, not jumping to the point. “I came back after convincing Lindy to run before Kyle got finished with Marcus and Victoria. I heard Kyle telling Victoria that his ‘cunt mother’ had been the one to bring Robert down in the end. Jane gave Johnson the used condoms with Robert’s semen in them, after Sheriff Cannon threatened her life. Victoria was a bloody pulp by then, but she managed to speak. She told Kyle she’d prove it, and her father’s name would be cleared. And we’d all burn in hell when she was finished.”

He laughs humorlessly.

“I’ve been living in hell ever since that night, so she held true to her word. At least for my part. Kyle just laughed and told her that his own mother had been silenced by the grave, and found it hilarious that the girl bleeding out on the streets thought she could scare him.”

He looks between us.

“Guess he’s not laughing now.”

Leonard looks to me, and I look at him. Devin has all but said he knows it’s Victoria who came back to kill them all.

But why does he suspect a dead girl when no one else in town believes it’s possible?

“You guys should look into Kyle,” he goes on. “First make sure he’s really dead, and—”

“He’s definitely dead,” Leonard says on a shudder.

“Deep down, I always knew he was the original killer. The Nighttime Slayer, they called him,” he goes on.

Again, Leonard and I exchange a look before I return my gaze to Dev.

“You think it was him?”

He nods. “Apparently someone else did too, if what I heard about his death was true.”

“He was killed a little more brutally, but because he was the one who orchestrated the night Marcus and Victoria died. Why do you think he was the killer?”

He snorts, rolling his eyes. “Isn’t it obvious?” he asks loudly, gesturing around us. “The world was a puppet on strings for Kyle. His father covered up the worst of his indiscretions, never seeing the pure evil in him. Kyle could charm anyone into seeing the best, but

when he unleashed his dark side, it was consuming, suffocating, and downright scarring."

A tear leaks from his eye, and he bats it away.

"I stood by and watched a helpless girl and boy be raped and brutally beaten to death. All because of the fear Kyle easily instilled. No one in this entire town had the balls to go after him with someone like Cannon backing his every move."

"But saying he was the killer is saying he raped and killed his own sister. From what I've heard, the sheriff's affections toward his daughter ran deep enough to make him frame an innocent man just to have someone to blame," I point out.

"If you don't think Kyle is capable of raping and murdering his own sister, then you don't know anything. Rebecca Cannon was the daughter of Mary Beth Cannon. Mary died of ovarian cancer when Rebecca was just five. She was only a year older than Kyle, who the sheriff didn't know existed yet."

"Which means the sheriff wasn't faithful," Leonard points out.

"Which made Rebecca hate Kyle when he came into the picture," Dev goes on. "The sheriff favored her, for obvious reasons, and it was the one person in town Kyle wasn't allowed to lay a finger on. If he'd ever so much as threatened Rebecca, the sheriff would have ended him without pause. Yet Rebecca was put on display in a way so tragic and scarring that it drove the sheriff over the edge. Sounds like one sadistic mind came up with all that, and Kyle's IQ will let you know he was capable of orchestrating each piece of the puzzle, knowing they'd eventually frame Robert."

"Why Robert?" I ask, seeing where he's going with this. "And why time the first killing with the anniversary for when Robert and

Jasmine had their first date? And why did most of the girls resemble Jasmine?"

"Well, for one, that Johnson guy railroaded the investigation, certain it was Robert, partially because of that day and the victimology. That was just one step into setting Robert up. Secondly, Victoria was always on Kyle and Morgan's radar—constant battle between those two. Victoria looked a lot like Jasmine, so maybe your victimology should center around the daughter more than the mother. Lastly, Rebecca was a typical mean girl, and mean girls tend to pick on the lesser privileged. Rebecca went after Victoria on a regular basis, running her mouth, mocking her family and her janitor father."

He smirks, pausing as though he's remembering something.

"One day she went too far, saying something about Victoria's dead mother. Victoria grabbed Rebecca by the hair of her head and slammed her face into the locker. Rebecca ended up with a busted nose. The sheriff tried to come after Victoria, but Robert had some kind of dirt on him that made him back off. Sheriff Cannon doesn't like being backed into a corner. Then Rebecca, the girl who so often bullied Victoria, is the one disgraced the most? The sheriff got onboard and they went after Evans with everything they had after that."

He grows quiet, and I run over the facts in my head.

"What was the dirt Evans had on the sheriff?" Leonard asks.

"Some financial stuff he'd used to get out of taxes or something. Sheriff shut that down before the trial, so it wasn't heavy enough leverage for that."

It’d be so easy to fall into his line of thought, go with the fact Kyle was the killer. It’d make that case ready to close.

“Kyle wasn’t the killer,” I finally tell him.

His eyes grow angry. “Then you underestimate him.”

I shake my head. “No doubt he was on a fast track to becoming a serial killer, but it wasn’t him back then. The killer was armed with the same knowledge and definitely had a hatred strong enough to let them frame Robert, even aided in persuading their profile and suspicions. He holds or held an IQ high enough to mastermind each and every calculated step. But Kyle never went to the trial.”

He frowns. “What does that have to do with it?”

Leonard takes on the explanation. “We have footage of the trial, including everyone in the trial room instead of just the immediate trial factions. Kyle was never there because he genuinely didn’t give a fuck,” Leonard says bluntly. “The killer would have wanted to watch each and every event unfold as he’d planned, and revel in the downfall of Evans in person.”

Devin sits back, deflated, as though he’s considering it. “So it wasn’t Kyle?”

I shake my head.

“Then who was it?” he demands.

“We’re still trying to figure that out,” I say, motioning toward the stack of DVDs. “We have every face that was there on a daily basis, and we’re ruling them out one-by-one based on all the facts and profiling we can possibly do. It’s odd how more of these discs are arriving by the minute by anonymous tipsters.”

He shakes his head, disgusted. “I still think it was him, and until you can prove otherwise, I think the current killer believes the same

thing.”

“Doubtful,” Leonard says immediately. “The one killing now? They’ve spent ten years examining all the evidence and know far more details than we do now.”

His eyes meet ours. “I hope you never catch this one. I hope this one ends every shred of evil this town has left in it. I believe in avenging angels, Agents. And I think this killer has been granted a dark gift to rid this world of the corruption this town offers. I thought there was a soul left to save, but now I don’t think there is. I think the angels’ wrath is here.”

He stands abruptly.

“Where are you going?” Leonard asks.

He turns to face us. “If you’re not arresting me, I’m going to go pick up my baby sister and take her far, far away from this place.”

I cock my head. “Why?”

He heads to the door and doesn’t turn around until it opens. “Because this place is going to burn. I can promise you that.”

# Chapter 4

*Weakness of attitude becomes weakness of character.*
*—Albert Einstein*

## LANA

“I thought you were just going after Murdock,” Jake hisses into the phone as I finish tying the last knot on Murdock’s ropes, binding him to the chair.

He wriggles in the chair, his threats muffled by the gag in his mouth.

“Due to our latest visitor, I’m ensuring that no one escapes the list. Just playing it safe,” I chirp, grinning when I back up and see Murdock glaring daggers at my face.

It was almost too easy to beat the hell out of him and tie him up. The hard part was loading him into my trunk and dragging him up the stairs of the courtroom without being seen.

Fortunately, with all the chaos following Kyle’s death, no one was guarding the back entrance. I just needed Murdock’s key to get us in.

I pick up the gavel, examining it. *Judge Henry Thomas* is engraved on the handle.

“This is too risky.”

“Not at all,” I promise Jake.

“Shit,” he hisses.

“What?”

“Some redhead is getting out of a car in our driveway.”

My body tenses. “Hadley found us,” I groan.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. What the hell do I do with her?”

“Don’t hurt her,” I warn him.

“So invite her in for tea?” he deadpans.

“If she’s there alone, that means she’s there to help us. Just see what she wants. And I mean it; don’t hurt her.”

“Great. I’ll just make nice with the FBI while you’re killing a deputy and a judge,” he says dryly.

“Exactly,” I say before hanging up on him.

I put my phone away and study Murdock as he sweats, still glaring at me like he can condemn me to hell with just that scathing look.

“Your daughter and wife will be home tonight, safe and sound, in case you’re worried. I’m sure they won’t miss you if you don’t return.” I crouch in front of him, keeping my eyes on his as that anger slowly gets replaced by reluctant fear. “I’m almost positive they’ll cry a little, but secretly, when no one is looking at them, they’ll treasure that small bit of peace they have now that you can no longer hurt them.”

I stand abruptly, and he screams, the sound muffled by the gag.

Casually, I turn on the old vinyl record Judge Thomas has on the player, waiting for him to return to his chambers after a long day of hiding or burning any remaining evidence from my father’s case. Too bad he’s a decade too late in covering up his trail.

You know what they say about hubris…

For ten years, they got lazy, thinking this case was over and done with, not much cleanup necessary, considering they killed everyone involved and a FBI agent was on their side.

Mozart's Requiem streams through the chambers, a dramatic composition full of passion and excitement.

I sway with the music, listening to it with my eyes closed. My father was always a Bach man, but Mozart had so much more emotion in all his compositions, in my opinion.

The sound of the door opening has me turning around and a smile dancing on my lips as Judge Thomas shuts the door behind him. I press the button on my remote, and my newly installed lock slides into place. The only way to open it is to get the remote from me.

Good luck with that.

The judge backs away, staring at the door in confusion. It seems to take forever for him to realize music is playing, and he whirls around, staring at the record player as I lurk in the shadows.

Murdock screams over the gag, growing loud enough to draw the judge's attention to him. Judge Thomas almost trips over himself when he spots the restrained deputy.

"Greg!" Judge Thomas gasps as I step out of the shadows.

He struggles to untie the deputy, and Murdock wriggles harder, screaming and trying to get the judge's attention. Murdock blinks and eyes the judge, then darts panicked glances in my direction, doing all he can with eye communication to warn the fool.

It's a valiant effort, but pointless. My favorite part in the horror movies is when the idiot won't turn around while the restrained buddy is doing all they can to alert them of danger.

"Damn it, Greg, hold still. These knots are—"

"Awesome," I say, finishing that sentence for him.

Henry Thomas trips, falling to the ground on his knees, staring up at me with wide, horrified eyes.

How fitting.

“While you’re down there, you can say your last words,” I tell him, holding up the knife. “And maybe confess your sins while you’re at it.”

He trembles, his lips move, but no words come out. Finally, he gets out three words. “Who are you?”

Pretty sure that’s the least important thing he could have asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I ask as the music plays on and Murdock struggles against his bindings. “I’m the girl whose life you destroyed. I just have a different face, considering the lynch mob you and Sheriff Cannon sent after us crushed the old one.”

He swallows hard, his color paling.

“You even cast away your son for not following through with the barbaric show the others put on. Did you think him less of a man for not being able to rape a sixteen-year-old girl or seventeen-year-old boy?” I ask, sounding amused, when really it’s all I can do not to slit his throat now.

“No,” he says on a rasp whisper. “You’re dead—”

“So I’ve heard. Over and over. Funny thing about death—someone has to do a damn good job at killing a girl like me. So far, everyone has sucked at that task.”

He scrambles up to his feet, backing toward his desk where he thinks he has a gun hidden. I smirk when he jerks open the drawer, slinging shit everywhere as he rifles through it, searching aimlessly for a gun I’ve already taken the liberty of removing.

“You won’t find it,” I tell him as he jerks the drawer completely out, tossing it at me in a desperate attempt to make time for him to dash to the door again.

I dodge the drawer easily enough, and watch with fascination as he jerks on the handle of the door over and over.

Einstein believed that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. By that definition, the judge is clearly insane for thinking the door is going to magically swing open.

I turn up the music as he starts screaming for help. I know the halls are empty. It’s late, well after hours in our small town courtroom. Only a few people are here, and they’re all on the floor below us.

“Tell me how you suppressed evidence, Judge Thomas. Tell me how you overlooked eye-witness testimonies and ruled them inadmissible.”

He spins, his back to the door, his chest heaving as the music plays on, creating the perfect ambience for a Judge’s murder.

“I had to,” he growls. “I had to, or Sheriff Cannon—”

“Let’s not lay blame,” I drawl. “Tell me your part, Judge. And maybe I won’t leave you hanging from the church tower like I did Kyle.”

Murdock’s fight leaves him as panic freezes him in place. A slow smile curves my lips when the judge staggers forward, his entire body a pasty shade of white now as he gawks at me in disbelief.

They know if I could kill a monster like Kyle so savagely and live to tell about it, then I’m the real thing of nightmares. Love it.

I throw the knife, and he screams, diving to the ground as it sticks into the picture of him on the wall. He's wearing his robes in that picture, looking prominent and pompous. The real man is sobbing on the ground while trembling in fear.

"Tell me!" I shout, smiling on the inside while playing the out-of-control mad-woman on the outside.

He curls in on himself, sobbing harder. "I did it," he says, sobbing harder. "I did it. I suppressed all the evidence that cleared Robert Evans. But at the time, I swear I thought it was him. Johnson promised us it was him."

I crouch, pulling another knife from my boot and toying with the handle for a nice little psychotic show.

"Tell me the rest," I say quietly. "Tell me how you and the sheriff, along with all his deputies, sent a gang of boys to rape the children of the man you wrongfully imprisoned."

He chokes on his sobs, hiccupping out the next words. "I never meant for the rape—"

"Bullshit!" I snap, holding the knife in front of me. "The truth, Judge. I already know it. I just want to hear it."

His breaths grow labored and his cries get harder. It takes effort, but he finally speaks again.

"We just wanted you to feel the same pain as those women because you two wouldn't stop defending him!"

That familiar coldness washes over me, and I slowly stand, moving toward Murdock who is positively quaking in fear now that he knows I'm a fucking crazy bitch with a knife. I'm sure the fact I'm the one who peeled all the flesh from Kyle's body is wreaking havoc on his nerves right now.

The record starts skipping, the song coming to an end, and I let the annoying sound continue as I slice the knife across Murdock's torso with no warning. Blood spills from the wound and red plumes grow bigger and bigger against the tan shirt.

The judge screams, as well as Murdock as I slice again, aiming at Murdock's middle just right, and this time, the gash is deep. Everything on the inside spills out, intestines rolling from his body like an uncurling ball of yarn.

He stops moving, dying almost instantly, and I face the judge again as he spills his own stomach contents in a different sort of way.

As he retches, I come up behind him, finding his lack of fight anti-climatic. These are the men who I feared for so long? One who beats his child and wife, but couldn't land a single punch on me? One who cries on the floor in the fetal position, praying I'll disappear like a bad dream, instead of fighting for his life?

Instead of drawing it out, I slice the knife against his throat, finding no excitement with these kills. The blood sprays across the room, and gurgles of agony are all that escape his lips, as all other sounds struggle to make it past the gash in his throat.

I leave him there in his fancy suit, allowing it to be stained red, along with the carpeted floor of his chambers. After cleaning off my knife, I tuck it back into my boot, but I leave my other one stuck into the picture of the judge.

Then I pull out the paintbrush I brought, and I dip it into the blood. Instead of painting a wall this time, I leave a message.

A message for the man who broke my heart.

A message for the man I never should have loved.

It's completely juvenile, but I can't help myself.

By the time I leave, the blood has mostly drained out of them, and I walk out, stained in their shades of red, but no one notices. At least I put on the horribly huge boots, though I don't know why I bothered.

Eventually Logan will out me.

I drive back to the house, finding myself in desperate need of a shower. There's a silver sedan in our driveway, and my brow furrows. Hadley drives the FBI issued SUV. Maybe she got another car to keep them from looking at her GPS history or something.

Wary, I pull out a knife as I slowly open the door. All the lights are off, and none of the monitors are on.

With silence, I step into the house, stealthily close the door, and gingerly make my way through the eerie quiet. A garbled sound comes from the back room, something sounding like pain as a loud grunt follows.

Without hesitation, I kick open the door to Jake's room, flipping on the light immediately, raise the knife in the air, and…freeze.

Jake curses, Hadley squeals while covering her bare breasts with her hands, and my mouth opens and closes a few times in complete shock.

"What the hell?" Jake asks, as though I'm the one who has lost my fucking mind.

"What the hell?" I shoot back.

I rarely get surprised. Usually I hate surprises. This time…I'm not really sure how I feel about this little nugget of unexpectedness.

Hadley groans while dropping her head to Jake's chest, and he grips her hips, rolling her under him. "Close the door," he says over his shoulder.

And holy shit. His hips start moving.

He can't even wait until I pick my jaw up off the floor to finish?

I slam the door, stumbling backwards as I head toward my temporary room. I've dripped blood everywhere now. I have to look like Carrie after the prom, yet neither of them felt compelled to stop fucking on my behalf.

My first thought is to call Logan.

My second thought is how stupid that is, considering I can never speak to him again.

My third thought is…I really need a drink.

I step into the shower, clothes and all, and start stripping under the cold spray. I don't even flinch against the chill, but I melt into the warmth when it finally comes. My clothes lie in a puddle at my feet as I wash away the blood and death, refreshing and cleansing myself of the madness.

I'm almost done when I hear the door to the bathroom opening.

"Any reason you kicked down my door armed and ready to kill?" Jake asks from the other side of the shower curtain.

"I should have killed someone in the shower," I state randomly. "Like in the horror movies when the murderer always sneaks up and slices the knife through the curtain. The water runs red then."

"Nice. And yeah, I've seen all the same movies, Lana. It was something you tortured me and Marcus with, because we hated them, and you refused to watch them alone."

"I was scared," I state quietly. "I can watch them alone now."

He blows out a breath. "Answer my question please. What happened back there?"

I roll my eyes and stick my head out of the shower to glare at him. “I heard noises that didn’t sound like pleasure—which really should say something about your skills—so I barged in to save your life. From a lesbian who had your dick captive in her vagina. What the hell, Jake?”

His lips twitch. “You said to play nice.”

“I didn’t say those words. And how does ‘play nice’ translate to fuck her raw?”

He shrugs. “She’s cool. Hacker like me, only not as good as me because she got caught.”

“I was a kid!” I hear Hadley yell, admitting her eavesdropping.

I try not to smile. “And you’re not a lesbian?” I ask.

She walks into the bathroom, her hair a red disarray of wildness. Her clothes are not exactly on right, as though she hurriedly got dressed.

“I told you I wasn’t. I like women, but I’ve been put off by men for a long time. Since you killed Ferguson…some of the unease has lifted. Tonight I met Jake, already knew he was the same as me, and…well, you know what happened in the end.”

“Can we discuss this when I’m finished washing off the judge and deputy?” I ask dryly.

Jake grimaces, his eyes flicking warily to Hadley, but she just shrugs. “You’ve seen what I’m working with. It’s only fair I see what you have.”

I’d laugh under normal circumstances, but I haven’t thawed enough for that yet.

Jake, however, snickers under his breath, seeming to relax at her casual reaction.

“Later. What’s up? Why’d you track us down? And more importantly, how’d you find us?”

She flicks her gaze to Jake. “He’s not as good as he thinks he is.”

She smiles sweetly at him, her double entendre clear, and he arches a challenging eyebrow at her.

“Alright then. Jake, make sure no one else can find us the same way she did.”

Hadley bats her hand. “I’m way better than Alan, and he’s the only one who would be tracking you. No way will he find you the way I did.”

Her phone goes off, and she checks it. Her frown forms immediately.

“What?” Jake asks her, peering over at her phone.

I expect her to shield it from him, but she hands it to him instead. “Guess I need to borrow a brush,” she says to me. “And some clothes. Thor over there ripped my pants open, and now the zipper is gone. My shirt has something on it too. I’ll spare you the guessing game as to what.”

I groan while waving my hand in her general direction. “Take what you need. But I hope you look good in red.”

She curses before flicking her red hair. “Red is the one color I can’t pull off. Every shade clashes with this. I thought you had a black hoodie or something.”

“My black hoodies are kill shirts, and probably have traces of blood on them. Not a good idea to wear them.”

She spins and walks out, plucking her phone back out of Jake’s hand on her way. I look at him questioningly.

“They already found the judge and the deputy.”

A smile curves my lips. “Good. Now the real fun begins.”

## Chapter 5

*False face must hide what the false heart doth know.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LOGAN

“What do we know?” I ask Leonard, peeling the glove off.

“You mean besides the fact the sheriff is trying to get us the hell out of here? Not much.”

Johnson eyes me from across the room, pure hatred in his glare. I ignore him.

He knows I’m close to digging up hard evidence against him. It’s just a matter of time.

“I think that message was meant for you,” Leonard whispers as my eyes lift from the gory remains of Deputy Murdock.

My eyes flit up to the message he’s pointing out.

*They stole. They lied. They brokered peace with the devil in exchange for the souls of an innocent family. Yet you call me the monster.*

*Fuck you. <3*

The little heart on the end is definitely a signature Lana used to leave for me. Apparently she’s going to personalize these kills now, even address them to me without using my name.

“I silenced her, so now she’s getting her words in,” I say quietly.

Leonard looks around, making sure no one is close enough to overhear.

“This is quite literally a ‘fuck you’ message. It’s not rage or even a threat to us. She’s just basically sounding like a true ex. People might do the math.”

“No one here knows Lana and I broke up. I told the others she went back home because I convinced her it wasn’t safe.”

“What happens when people see her in town?”

I lean back, surveying the damage to the neck of Judge Thomas. I doubt it’s a coincidence his son came back to town today, and Lana decided to kill the father tonight.

“She won’t be seen,” I say absently. “Dev Thomas was there *that* night, and he seemed certain he’d been spared when he talked to us earlier. I think she paid him a visit when he arrived in town today.”

“Why?”

“To see why he was here.”

He looks confused, but I don’t want to talk in front of everyone.

“I shouldn’t be involving you in this and forcing you to—”

“You’re not forcing me to do anything,” Leonard says on a sigh. “Like I said, I get why she’s doing it. This town has been killing and torturing people for years, and no one even cared about it until her.”

I start to say something else, but Donny walks up, silencing our private conversation.

“So our unsub goes from quoting Voltaire to leaving a crude ‘fuck you’ message with a heart? Maybe you were right about it being a female, but why bother with the men’s boot prints if you’re going to leave a heart signature?”

“That message is about as petty as your girlfriend,” Lisa says as she joins us.

Leonard chokes on air, but I remain composed.

“Says the petty girl who keeps trying to make her jealous,” Hadley announces as she walks in, avoiding eye contact with me as she squats down with her kit to start taking samples.

My eyes rake over her, seeing her wearing different clothes than she left in. What is particularly eye-catching is the fact she’s in a red shirt.

Over the years, I’ve heard her bitch more than once about the fact her red hair limits her wardrobe. She never wears red.

But I know someone who does.

“She spit gum in my hair,” Lisa hisses.

“When?” I ask, hopeful this was recently and hopeful it *wasn’t* recently at the same time.

“After I accidentally walked in on you two,” Lisa mumbles, her cheeks turning pink.

“And provoked her,” Hadley says from her crouch, not bothering to look up. “Twice. I would have slapped you. Lana went for a less obvious approach.”

Leonard tugs my arm, guiding me out as Hadley and Lisa bicker. As soon as we’re outside of the courthouse, he looks around, making sure no one can hear.

“They called Elise to New York to help with a case.”

“I know. I’m the one who told you. And Elise volunteered to go because she’s still not physically one hundred percent and wanted to make sure no one else was pulled.”

“They called Craig back for something else.”

I nod.

“It’s just a matter of time before they pull us out of here completely, even if it is one by one.”

“They’ll try,” I say with a shrug. “But short of any charges, the director has no weight to pull us completely.”

Leonard looks out into the woods behind the courthouse.

“She could have easily killed Lisa.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline.

“What?”

He looks back at me. “She’s fiercely protective of you, even killed to keep you safe. Yet Lisa provokes her over and over and she spits some gum in her hair?” he asks, his lips twitching.

“She still has a firm grip on reality.”

He leans back, his look going thoughtful again. “So Dev Thomas coming back prompted the demise of Judge Thomas. Why handle two at once? That’s risky. What was so important about Murdock that he needed to die tonight as well?”

Before I can answer that, Hadley walks up, eyeing us. “Here.”

She hands us a blood-stained folder, and I tilt my head as I pull on my gloves again.

I open it, looking over the files. It takes me a second to realize what I’m looking at.

“Those are Murdock’s eight-year-old daughter’s medical charts. Her wrist has been broken twice, and she can’t even play sports because of how weak it is now. Other bones have been broken over the years as well, including her ribs on multiple occasions. His wife’s chart looks thirty times worse, or at least I’d put money on it. It’s not here, but I bet I can hack into it for you,” Hadley states flatly.

“Why would his daughter’s charts be here?” Leonard asks, looking on with me.

“Because someone wanted you to see this,” Hadley says vaguely.

I close the file, blowing out a breath as I hand it to Leonard.

He skims over it quickly as Hadley walks away, a smug smirk on her lips.

“He was beating his kid?” Leonard asks, an edge to his tone.

“How much would you bet all the other deputies and the sheriff knew?” I ask rhetorically.

“We need to speak to Murdock’s widow before the sheriff gets to her first,” I say quietly as two deputies walk out, eyeing us on their way by.

“What is Collins saying about all this?” Leonard asks me as I fire off a quick text to Hadley, telling her what we’re doing and to keep it quiet.

“Collins is saying we still need physical evidence. Johnson backed the sheriff on the matter of one of the deputies trying to kill me as being one rogue cop. As of right now, he’s having to play politics, since the subcommittee nor the senate has convened over the actions of Johnson and the director.”

He follows me to the SUV, both of us avoiding drawing attention from any of the local law enforcement.

“I joined this unit because I thought there’d never be any politics with serial killers,” Leonard says dryly.

“I’m sure you never thought you’d find yourself compromised on a case either,” I point out.

He snorts derisively as I start the car.

“I bet you never thought you’d find yourself in love with a serial killer.”

I grimace, and he shakes his head. “Right. Sorry. Too soon. I’m still trying to wrap my head around all this, and awkward jokes seem to find their way out of my mouth.”

“Let’s just go see Murdock’s widow,” I grumble.

# Chapter 6

*Memory is deceptive because it is colored by today's events.*
*—Albert Einstein*

## LANA

My eyes are on Cheyenne Murdock as she wraps her arms around Alyssa, her daughter. Alyssa cries, but Cheyenne seems to shed ten years of age as she closes her eyes, exhaling relief.

Or maybe I'm just seeing what I want to see in case there's even an ounce of guilt inside me for killing a father. An abusive husband *and* father.

My hair is still damp, considering I didn't take the time to dry it before leaving. I knew what was to come the second they found the bodies.

I watch through the window, waiting on something to happen. Someone will surely try to shut her up, and she has something Logan needs.

Murdock was a sick fuck, but he was also a smart one. He knew it was stupid to burn all the physical evidence as he was tasked to do. He also knew it would be wise to harbor it, keep it safe, in case the sheriff ever decided to turn on him the way he did my father.

The name of my father has become a cautionary tale to not get on Cannon's bad side.

I'm going to turn this town into a cautionary tale of what happens when you destroy a family like mine.

But to instill fear, I have to show mercy as well. Mercy to those who were victims in their own right. Mercy to those who are tired of being weak and silenced.

They'll come for her. No doubt Murdock has run his big mouth about his evidence hoarding at some point. His wife wouldn't know of its existence. But some of the other deputies—if not all of them—would.

As if to prove me right, I see headlights in the distance, the car shutting off and the lights being killed down the street.

I sit on my perch in the tree behind the house, cloaked in the shadows of darkness.

I guess I'll be showering twice tonight.

The two silhouettes move toward the house, and I hop down from my tree and stealthily move inside the backdoor that has been left unlocked.

"Your bath is finished running," I hear Cheyenne saying to her daughter as I stop inside the kitchen, gauging the windows that are concealed by the blinds. Only the back had visibility. The men are coming in from the front, but I need to prepare for one to slip around back.

"Okay," the child says weakly, and I ignore the pang in my heart, reassuring myself that I did the right thing.

As soon as the child heads up the stairs, I step inside the living room, finding a spot I can't be seen from the back, and study the back of Cheyenne as she lifts a picture of her late husband.

A small smile crosses her lips. "Rot in hell, you stupid bastard. Let's see if the devil lets you lay your hands on him, or if he shows you a taste of your own medicine."

A dark grin emerges on my own lips.

“I’m sure the devil will enjoy playtime with Greg,” I drawl.

She stumbles, eyes wide and panicked as her head swivels around to see me.

“Who are you?”

“Someone who is about to save your life. Two men are coming. One will come from the front, one from the back,” I say, keeping my voice quiet. “They know Murdock hid some evidence.”

She pales, and I nod. “I’ve already saved you once tonight; this will be the second time. You’ll owe me, Cheyenne.”

Her lip trembles, but before she can speak, the door is kicked in from the front, and she screams, drawing the barrel of the gun toward her. The end has a silencer on it, because these guys came to kill—not fuck around.

I dart across the room before the first shot can be fired, and I grab the man’s wrist, twisting it back. I don’t know this guy. I guess the sheriff outsourced this job to keep his nose clean.

He cries out when I slam the heel of my palm up, connecting with his nose. Blood sprays, and I spin, disarming him in the process. Just as I grab my knife from my side, I hear a *click* from behind me.

“Just who the hell are you?” a man’s voice asks.

Everyone wants my name. There’s a Rumpelstiltskin joke in there somewhere.

Again, it’s someone I don’t recognize. I catch a vague image of him through the reflection of the picture glass on the wall.

The guy I was fighting with is staring at me with contempt in his eyes as he cradles his broken nose.

“Who cares? Kill that bitch,” the bleeding one growls.

“My name now doesn’t really matter. But once upon a time, people called me Victoria Evans.”

I may not know them, but judging by the audible breaths and the surprise in the bleeding one’s eyes, they know me.

“In case you haven’t heard…I don’t die too easily.”

I spin just as a shot is fired, with the diluted sound sparing my ears. I feel the heat of the bullet as it grazes my cheek, burning just barely. In one swift move, I slam the knife into the man’s throat behind me, and grab his gun, firing it twice without even having to look.

I hear a pained cry from behind me, knowing the original man is now in a heap, as the man in front of me gurgles on his own blood, choking on it. The knife is still planted in his throat like a gruesome piece of artwork.

I finally turn my head as I jerk my knife out, and I see the two shots hit directly into the other man’s chest.

I’d brush my shoulders off, but that seems a bit cocky.

“You know them?” I ask Cheyenne, who is clawing the corner she’s in, shaking fiercely.

“Yes,” she rasps, her lips trembling. “The Durham brothers,” she says a little stronger, trying to stand on unsteady legs. “They play poker with the sheriff and…sometimes they handle things he doesn’t want his deputies involved in.”

“I guess they came after my time,” I muse, watching them both slowly die.

They did good to escape my interest in the town as well. I really hate surprises.

“Yes,” she says, her voice trembling again. “Are you… Are you really Victoria?”

Her tone is reverent, hushed, and somewhat fearful. I look around at the bloody mess and hope Alyssa stays upstairs.

“Is your daughter safe?” I ask instead of answering, looking over at Cheyenne.

She nods timidly. “Alyssa?” she calls out.

When the child doesn’t answer, Cheyenne rushes by me, racing up the stairs. I’m covered in blood, looking every bit as scary as Jason Vorhees, so I stay down here, listening, deciding to spare the kid some unnecessary nightmares.

In a few moments, Cheyenne comes back down, her shoulders easing. “She likes to go under the water during her baths. She didn’t hear anything.” She stares at me, then at the men at my feet. “It’s been you, hasn’t it? The one who has been killing all those men from…from that time?”

She swallows against the knot in her throat, and I cock my head.

“The one who killed Greg?” she goes on, her voice cutting out.

“The one who killed a child abuser, a murderer, and a violent, sadistic man in general,” I amend, studying her curiously.

She runs a hand through her hair, her eyes intentionally not dropping to the gory mess in her living room again.

“I thought it was all a horrible urban legend, something to make the sheriff and Kyle seem all the more untouchable. I came to town after you were gone, and I barely heard whispers about anything. Then one night, Greg got drunk. It was the first time he hit me. I always stepped between him and my daughter, but I couldn’t leave.

He wouldn’t let me—told me the sheriff would help him hunt me down, and he’d kill me and take Alyssa away.”

She chokes back a sob, shaking her head. “I wanted him dead. I even went to the sheriff, hoping Greg’s threats of Cannon helping that abusive bastard were all a bluff. But they weren’t. The sheriff listened to all I had to say, then he called Greg right in front of me. I dealt with a broken jaw as punishment. That’s when he told me he had all the evidence he needed to keep the sheriff in line, and that the next time I tried to run or get help, he’d slit my throat in front of our daughter.”

I wish I’d come sooner for Greg now.

Surprisingly, his wife does know about the evidence, after all.

“He has a safe. I’ve never seen what’s in it, but I know he keeps the combination in his favorite shoes. He’s always had a terrible memory with numbers, so he had to write it down. I’ll get it for you.”

I step in front of her, and she stumbles back. “Save it for the feds. SSA Bennett, to be more precise. Don’t give it to Johnson.”

More lights draw my attention, and I peer out the window, hissing out a breath when I see a SUV stopped beside the abandoned car just down the road. Logan walks in front of the lights, and my stomach somersaults. Shit!

I lift my phone, cursing when I see that I have a text I didn’t know came through.

**HADLEY: Logan is going to the widow’s house. The deputy’s widow, that is. Not the judge’s.**

Obviously Jake gave her my burner phone number.

I put my phone away, and look back to see Cheyenne is pale and shaking.

“Who are they?”

“The good guys. They’ll be who you give the evidence to.”

“But you look scared. Why are you scared if they’re the good guys?” she demands.

I gesture to my bloody appearance, then the dead guys in her floor. She doesn’t have a speck of blood on her.

“I’m not the good guy,” I remind her, and she exhales like that’s a relief to hear.

What a twisted town…

I grab a piece of paper from the table, and I scribble down an address as fast as I can, trying to get out of here before Logan makes it to the house.

“Have him escort you out of town. Tell him you never saw me, only knew I was in here because you heard the commotion. You were in the bathroom with your daughter the entire time, okay?” I ask, careful not to touch her with my bloody hands.

She nods, her throat bobbing with nerves.

I hand her the piece of paper.

“You can’t go anywhere there might be family or friends. They’ll track you that way. Leave your cell phone. Go to this house. It’s my Connecticut home, and a woman named Olivia lives there. She’ll give you the funds to replace anything you need.”

Her eyes water as she looks over the paper.

“Why would you do this for me?”

I watch her eyes as they lift back up. “I’m doing it for your child more than I’m doing it for you. This town doesn’t care if it’s a child.

They planned to not only kill you, but to kill her tonight as well. Keep that in mind. And the evidence won't be somewhere as obvious as his safe. Think of somewhere he goes daily. He would have been paranoid, always checking to make sure it was still there, but discreet enough not to do it in front of you."

I peer out the window again, and curse, immediately dropping the curtain when I see the SUV moving this way now.

She looks lost in thought, then finally her eyes widen. "I know where it is."

"Good. Have him escort you there, get it, and then leave. Make sure he follows you out of the town, just in case the sheriff gets wind of your retreat. And don't stop driving until you absolutely have to—for gas or whatever."

She nods vigorously, clutching the paper like it's the anecdote to life. The door to the front is still open from it being kicked in earlier, so I don't dawdle with racing to the back when I hear approaching footsteps.

But just as I reach the back, I catch a glint of blonde hair at the door, through the window there. His eyes are down, so he doesn't see my cartoonish slide to a stop. Internally cursing, I spin back and dart into the broom closet, hating myself for being so reckless.

*Please don't let there be a blood trail. Please don't let there be a blood trail.*

I should have known he wouldn't be alone.

Just as I silently get the door shut, I hear the back door opening without so much as a knock.

I can't see, only listen.

"Logan, we have bodies," Leonard's voice announces.

Logan doesn’t respond. My stomach sinks to my toes when his shadow interrupts the stream of light coming under the door. This shallow closet isn’t going to hide me if he opens the door.

The door knob starts to turn, and I hold my breath, waiting for the inevitable. I’ve planned for everything except him, and the waters keep getting murkier. What will he do if he finds me? Shoot me? Arrest me? Hurt me? Hate me more?

I don’t have to find out right now, because he apparently changes his mind, leaving the door shut as the sound of footsteps move away from me. I expel the painful breath I’ve been holding, and I listen as he talks to Cheyenne.

She tells them the story I crafted on the spot, and I hear the little girl’s voice calling for her from upstairs. “Stay there, sweetie,” Cheyenne says with a broken voice. “We have people down here right now.”

“I’ll be right back,” Cheyenne tells them, as I try to think of a magical way to get myself out of the damn closet without being seen.

“She’s right. We have to get her out of this town,” Leonard tells Logan.

“We just can’t let anyone know that’s what we’re doing, considering that’s against protocol.”

They both grow quiet for a moment. “She knew they’d come for her,” Logan says quietly.

“Yeah, and if she hadn’t been here, there’d be two different bodies lying at our feet right now,” Leonard says, sounding as if he’s defending me.

So he’s compromised?

I touch my cheek, finding that my fingertips burn the exposed flesh the bullet grazed. That's going to leave a scar. Stupid fucker.

I should have stabbed him harder, dragged out the pain. I would have if not for the fact a child could have walked in and saw the horrors for herself.

"Find out who these two are. I'm sure they're linked to the sheriff somehow."

"Why come after the widow, though?" Leonard asks.

"Because I have something you need," Cheyenne tells them, apparently surprising them with her reentry. "My daughter is packing a bag and putting on clothes. My husband went to the basement regularly, and I never thought anything of it. He'd go down there for just a few minutes at a time. There's a loose floor plank down there, and I never questioned why he wouldn't fix it until today."

I listen as footsteps disappear into the basement, and very cautiously, I try to hear if anyone stayed here. It'd make sense for one to stay here, considering a child could walk down and into the massacre show I've left on display.

"Get the daughter to the car without letting her see this," I hear Logan saying as he comes up the stairs again. "And take this with you."

It feels like I've been in this closet forever.

"Where are you going?" Leonard asks.

"With you. Come on. There may be more coming if the sheriff doesn't hear back from them."

I blow out a breath, relieved when I hear the rustle of them leaving. When the front door shuts—the best it can, since it's broken—I finally peer out of the crack I make in the door.

When the coast is clear, I dart to the backdoor, and with light footsteps finally leave the damn house behind.

I hear the sound of doors opening and closing as I retreat into the woods, cursing the leaves for crunching under my feet as the chill kisses my bloodstained skin and hair.

My retreat isn't too quiet, but they're so caught up in getting her out of here, that I doubt they notice. Finally, I find the path I beat out earlier, the leaves too damaged and broken to crunch beneath my feet, and I quicken my pace. I'm leaving a bloody trail right to my house if I go directly there.

Searching the area around me, I strip out of the hoodie I'm wearing. Then I kick off the boots, opting to wear socks only. Just as quickly, I peel away the top layer of pants, pulling a bag out of the back pocket. I unfold the bag then toss all the bloody apparel into it. My leggings catch a chill from the night, but there's also a chill that shoots up my spine.

My eyes dart around, but all is silent. Nothing is moving.

Why does it feel like someone is watching me?

I finish closing up the bag, checking to make sure no blood is dripping. After one last wary glance at my surroundings, I turn and start jogging in my socked feet back to the house, ignoring the way the twigs and acorns try to hobble me.

Pain is something I learned to ignore a long time ago.

But ignoring the sensation that someone is watching me is harder to let go of.

Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I doubt it.

I turn again, but hear nothing and see no motion.

Then, like every fucking horror movie I've ever seen, a chill rides up my spine, and I know without a doubt someone is directly behind me.

I drop the bag and spin, bringing my elbow up to collide with a face, but a hand grabs it, and my breath seizes as another hand comes around, grabbing my other arm. In one smooth motion, I'm shoved against a tree, and a hard body bears against mine.

The only thing that halts my lethal reaction, are the familiar blues staring directly into my eyes.

My breaths turn painful as I heave for air that escapes me. It's not because he's hurting me, it's because it hurts just to see him.

His eyes are hard as they level me, and his grip stays tight, even though we both know I could escape him if I wanted to. The problem is doing it without hurting him.

"I won't be arrested," I say softly.

"So you'll do whatever it takes to stay free?" he asks, his voice not as hard as his eyes. He runs his gaze over my face, taking me in.

"No," I whisper hoarsely. "I won't do whatever it takes, but I won't be arrested either."

His gaze lingers on my lips. "You could break away with ease right now, couldn't you?"

His eyes pop back up, holding my stare.

I don't speak. I don't have to.

He doesn't need to hear the words aloud, and I'm not quite prepared to admit all I'm capable of to him.

He doesn't ease his hold, but his grip doesn't tighten either. "Leonard is escorting Cheyenne and Alyssa out of town, but since

you were hiding in the closet, I'm sure you heard all that."

I suck in a breath, and his lips twitch.

"You've been the huntress for so long that I'm sure you've forgotten what it felt like to be the hunted. But I've been looking everywhere for you, Lana. And I'm a lot better than you give me credit for."

I start to move, but instead of gripping me harder, he eases his hold and brings his hand up to my face, cupping it as he studies my eyes.

"I had no idea you were Victoria when I fucked up. I never would __"

"Does it really matter?" I ask bitterly, hoping those damn tears don't start falling, even as they crowd my eyes and turn him blurry. "I'm still the twisted monster of the night, while you're the honest hero in the light."

Even through my blurred vision, I see his expression soften. "I wouldn't have fucked you and left you naked on my bed if I'd have known. So yes, it makes a huge difference. I thought you were suffering an obsession disorder that had you killing as Victoria's proxy. It's a lot different than you being Victoria, because a proxy killer is most definitely suffering a psychotic break and is highly unstable. In my mind, you were being manipulated by Jacob Denver, and I was being played as a pawn."

My heart is thumping painfully in my chest, and I almost wonder if he can feel it too.

"Jake can't and wouldn't ever try to manipulate me. And as far as you go, I *never* asked for any case information. *You* came on to me. And—"

Usually, as everyone is aware, I hate surprises. But my heart ends up beating to a new rhythm when Logan surprises me by crushing his lips to mine.

At first I try to weakly push him away, but the tears start falling as he kisses me harder, his hands going from restraining to needy as he pulls me flush against his body. My arms go around his neck as I give in, kissing him back as the tears streak down my face.

He lifts me, his kiss almost consuming me, and every pent-up emotion flows into it, making it powerful and destructive at the same time.

My legs wrap around his waist, and he pushes me against the tree again as he devours me, taking in every taste and flick of my tongue as it battles his. I'm not sure if it's angry or sensual, but I know I can't just let go right now.

Even though I know I should.

Something cracks near us, and we both break the kiss, our eyes darting over to a fox as it runs by. My breath gets shaky as I turn to face Logan again, seeing the softness in his eyes that wasn't there the last time we were this intimately placed.

"I never would have hurt you like that if I'd known," he says softly.

I swallow hard. "You didn't hurt me physically. And as far as the sex goes, I could have stopped it. I knew you knew. I knew what was happening. I just loved you enough to take your anger, knowing I deserved it."

He groans, his forehead pressing against mine.

"You didn't deserve it. For the first time in my life, I have no clue what to do, Lana," he whispers with such tragic honesty that it slices through me.

Part of me wants to corrupt him, to make him see what I'm doing is a twisted version of the right thing, despite the torture and massacre I still have planned. But to do that would be stealing his soul and condemning it to join mine.

Just knowing he hasn't told the others and he's holding me to him right now is more than I ever realistically expected. But to go forward with me would be to irrevocably damn him to my same fate.

"I love you," I say on a broken whisper, because I'm just too weak to turn him away so soon.

"I love you," he says back, thawing my heart completely as the tears start leaking again. "Which is why I'm begging you to end this now and go away with me," he adds, his voice cracking.

He has no idea what an offer like that does to someone like me. Leave? Stop now? Walk away with him as a prize?

It's so tempting, and if not for the fact the sheriff and his deputies still live, still spread dark shadows over everyone's halls…I'd do it. I'd walk away from the revenge. But I can't walk away from all the innocent lives still being scarred.

People just like Cheyenne and her daughter who would have been killed by a man who is supposed to protect them, all to conceal his darkest secrets.

"We have enough evidence to put him away," Logan says, as though he's reading my mind.

But he believes in the justice system. He doesn't understand a man like Cannon can only be killed *after* he's buried. Only then will anyone care about evidence. He lines the pockets of too many important and powerful men.

Just like Director McEvoy.

Just like SSA Johnson.

Just like the fucking governor.

“Don’t decide right now. Right now, just be with me, and for tonight, we can simply forget the rest of the world exists,” he goes on, brushing his lips over mine again.

“What about the case?” I ask stupidly.

His case is solved. He has the murderer in his arms.

He grins like he’s thinking the very same thing. “They can do without me for tonight. Leonard will cover for me.”

I’ve already killed four people in twenty-four hours. I suppose I can pretend as though the world around us isn’t collapsing for just one night.

“This isn’t a ploy to find out where you’re staying. I could do that just by following Hadley,” he adds, kissing my lips again.

Pathetically, I never doubted his intentions.

“I know,” I say on a sigh. Because Logan Bennett makes me forget the fact I’m not untouchable.

It’s been a dangerous game since the beginning.

Now I have to stop myself from dragging him to the pits of hell with me.

# Chapter 7

*Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without.*
*—Confucius*

## LANA

Jake's eyes almost bulge out of his head as I walk in with Logan. Logan slides his arm around my waist like he's ready to protect me, as though Jake is about to do something stupid.

I lace my fingers together with Logan's, as Jake continues to gawk at me.

"Are we under arrest?" Jake asks, so confused that it's almost comical.

Logan grunts out a breath, and I lean against him. "This is neutral ground. No talk of killing people, and no talk of arresting," Logan finally says. "As of right now, there is no talk of this town or what's going on inside it."

Jake looks between us, his eyebrows still raised as he keeps the laptop in his lap. The monitors all around have the town from various angles, and Logan glances at each one.

"That explains a lot," he says on a long breath. "You really have the entire town under surveillance. But yet I haven't spotted a single camera."

"I thought we weren't discussing the case," Jake says warily.

Logan pinches the bridge of his nose, and I stifle a sad smile. He's in love with his job and curious by nature. Right now he's

suffering the ultimate battle of right and wrong; a confliction I haven't faced in a long time.

That struggle I see in his eyes is my fault.

"It's NSA tech Jake swiped a few years ago, and he built his own versions," I explain.

Jake looks like he's about to fall off the couch, but I shrug like it's no big deal. "The monitors cover all the most important parts of town, and we stay with the sheriff, watching his every move. We also keep a close eye on the deputies. It's how I knew Hollis was coming after you."

I don't look at him as I say the words as emotionlessly as possible. But my voice unfortunately cracks and betrays me on that last sentence.

Logan's hand tightens on my side, and he pulls me to him, hugging me against him. I take in his scent, closing my eyes, soaking it all in while I can.

He doesn't know what's to come, because he can't see all the conversations the way we can.

"So you're safe here?" Logan asks, the heartwarming concern in his tone coupled with a defeated sigh. He knows which route I'm going to choose, even though his option sounds better.

"It's not just about me," I say, peering up from his chest as he looks down.

He breathes steadily, but I can tell it's with strain.

"Just like it's not just about you," I add, clutching the front of his shirt. "You're good. I won't take that away."

He starts to speak, when suddenly the front door opens, and I turn in time to see Hadley stumble in, her eyes wide and fixed on

Logan.

Her mouth opens and closes several times before finally locking shut. Then it pops back open. “What’s going on?”

“I’m wondering the same thing,” Jake says, not moving from his spot on the couch.

Logan groans, and I tug his hand. “We’re going to the bedroom to have a night off.”

“Four bodies is your idea of a night off?” Hadley asks dryly.

I grimace, but Logan doesn’t make an expression as he follows me to the bedroom.

I hear whispers erupt in the living room as Jake and Hadley panic a little, but I shut the door on them and lean back on it, studying the man in my temporary bedroom.

He looks around at the floral patterns lining every surface and quirks an eyebrow at me.

“The owners only come here for summer and Christmas.” Just in case he wants to look for their missing bodies or whatever. I don’t know if he trusts that I’m not killing innocent people.

He sits down on the bed, clasping his hands together. One glance in the mirror has me cringing. Blood is splattered across my face and matted in my hair.

“I’ll shower,” I say awkwardly.

I’m pretty sure there should be a sense of horror filling me, considering his white shirt has smears of blood on it as well.

The bloody ex-girlfriend takes on a new meaning.

He doesn’t object or say anything as I step out, leaving him overwhelmed with everything going on.

I feel like the devil's advocate who has lured a saint to the edge of a cliff and now beckons him to jump.

With quiet steps, I grab the note from the drawer in the hallway—the note I never knew if I'd use or not. The living room is quiet, but I'm sure Jake and Hadley are in the back bedroom, making use of their kindred ways.

Instead of interrupting them, I tuck the note inside Hadley's bag, right where I know it'll be safe until I want it found. Then I retreat to the bathroom, and start stripping.

My sense of self-loathing left a long time ago, washed away with the tears and pain. Yet it's coming back with a vengeance as I step under the shower with a new flow of tears that refuse to stop falling.

I scrub away the blood, watching the red run down the drain for the second time tonight. I'm barely holding it together when the shower curtain slides open, and I jump, startled.

Logan steps in fully naked, that trademark smirk playing on his lips as he nears me. I half wonder if I'm dreaming, until he kisses me, tangling his hands in my hair as he tilts my face up to devour me better.

I moan into his mouth as he lifts me, sliding his hands under my ass as his naked body gets more slicked by the spray of the shower. Our heights are so different that picking me up always makes it easier for him to kiss me, but it also lines up our bodies in a much better way.

Our kiss turns frantic, hungry, and desperate. We both know that tonight might be the last time we're ever allowed to love each other. The gray area has only a brief window of opportunity before it's closed and we're back on our opposing sides.

But this? This is the right way to say goodbye. Not the way we left things before.

My back slides against the wall as I struggle to find friction, but Logan is strong enough to maneuver my body without my help.

He thrusts in hard, and I cry out, breaking the kiss to keep from accidentally biting him. He buries his face in the crook of my neck as he starts working his hips, driving me crazy from all the right angles.

My fingers dig into his shoulders, clinging to him, as my back slides up and down on the slick wall. Water hits our sides as Logan moves us closer to the back, his face still against my skin as he kisses, licks, and nips a trail up the column of my neck.

That all-consuming, bone-deep sensation of ecstasy starts to unfurl at my core, and I grip him tighter, praying I don't draw blood as I move against him, desperate to tip over that edge.

His hips falter as he nears the same intense feeling, and his lips find mine as I cry out, my entire body shuddering with the force of the orgasm. A guttural noise escapes his lips as he stills inside me, struggling to keep me up as his strength tries to give out, his body going lax.

My legs lazily slide down his sides as he lifts me off him, and I wobble a little when I'm standing on my own again. His lips find mine in a soft, reverent kiss as he backs me under the spray of the shower again.

I lose track of time, and it isn't until the water starts getting cold that we're forced to finally end the shower.

"I can't let you go," he says against my lips as he shuts the water off.

My eyes meet his as my lips fall away, losing the contact that keeps me grounded in reality.

But then I'm on him, kissing him again, passionately, deeply, hungrily…

And I stave off the onslaught of emotions that would surely wreck me if given that sort of power.

*I can't let you hold on,* I silently tell him, refusing to ruin any more of our night with heartbreaking truths.

## Chapter 8

*Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LOGAN

Lana is pressed against me, her head on my chest, as my fingers idly run through her hair. It's after three in the morning, and neither of us have even thought about sleeping.

Instead, we've spent the past several hours just talking about anything and nothing at all. Mostly it's been mundane stuff, when we weren't wrapped around each other and doing less chatty things.

Her cheek has a small graze on it from a bullet that got too damn close, but it's not bleeding. It should be a reminder that she's not invincible, but she seems to think battle scars are better than victim scars.

"So I spent all that time worried about Plemmons targeting you, and you spent all that time annoyed with me for keeping him from you?" I ask, staying on the conversation we've veered to.

I feel her smile against my chest, and she runs her fingers down my stomach, tracing the lines there.

"A little annoyed, but mostly I just felt cared for. If I hadn't wanted him dead so he could never hurt you, then I would have appreciated all your concern a lot more."

She presses a kiss to my chest, and I tug her tighter to my side as I stare up at the ceiling, trying to sort through everything. It's a

mess in my head. It's a mess everywhere inside me.

I'm questioning everything I've ever stood for.

Judge, jury, and executioner has never been something I've agreed with. I've fought for legality and true justice. My entire world has centered around it since I was offered a position within the FBI.

"How'd you learn to fight like you do?"

"You haven't seen me fight," she sighs. "I'd never fight you."

My lips twitch as I glance down at her. She peers up at the same time.

"Should we test to see who's better?"

She stifles a grin, trying to keep a serious face. "Agent Bennett, I think it'd be emasculating if I kicked your ass. So don't worry, I'll hold back if you ever get brave enough."

I laugh, finding the sound almost sad. Her smile is just as grim amidst the heavy air around us when she lays her head back down and resumes her task of tracing idle circles.

"So now that all your worst secrets are aired, maybe you can share a little about your past," I say quietly, feeling her stiffen next to me as her fingers still on my chest.

"You've already heard everything they did. Do you need more detail than that?" she asks in a harsh whisper.

I tilt her face up, palming her cheek. She meets my eyes with the same fearlessness she faces the rest of the world, but I see the vulnerable girl tucked away inside her; the girl she has to protect after all she's been through.

"I was talking about your past before all that happened. Something that would tell me about the girl you used to be."

She cuts her gaze away, blowing out a breath.

“The girl I used to be is dead. Knowing how naïve and fragile she was won’t do anything but break your heart right now. Because you’ll picture me as her. You’ve had the real me the entire time, Logan. Nothing between us or how I was with you was a lie. Only snippets of my past were altered for the sake of keeping my secret.”

I can feel her drifting away even as she presses closer to me.

Instead of letting her float off inside her own mind, I shift, turning and coming down on top of her. She tries to kiss me, but I pull back as I settle comfortably between her legs and keep my lips just out of reach of hers.

“Part of the reason you’re so fierce today is because of that girl. Pretending as though you were never her is one step closer to detachment from reality. It’s a dangerous slope.”

She rolls her eyes, but a small smile forms on her lips, surprising me. I’ll never get tired of how she never reacts the way I predict. Half of the reason I fell so hard was the constant mystery cloaking her.

Even as pieces of the puzzle continue to fall together, I’m still just as intrigued and mystified by her.

“You sound like Jake,” she finally says, running her fingers through my hair as her legs tangle with mine.

“I hope Jake never held this position while having this conversation.”

She laughs, rolling her eyes again, and finally she sighs.

“Jake is just a friend,” she says quickly.

“So you’ve said.”

She flashes that smile that is real and not weighted like all her other ones have been tonight. For some reason, she likes it when I get jealous.

“My mother and father were peculiar people with varied interests. My brother always said they had ‘eclectic’ personalities.”

It’s so out of the blue that I don’t know how to respond. Fortunately, she doesn’t need me to speak to continue her story.

“They loved classical music, and hated that none of us had an ounce of musical talent. But they also loved their hard rock and jazz too. You’re supposed to be able to judge someone based on their taste in music—hence the reason my brother deigned them with the eclectic personality label.”

Her smile grows.

“They were this amazing team. Dad worked a thankless job as a janitor—the true reason I pieced together the Boogeyman’s cleaning background—and Mom was a coroner. She was such a perky person for someone who dealt with death every day, and I was a little too comfortable around dead people, since she often had to take me to work with her. They took turns cooking, and they cleaned together. No one was ever more important than the other.”

Her eyes grow distant, as though she’s recalling a memory, and I watch her, unable to tear my own eyes away from her face. I’ve never seen such a serene look on her.

“They’d dance,” she says, her eyes sparking back to life as she meets my gaze again and smiles.

“Dance?”

“Every night after we went to bed, they’d stand in the living room, put on a slow song, and dance.” She clears her throat as her eyes water. “Mom would always have her head on Dad’s chest, and he’d be holding her to him with his eyes shut as they swayed off-rhythm

to the music. Mom could sing so well, and she'd often sing as they danced."

I brush a tear from her cheek with my thumb, and she leans into the touch.

"I would sneak out just to watch them dance. Sometimes Dad would catch me, but instead of scolding me, they'd have me dance with them. Same for Marcus. Even Jake was invited into the dancing ring on the nights he stayed over. It was a time so perfect that it eventually had to end in tragedy. Good things have a lesser reign than the bad."

She exhales heavily, and she offers me a tight, less genuine smile.

"They were really in love. That must have been nice to grow up in," I say, trying to encourage her to continue.

Her spark fades again as a coldness surfaces, confusing me.

"You see something for so long, and you take it for granted. In our minds, Marcus and I believed a love like that was common, easy to find, and effortless. In our minds, falling in love with someone had to be the simplest thing in the world."

She presses her hand to my chest, holding it against my heart, and her eyes stay fixed there.

"We didn't know how messy love could be or how jealous people would lash out."

"Jealous people?"

Her eyes come up, and she releases her hand from my heart. "Everyone was envious of what my parents had. My father was a lowly janitor, but he was handsome. My mother was beautiful, and

her smile could save the lives of the almost-dead. She radiated purity and warmth. Everything the opposite of me."

"I'm sure there's a little girl living with Lindy Wheeler who would object to that," I remind her.

Her eyes harden again, and I decide not speaking would be a good idea. I have no idea what to say that won't drive her farther into her own head.

"Lindy suffered. She knows how to offer comfort to another. The little girl is in good hands. I made sure of that. One good deed doesn't make me the angel she accuses me of being. And I'm not even bothered by it. I don't *want* to be an angel. I *was* like my mother, only a little more hotheaded and ready to defend myself. I was just like her other than that. I saw the good in everyone, and I smiled even when someone was trying to break me down. I thought I was so strong and so smart. The problem is, I saw good where no good even existed."

"Like with Kyle?" I ask, an edge to my tone. Just knowing he touched her…

"Like with Kyle," she repeats, her tone flat and emotionless. "I trusted him even after he'd proven himself to be a jackass. I never saw the pure evil in him until that night. And my brother was just as naïve. The two of us walked directly into that trap, unprepared and outmatched, with no chance of walking away. And we never saw it coming, because we never thought people could be that cruel."

She blows out a breath, as though she's keeping herself in check. I don't press the issue or say anything, allowing her to tell the story however she wants to.

But if I hear the details from her mouth, I may end up joining her on her killing spree. I just don't think I'm strong enough to hear her break down and tell me what they did without killing everyone else involved in all of it.

"We learned differently, and I shed the coat of naivety once I managed to survive. I made a promise to my brother that I intend to keep. A promise he knew I would be able to make. Now I only see the good when it's there to see. I'm smarter. They made me smarter. They also made me what I am today—lethal and merciless. I have to believe there was a reason for that, and each time I save someone else from the same possible fate I suffered, I feel a bit closer to Marcus."

My mind is fucked. All she has to do is ask me to join her, and I'll be at her side. So I'm grateful that she doesn't, because I'm not even sure what to feel about this.

"When the lights go off and the music is playing, I often think back to my mother dancing with my father. I was so young. My younger self didn't understand how important it was to treasure and soak in all those memories. But the ones I have stay with me. Those memories kept me alive and helped drown out some of the nightmares."

My thumb traces over her lip as I study her.

"Come on," I say, rolling off her and standing up.

She looks at me like I've lost my mind until I flip on my phone and the music starts streaming through. Her eyes glisten almost instantly, and she smiles as I tug her hand, urging her to join me.

Naked in the middle of the bedroom, I pull her to me. Her head falls to my chest, and my lips press against the top of her head as I

hold her as close as possible.

And we dance.

We dance for several songs.

Until she's suddenly climbing up me and kissing me hungrily, like she can't hold back any longer, and the night is too close to ending.

And I take her over and over, until the sun is shining down on us and we're both too spent to even attempt another round.

As she gets comfortable on top of me, her eyes lazily drifting shut, I ask, "Why Lana Myers? What made you choose that name?"

She grins as her eyes struggle to remain open.

"My mother said she and my father always argued about my name before I was born. They agreed immediately on Marcus, but my name? It was one of the few arguments they ever held. She wanted Victoria because of my late grandma. My father loved the name Lana, had heard it when he was traveling as a teen with his parents. He said he felt like I was going to be a Lana, and not some regal girl like the name Victoria suggested."

She laughs under her breath, her gaze shifting as she drifts into her memories again.

"Mom said after I was born, she knew she was right. But Dad said he was right, because the definition of Lana suited me perfectly, even though my mother argued I was as hot-tempered as any Victoria there ever was."

I tilt my head, wanting in on the inside joke. "What does Lana mean?"

"Depends on the country. Precious. Little Rock. Sun Ray. But Dad said it was the Hawaiian meaning above all else that suited me—*afloat; calm as still waters.* It took a storm to offer me a calm."

She meets my gaze again, and I smile, thinking of how well it does suit her.

“I needed a name that meant something; I needed something to keep me from fading into a new persona. That was the only one I had,” she goes on.

I run my finger along her nose, tapping the end of it. “It fits you perfectly. But why Myers?”

A darker smile lights her lips. “My father was also a horror movie buff. Old school horror movies. He said he didn’t have the time or patience for pretty boy douchebags who had mommy issues.”

I laugh unexpectedly, and she grins.

“Mom always teased him that he just liked the scary, in-your-face psychopaths with mommy issues. Michael Myers was one of his faves.”

I laugh harder, shaking my head, and she lifts her hand, running her fingers through my hair. Our eyes meet and a calm silence washes over us.

“Can I ask a case related question?” I ask hesitantly.

“You know everything that’s happened,” Lana says warily. “I can’t tell you what’s left.”

“Do you know who the original killer was?”

That’s when there’s a knock at the door, pausing our conversation.

“Yeah?” Lana calls out, her body sprawled across mine.

“I hate to break up the reunion, but there’s an emergency meeting going on right now. Donny says we need to be at the cabins ASAP.”

“Shit,” I groan, cursing the day already.

Lana rolls off me with effortless grace and grabs a robe, tying it together before I even manage to pry myself from the bed. She leans against the wall and just watches me as I quickly dress.

“You’re good, Logan,” Lana says quietly, drawing my attention to her as she perches on the edge of a dresser. “It’s the thing I love most about you. Do whatever you feel is right. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay.”

I knew what her answer was going to be when I asked the question last night, but hearing the finality in her tone is like a sledgehammer to my stomach.

“This isn’t goodbye, Lana. I’ll be back tonight. We may have to actually sleep, but I will be back.”

She smiles at me, but it’s weighted once again.

I turn my phone back on, letting it go crazy with messages I don’t have time to read. Instead of wasting these last few minutes, I kiss her, letting her know I love her even if she is choosing to finish this.

My head is still spinning with a thousand conflicting arguments as to why this is wrong or right, but I refuse to give her up.

“Later,” I say against her lips.

“Later,” she whispers back.

Hadley and I leave and head to her vehicle, and I take in her disheveled hair and realize…that house has only two bedrooms.

“I thought you were gay,” I say as she works from her laptop in the passenger seat in the silver car she got from who knows where.

“I told you I wasn’t. I’ve always liked guys and girls…but you know what? Let’s have this conversation later. Whatever is bugging Donny has me worried.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I say dismissively.

It’s not until we’re almost back at the cabins that I realize I never got an answer to the question I asked Lana about the original serial killer.

But the look in her eyes told me she knows.

# Chapter 9

*Everything's fine today; that is our illusion.*
*—Voltaire*

## LANA

"Showtime?" Jake asks as I walk into the living room. My hair is pulled back, my combat boots are on, and my red shirt is the only pop of color on the otherwise black apparel.

"Final countdown."

I take out the paintbrushes, pull up my hoodie, and grab two cans of paint.

"You take the east, and I'll take the west. I'm assuming you know what that meeting is about?" Jake asks.

"Yeah. It's what we predicted from the start. Johnson and the director are about to railroad the entire investigation. Johnson has his target, which happens to be Diana's son, despite his numerous alibies and the fact he's states away."

"And dating a damn fancy lawyer who will give them hell before they ever even think about arresting him," Jake adds with a smirk.

"It's almost anti-climatic how predictable they all are." I feign a sad sigh, but he doesn't smile the way I expect him to.

"I'm having reservations about the final leg of the plan. I think we should just leave and let the fireworks happen instead of you risking yourself."

I quirk an eyebrow at him, ignoring all the festering emotions that are aching inside my chest. Today, Logan will leave. Tonight, Logan will be free to forget me.

His life will go on, and he'll eventually just see this as a blemish in his otherwise flawless character.

"I'm not risking anything but them surviving if we deviate now, Jake. Have a little faith. I'm better than them. They've not even laid a hand on me."

His lips thin, and his gaze flicks to the bullet graze on my bandaged cheek, but he doesn't argue as we pack our separate vehicles with the paint.

"Quit dawdling. We have an entire town to terrorize," I say when I know he's about to press the issue.

He's worried about me surviving.

I see a life too empty to be concerned with the notion of survival.

## Chapter 10

*The road to perdition has ever been accompanied by lip service to an ideal.*

*—Albert Einstein*

## LOGAN

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I snap, glaring at Johnson as he pokes his chest out, posturing like a motherfucking gorilla about to beat the damn thing.

“You have your orders. You and the rest of your *team* are to return to Quantico. The director signed off on it. That’s what happens when you stray from the current case to work on a *closed* case from ten years ago, while people continue to die in this town. Four people in one night died, and you didn’t even bother to ask any questions. Nor did you bother to show up to where all the officers set up to canvas the surrounding woods in that area.”

Donny grips me before I can launch myself at the smug son of a bitch smirking at me.

I brush Donny off, grabbing my phone as I walk out the door, ignoring the stupid fucking deputy who has the audacity to act like he’s going to lead me to one of the SUVs.

Collins finally answers, and I immediately start snapping at him.

“You’re letting this happen? You’re letting them pull us out so they can do what? Launch a new witch hunt like the one they did ten

years ago? It's obvious they didn't learn their lesson. You're really going after a pro athlete with a fucking lawyer girlfriend?"

Collins heaves out a breath. "It's out of my hands, and the girlfriend already knew about the intent to arrest before it was ever decided. Obviously they have a leak, and she's pretty much squashed their entire case. It's not going to be like last time."

There's no fucking leak. Lana or Jake knew this was coming and warned them through Diana most likely. Or in a way that didn't give them away. Or maybe they just don't care who knows at this point and are gambling more.

They can't manufacture evidence this time, because Diana's son has airtight alibies. It'd be too obvious.

"Get back," Collins says.

"Fuck that. I'm not going anywhere."

"You have to, Logan," he says, exasperated. "The director has called a meeting to see about having you removed from all your duties, pending an investigation into your actions. He's claiming your entire team is compromised and exhibiting signs of empathy with the killer. He even said you helped a woman and child leave town, despite her husband's murder, along with two other murders in her home, before you even reported the latter two murders. I told you to be discreet when looking into the past case. You ignored me."

"So you're playing politics. I thought you were better than that. And the woman had no hand in those murders. Someone else acted on her behalf in self-defense. Those men were sent to silence Cheyenne Murdock."

He grows quiet for a moment, and I turn to see the rest of my team already packing up, giving in so easily. I can't fucking leave

Lana in this town. I'll quit and stay here on my own if they try to make me.

"I'm not playing politics, but I do have to play their game until I can see if that evidence you recovered is enough. If you don't leave and return to us willingly, Johnson will arrest you for obstruction, and I can't save you from anything while you're there. It could be too late before I get there. Don't risk it. It's not worth it. Keep a lid on what you've discovered. Just come back. Don't let them toss you in one of their cells. You know what that town is capable of."

My eyes rake over the men here. No doubt Lana wouldn't trust me to take care of myself if I was locked up here. Too many violent memories from the past would have her risking her life to come after me.

And that's the only reason I won't risk it.

"Fine," I bite out. "But you better have this resolved by the time I return so I can come right back."

"I'm trying, Logan. I really am. Just give me some time to—"

A loud white noise sound comes over the speakers, and my eyes flick to the television in the living room. I vaguely remember the only innocent deputy telling me the sheriff owned the television network service, and he had a special broadcasting ability.

But that's not him broadcasting.

"Logan?" Collins prompts, but I ignore him as I walk into the living room, watching the slideshow unfold on the television. It's just a few pictures of the town at sunset, all of them flicking around at random.

A voice comes on, speaking like the damn creepy voice from SAW.

“Citizens of Delaney Grove. It’s time to purge the town. You have until sunset to leave…to save yourself. We’re claiming this town now. For your sins, you shall repent. For your past, you shall endure the nightmares you caused. And for your eyes that you closed so willingly, now you shall see.”

The slideshow starts to make sense, and my stomach roils as I see a familiar young girl and boy on the street. Someone fucking recorded this?

A younger version of Kyle Davenport appears in front of them, and the screen cuts to Victoria on the ground, and Marcus right behind her. His screams almost make me heave as he begs them to stop, but Victoria fights. She fights with all the limited strength she has.

They hold her down.

Thirteen to two.

Their fingers dig into her arms to restrain her. All ten fingers. Which is why she cuts them off.

“Someone fucking stop this!” the sheriff barks, running out of one of the cabins. “Call Hank and tell him to pull the plug now!”

“He’s trying!” a deputy shouts back. “The sick fuck is overriding the system.”

The screen cuts away from the horrors, like whoever was filming got too tired to keep on, and the next screen is that of Robert Evans suffering a fate just as sickening.

I turn my head away as the deputies do their worst on the screen.

“Now!” the sheriff shouts. “You have to kill it now!”

He’s on the phone, but I barely notice him, because my attention turns back to the TV when the voice comes on again.

“Hear no evil.”

The black screen is blank, but several screams of agony are coming out loud and clear.

“See no evil.”

The screen lights up with both disturbing movies playing side by side on a split screen.

Then the screen fades to black again, before a cloaked silhouette comes into view. All you can see is the dark hood. The face is nothing more than a shadow as a red-gloved hand comes up. One finger extends, covering the spot where the lips would be if you could see them, making the universal ‘shush’ sign.

“Speak no evil.”

The screen goes blank again, then lights up with images of different people as they watch their TV. Screams and panic erupt. It’s like the jumbo-tron at ballgames flicking to different people, and them noticing it on a delay. Only instead of excitement, there’s pure horror when they see their faces.

It continues throughout the town, as though they have cameras in every family room of every home. People practically leap from their seats when their faces flash across the TV screen.

I remember the day when everyone said their doors were found open, but nothing but some mirrors were taken.

The mirrors are still a mystery, but it’s clear now why those doors were open. Jake planted cameras while families slept in the next room, completely unaware.

The screen continues to cycle from one home to the next, and the sheriff continues to panic more and more.

“Sundown,” the voice says again as the shadowed, hooded figure comes into view once more. “Or the monster comes for you.”

Suddenly, the shadow disappears as the figure jerks toward the screen, revealing the face… Well, the mask.

The mask is a mirror, reflecting nothing in particular, but sending a message all the same. In other words, the person you see in the reflection is the mirror.

“The monster who comes is no worse than the monsters who deserve to die. Pick a side. Pick it now.”

The screen cuts to Belker Street. The sign is in the background, but the focal point is the large amounts of blood on the asphalt. My eyes narrow on what looks like a set of wings imprinted in the blood, where Marcus was, and my mind goes back to the message written about angels on that first day.

“You let them die. Now save yourselves. While you still can.”

The screen goes blank again, and white noise fills the air. A deputy flips several channels, but every one is the exact same.

“Did you hear all that?” I ask Collins, stepping back outside as Leonard and Donny stare at a TV blankly.

“I heard. But you still have to come back. There’s nothing I can do. Just hurry back so we can clear this up, and then hopefully this will all backfire on them in time for you to get back and stop this.”

I look around at all the furious faces, including the sheriff who is having a temper tantrum, kicking feet and swearing, placing blame on blameless men who obviously didn’t help Jake hack into the station.

“Fine. I’m on my way.”

I hang up and walk over to Donny and Leonard. “We have to go if we’re going to get back before sunset.”

“Are they calling anyone in?” Donny asks as he turns to face me.

My eyes flit around. “They won’t ask for help if they’re intent on sending us away. This investigation is about to turn into a shit-storm. Johnson and Cannon are too busy hiding their crimes of the past to protect their future. Let’s go.”

Leonard doesn’t speak, but I know what he’s thinking. I just had to watch my girlfriend getting raped. It’s all I can do not to kill every-fucking-body wearing a deputy badge right now. Not to mention the sheriff.

I’ve never once thought of killing someone as a desire. I’ve never blurred that line.

That’s not the case at the moment.

I hope she fucking kills every last person with a badge who didn’t come to save her when she was left to bleed out.

# Chapter 11

*They say miracles are past.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LANA

Twenty minutes after the broadcast, people were fleeing town. Just as predicted, Logan and his team are already gone. The video will find them soon—the same video we just shared with the entire fucked up town.

Our original plan was to have Jake handle that little fun part, but it'd be easier to have someone inside the FBI to do it.

"At least they're fleeing," Jake says as we watch from the distance, our eyes on the phone screen that has the sheriff all but imploding.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sheriff Cannon barks, slapping his hand on the driver's side window of a car.

The man cracks the window an inch. "I'm getting my family out of this damn town before you drag us all to hell for what you've done."

My lips twitch. They're abandoning their captain.

"Looks like they're more scared of us than the sheriff now," Jake gloats. "Finally standing up to him."

"By comparison, the sheriff now seems insignificant to a monster who sees all, hears all, and knows all."

"It's just one fucking person! Stay and defend this town!" the sheriff snaps to the guy.

We knew they'd abandon him. They've heard it all, but until today, they've never seen it.

Jake nudges me with his elbow, and I look at his phone's screen which is diagonal from the sheriff's location. On the back of the old gym's wall, a message appears as though Jake timed this all too perfectly.

*One person cannot change the world. But one person can strike terror into multitudes.*

*—Robert Evans*

The man in the car sees the message, probably thinking something supernatural is going on, giving the timeliness of the message's appearance. He gasses the car, driving away from the sheriff, and almost sideswiping another vehicle in the process.

"Find that fucker now!" the sheriff barks, giving up his endeavor of stopping the rats who are fleeing the sinking ship.

"Heat signatures have a flurry of motion right now, but we still need to up the game if we're going to get everyone out," Jake says as more and more messages start to appear throughout the town.

With everyone distracted with Logan's team and our little special broadcast, we ran around town, hurriedly painting the messages with the faster paint. Jake painted some last night with the slower paint.

I'm still wearing my damn harness from all the drop-downs I did to paint the messages high, making them as visible as possible.

You can do a lot in forty minutes when you have a plan and a goal.

On the church, a massive message appears.

*Any demon is capable of cruelty, but only an angel is majestic enough to rain down vengeance for the innocent.*

*—Marcus Evans*

Jake smirks as people running by stumble over their own feet, seeing that message appear like magic. They were actually inside the church when I painted that earlier.

Jake swipes his screen, letting me see the newest one appear on the side of the school.

*Little eyes see. Little eyes learn. Be a good example for all the little eyes watching you. They're everywhere.*

*—Jasmine Evans*

Out of context and written in red paint, that message is creepy.

More people panic, more people abandon the town, taking only the essentials before locking their families in the car. I even see some people sprinkling salt in their vehicles as though it'll keep the devil away during their trip ahead.

I flip my screen, letting Jake look on with me as another message appears on the side of the town hall.

*The wicked can fake nobility, just as the damned can fake innocence. But only the truth will rise from the ashes when we all start to burn.*

*—Victoria Evans*

More panic. More fleeing.

Jake pops up his app, showing me all the heat signatures still in town.

“Turn on the broadcasting system and cut screens to all the chaos; show the messages too.”

He smirks, and he starts doing just that, streaming the footage live through the channel. I love hearing the sheriff demand that station be cut off. We’ve already taken all precautions to halt that action. Well, Jake has. I’m an idiot with tech stuff.

My role is to slaughter; his role is to do all the geek stuff.

Killer and geek seems like an odd combination, but the screams we’ve composed from the town make an intoxicating melody.

Several messages appear, all of them sliding up and down the town. People try to read them while running, unable to stop themselves from seeing what we have to say, ironically enough.

*A wise man knows when the war is lost, and will understand retreat is the only way to save lives. A foolish man will condemn all his followers to death because of his pride.*

*—Robert Evans*

Everyone knows that’s geared toward the sheriff, and let’s face it, no one but his deputies are willing to die for him. The few strays that will join his side will be the ones he’s used on the side to keep people in line without tying it to the department—just like with Cheyenne last night.

I’m not going to discriminate and leave them out of the slaughter if they so choose to join him now.

*If hatred didn't exist, love wouldn't either, for one is formed by the other. I love and hate this town.*

*—Marcus Evans*

*I believe the souls of the wrongfully persecuted often haunt our world, bringing the same grief they feel from beyond the grave.*

*—Jasmine Evans*

"It's time for the bell drop," Jake says, almost shaking with anticipation.

He's the master of timing, so he should be proud.

He presses a button on his phone, and a mild, contained explosion happens at the top of the church tower. The bell groans and wines before it crashes through the rock. We watch it in real time, not needing a screen to see it plummet to the street.

People screech and dive away, but he timed it to be when no one was too close.

It crashes to the ground so hard that it splits the street on impact right in front of the church. Everyone slowly approaches the mess as the front of the church reveals the last message.

*Never mock or harm the passionate, for they are the fiercest with their wrath.*

*—Victoria Evans*

More screams. They sound so pretty.

I cock my head, watching the people scatter, everyone rushing into their homes to gather their belongings. Our plan is to break the record for total town evacuation.

We also have a plan for the stragglers. Tranquilizing darts are a last resort, but we have them in spades, along with a dump truck to toss the unconscious ones into.

Nothing will stop us from finishing this.

Today.

My father would love this horror movie, because the bad guy finally wins.

“Ready for phase two?” Jake asks me.

“Where are we at on heat signatures?”

He pops up his app, showing me all the dots still in town.

“Broadcast phase two. Let the ones hiding in their homes see the show that will push them over the edge.”

“Planned on it,” he tells me with a dark grin.

My attention turns to one of the two cemeteries, the one where my parents and brother are buried. This is the part I’ve been dreading, but it’s a necessary evil. Besides, I know my brother and father would want to be involved in any way possible. I’m probably creating the illusion in my head, but I’d like to believe that if my mother had lived to see the horrors that were bestowed on her family, she’d be equally onboard.

For she was a romantic.

“Now,” I say quietly.

Though it’s in the distance, I still see with perfect clarity as the tombstones start exploding one by one. A fire starts in front of the cemetery, zipping down the line that Jake laid out.

We can hear the screams as the headstones continue to explode, and Jake presses a button on his phone that releases shadows made by light boxes. They look like souls rising.

To a town so full of guilt and religion, it'll be like a mini-apocalypse.

Every headstone there finally explodes, and the lines of the fire finish, spelling out two words.

*We're back!*

No longer is it one flesh-and-blood killer. Their worst suspicions have just come true. The spirits buried in that cemetery are back to wreak havoc on everyone here.

Jake pulls up his heat signature app, seeing more and more dots leaving their homes, fleeing to their cars to drive the spiral out of town.

One road in. One road out.

He broadcasts the second graveyard, following the same suit, the fire sparking and forming more words as the headstones explode one at a time. I idly watch the deputies running around the town, trying their best to calm everyone and convince them they're safe.

Spirits don't exist, after all. But their eyes tell them another story as they see the shadows emerge from the cemetery, convinced the illusion is the truth.

I love this town right now, because they're so fucking predictable.

Cars zoom by us, getting out of here as fast as they can.

The second string of letters form more words in the fire, and Jake zooms in, broadcasting it flawlessly.

*And we're taking everyone with us back to the grave.*

"Phase three," I say, backing behind a tree as a deputy races by on foot, trying to stop a fight that has broken out in the street.

The stubborn fools who don't want to leave may change their minds now.

The mirrors Jake stole on night one are suddenly launched from the ground where they've been hiding, the soil blanket being pulled back by another of Jake's genius inventions. After all, he's been planning each detail of this day for years.

People shriek in horror as the mirrors line up, all the varieties of them shining the reflections of the monsters hiding beneath their own flesh. Then the mirrors explode, slinging glass everywhere.

The shards get cut down so small that they merely slice a few flesh wounds. Don't worry; no children are harmed in this act. We're more careful than that.

One woman screams as the small cuts on her face starts to bleed, and she touches them with shaking hands, going into shock.

Weak.

Pathetic.

All of them.

But that's what tips the scales. More and more heat signatures start disappearing or moving down the road too fast to be on foot. They're retreating.

"I'll handle phase four in fifteen minutes. That should be enough time for the retreaters to run," Jake says as I unstrap the harness I'm wearing.

“Make sure you completely get everyone out,” I tell him distractedly.

“I will, Lana. Trust me.”

I smile as I push the harness to his chest. “I do trust you. With my life. Now I need to go get ready for phase five.”

He glances over at all the chaos, then he flicks his screen to the sheriff who has his hat off, running a hand over his salt and pepper hair in defeat. “You shouldn’t have to wait too long.”

## Chapter 12

*‘Tis one thing to be tempted, another thing to fall.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LOGAN

“They have the evidence. There’s a fucking video of what they did to Robert Evans, for fuck’s sake! And you’re still holding me here? On what grounds?” I snap, glaring at Collins and Director McEvoy.

“On the grounds you aided a possible murder suspect in fleeing a town the same night her husband was killed, along with two men inside her home.”

“Cheyenne Murdock feared for her life, and she was not a suspect. She was attacked in her home, and our unsub saved her life.”

McEvoy points a finger at me. “And that mentality is why you’re here. You don’t get to assume she’s innocent because she says she is. Especially after you swore to your team the unsub was a female. Your entire profile for this case is all over the map, and it doesn’t make a damn bit of sense. Then you just release a woman after two men are slaughtered in her living room with a skill far too advanced to ignore?”

“Two hit men,” I growl.

“Speculation,” McEvoy growls back.

“Let’s all take a step back,” Collins says, easing his hands between us and pushing us apart, creating much needed separation. “I’ve sent the evidence to be examined,” he goes on.

McEvoy narrows his eyes at Collins. “A woman digs up her basement floor and happens to hand you the keys to a closed case from years ago? And yet she’s nowhere to be found now, as though she magically vanished. It’s not like she can corroborate this story if we can find her, which makes it completely inadmissible.”

“You hope,” I add, glaring at him.

He takes a step forward, and Collins lands a hand on his chest, holding him back.

“All the lies and cover-up schemes in the world won’t do you a bit of good once I get my hands on that video evidence and have it authenticated.”

He takes a step back, his eyes narrowing. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with. I’ll bury you, boy. I’ll ruin your name so fucking well that nothing out of your mouth will mean a damn thing. All the evidence in the world won’t do you a bit of good with a reputation like I plan for you.”

“Is that a threat?” Collins asks him, eyeing the director like he just slipped up.

A sinister smile lines the director’s lips. “He’s being held for charges of obstruction and conspiracy to aide a known serial killer.”

“You can’t do that,” Collins growls.

“Watch me. He doesn’t leave this floor until they come with an arrest warrant and escort him out.”

He turns and stalks away, and Collins runs a hand through his hair.

“He must have played a really big part in covering all that shit up if he’s pushing the limits this far,” Collins says, looking over his shoulder. “I need to meet up with some people and get this sorted before he really does try to have you arrested. If you leave here, though, it’ll look bad. I won’t doubt that he has people blocking your exit. They’ll have permission to restrain you by any means necessary. So stay put. Don’t do anything stupid.”

He turns and walks away, and I grab the first thing I can get my hands on and throw it across the room. People gasp and scatter away as the broken stapler falls to the ground in two pieces.

“They just pulled in Donny,” Leonard says near me, looking around like he’s wary of everyone’s intentions.

“They’re going to split us all up and talk to us one-by-one. Just remember this is about me and none of you. Say whatever you need to in order to keep any blame off you.”

“I escorted Cheyenne Murdock and her daughter out of town. Not you,” he argues.

“Under my orders,” I remind him.

He narrows his eyes. “I’m not letting them take you down.”

I look around, making sure no one is close enough to overhear. “Their allegations aren’t wrong. I’m definitely compromised and you know it. In all honesty, I started obstructing this case the second I learned of Lana’s involvement.”

“In that case, Hadley and I are both in the same tub of shit you’re in. You’re not going down for this. Lana’s methods may be barbaric and illegal, but after seeing what they had to endure and then contend with in the aftermath, I can’t fault her logic.”

“Makes you question everything we’ve ever stood for, doesn’t it?” I ask, exhausted as I lean back against someone’s deserted desk.

“No. We’ve always fought to save the innocent from the sick and depraved. Lana had no one to fight for her or her family. She was tasked with the worst case scenario on her own.”

I cock my head as Hadley walks by, glancing over her shoulder as though she’s checking to see if she’s being followed. She holds her laptop closer to her body, clutching it like she’s up to something.

“She wasn’t on her own,” I say distractedly, watching as Hadley ducks into Craig’s office and closes the blinds.

His door doesn’t have a lock on it though.

He’s still out on the bullshit assignment they used to keep him away from Delaney Grove.

“Keep an eye on things and come find me if anything new reaches you. I’m confined to this floor for now.”

My eyes lift to where one of the director’s men is standing at the doorway, his eyes trained on me. He definitely plans to keep me in place.

“Where are you going?” Leonard asks me, but I don’t answer.

I’m sure he watches me as I head through everyone whispering about me, and burst into Craig’s office without knocking.

Hadley squeals and slams her laptop shut.

“What are you doing?” I ask, suspicious.

I shut the door behind me, and she blows out a relieved breath before reopening the laptop. Her fingers fly rapidly over the keys as her eyes grow determined.

“They won’t give me an office with privacy, so I’m borrowing Craig’s, since he’s still gone.”

“But what are you *doing?”* I ask again, coming up behind her so I can see the screen.

I lean over, putting one hand on the desk beside her, and one on the back of her chair, as I stare at all the nonsensical lines of code on her screen.

“I’m hacking into Jake’s video feed.” She motions to the three monitors in Craig’s office that he uses for work. “It’s not quite as elaborate as Jake’s twenty monitors, but it’ll do.”

“I guess that means you lied when you told Leonard you couldn’t hack the feed,” I grumble.

“I didn’t lie. I couldn’t hack them at the time. Jake’s brilliant, by the way. I never would have found the frequency he uses if he hadn’t shown me how to discover it. It runs at the same frequency normal power lines do. I don’t even understand how he did that.”

She continues to type in random letters, symbols, and numbers that make zero sense to me.

“Why would he tell you?”

“Because he trusts me. It was that instant sort of trust that he doesn’t usually feel. We’re kindred. He wanted someone to really appreciate the effort and genius that went into all his work, and I’m as much of a tech nerd as he is. You and Lana are both oblivious to the layers and difficulty level that goes into something like this. Me? I had a nerd-gasm that led to a real orgasm later on. I got that turned on.”

“More information than I needed,” I mumble.

She ignores me. “And he is a fucking genius. I only thought I was good. No wonder he’s never been caught.”

Suddenly, all the monitors come alive with images of the town. Cars are fleeing by the second, rushing to get away from something. My eyes move from screen to screen as Hadley flips to different views. I'm searching for some explanation.

But all we see is the aftermath of whatever has happened.

"Can you rewind this?"

"Not right now. He has it set to live feed only. We can only view what he's viewing. He's using the feeds to broadcast this live over their TVs. He's so fucking perfect."

I ignore that last part, focusing on the rest of it. I catch glimpses of words, but the screen changes before I can read them. I thought Hadley was flipping screens, but it's Jake. Like she said, we can only observe as he observes.

"I want to find Lana. Is there any chance you can hack into a different—"

"Don't even pretend you know how to speak geek. If I tried to hack anything from this point on, it would mess up what he's doing. Even if I didn't care to do that, he'd immediately back hack me and possibly close out everything, may even lock me out of the system completely. I wouldn't doubt that he'd be able to bring the entire federal network down. Like I said, he's better than me. Much better. But he's also more passionate and has pushed himself to the limits for this very goal."

I try calling Lana's phone, cursing when I realize she must have already switched burners again. This one is no longer an active number.

A different screen pops up, one I know too well. "They're reading heat signatures? Why?" I ask, watching as more and more red dots

join into the middle of the street, everyone heading for the exit.

“For whatever their endgame is. That monitor is linked to his phone, bringing up any screens he brings up—”

The monitor shuts down, and Hadley curses. “He apparently didn’t want me watching that part.”

She waits, staring at the other screens, but none of them shut down.

“So he knows you’ve hacked him?”

“Like I said, he’s brilliant. He probably has a system set up to alert him of any interference. He doesn’t seem to mind us watching this, but he wants his phone a secret.”

“Because he’s running this show from that phone, and he doesn’t want us knowing what comes next,” I say, worried.

A screen flips to a residence where an older man and an older woman are sitting in their living room. They’re right across from where Lana would have been assaulted.

They’re talking about the madness going on outside and how they plan to wait it out, when suddenly the TV flicks on, and a masked face comes into view. Instead of the mirror mask Lana was wearing, it’s a red mask.

“Get out, Whitmires! Get out now!”

The woman and man both scream, and the man clutches his heart, his eyes wide in horror. That’s all the prompting they need.

They don’t even bother grabbing a bag before rushing out.

The screens all change again, and I try to focus on the ones that seem the most important.

“How is he viewing all this from one phone?” I ask Hadley.

“He has a system set up to flip between screens, but he can minimize up to five at a time and watch them in thumbnail size. I wonder if he’ll go house to house with that tactic.”

“What happens if that tactic doesn’t work?” I ask more to myself than her, dread creeping up my spine.

There has to be a reason they’re focusing on evacuating the town.

My eyes hone in on the monitor with the most activity. The deputies are scattered, all of them looking angry and desperate to keep people in the town. One even punches a civilian, but two men grab the deputy and sling him into a car.

He backs off when one pulls a gun on him, and the civilians help the fallen man back to his feet before backing away into a car.

“They’ve bound them together to stand up to the sheriff and his men,” I surmise.

“No one will fight for the town, and after the show they put on with the broadcast, no one wants to be there when the sheriff goes down either,” she says, but then sucks in a breath.

She turns to face me, her eyes wide. “I think I know where Lana is.”

“Where?”

She gestures to the screens. “Who’s missing?”

# Chapter 13

*Don’t impose on others what you yourself do not desire.*
*—Confucius*

## LANA

The door slings open, and I watch through the wooden slats of the closet door as the sheriff stomps in, angrily slamming the door behind him. He grabs an empty glass off the table by his recliner and slings it across the room. It shatters against the wall as he roars like a beast enraged.

For a few long minutes, his head hangs, his chest heaves, and he grips the sides of the chair for support. He always puts up a good front, but he’s as mortal as the rest of us.

My smile kicks up as he predictably goes to the bar in the living room, opening the door and pulling out a bottle of whiskey. His hands are shaking when he pours a glass and drinks it down quickly.

Any time the pressure mounts, the sheriff has to have a drink. But he can’t let his deputies see him carry a bible and a glass of whiskey. He can sentence innocent people to a gruesome death, but being so weak as to need a drink is simply unforgivable. Not to mention shameful.

I’d roll my eyes, but I’m busy watching as he takes his gun off, putting it by the door.

Finally.

*“You’ll pay for this,” the sheriff hisses, glaring at my brother and me as we get carried out of the courtroom.*

*“He was with us!” I shout again, staring frantically at the jury as they continue to wrangle me out. “They’re hiding the truth! They’re suppressing evidence! This is just a fucking witch hunt, and my father is being framed!”*

*“Just make them show you our statements!” my brother bellows as they finally haul us all the way out.*

*As soon as the doors seal shut, they reopen, and the sheriff stalks out.*

*Cuffs are being put on our wrists, but they can’t lock us away for long. It’s on film. We’re in contempt of court and nothing else.*

*“Put them in a cell until this damn thing is over. I won’t deal with them again until I have to,” the sheriff barks. Then those cold eyes turn to us. “You’re making a deal with the devil by betraying the souls of the innocent. Your father is guilty. And I’ll make sure he hangs for his sins.”*

*He starts to walk back inside as we start demanding to be turned loose.*

*The sheriff turns just as we reach the corner, and he eyes me.*

*“I’d hoped you see the devil you loved through clearer eyes, but I guess you never did and never will.”*

I wait patiently, silently stalking him with just my eyes as he finishes off another glass. His eyes dart toward something near the couch, and his head tilts as he studies something I can’t see from this angle.

He looks away from whatever it is that no longer holds his interest, and carries his glass around the corner to the kitchen, which is near his master bedroom. Pushing the door open silently, I step out, putting my knife in its sheath on my hip.

As I near the couch, my eyes dart down, curious at what held his attention. And I close my eyes as I refrain from blowing out a frustrated breath. My flashlight is there. I put it down earlier when I was looking for any hidden weapons, and forgot to pick it back up.

Rookie mistake.

Opening my eyes back up, I clutch the handle of my knife and walk into the kitchen. But I screech to a halt when my gaze is suddenly locked on the end of a barrel.

“Boo,” the sheriff says, drawing my eyes to his as I slowly raise my hands, feigning compliance.

He looks over the pistol to stare down at me, the barrel just inches from my face.

“Any reason why the fed’s girlfriend is slinking around my house?” he drawls lazily, hiding that welling frustration he showed just moments ago when he didn’t know I was watching.

“Probably because she’s not just a fed’s girlfriend,” I quip, smiling bitterly at him.

He cocks his head, watching me.

“And who exactly are you?”

I smirk as I take a step forward, pressing that barrel right up against my temple with my hands still raised. His eyes widen fractionally, but he masks all other signs of surprise.

“I’m the girl you sent your son to kill. I’d hoped you see the devil you loved through clearer eyes, but I guess you never did and never

will.”

Confusion only lights his eyes for the barest of moments before recognition slides over his face.

“No,” he says in a rasp whisper.

But then his eyes turn to ice, and the resonating sound of a dead *click* rattles around the room that is otherwise cloaked in silence. Fear replaces determination when I smile.

And he pulls the trigger again, and again, and again…all while I take a step back.

“Hope you don’t mind, Sheriff. I took the liberty of emptying all the bullets from every other gun in the house, sans your service weapon you left in the other room.”

He starts to rush by me, surprising me by not lunging for the helpless looking woman before him. I guess I gave him too much credit for being masculine and all that.

My knee slams into his stomach, halting his retreat, and he hits the ground, collapsing with a pained cry.

“I’ve always preferred knives,” I say as I pull mine out, sliding it under his throat as he goes stiff and still beneath the blade.

I crouch beside him, holding the knife there.

“How are you alive?” he asks almost too quietly.

I grin, waggling my eyebrows. “A lot of pain. A lot of healing. And a hell of a lot of tequila. But mostly, I’m here because of Jake. You remember him, right? Jacob Denver? The boy you overlooked as any sort of threat once you realized he’d been in love with my brother? Because what sort of weak man loves another man, right? No way would such an abomination be awesome enough to help a dead girl slaughter so many of your monsters.”

His lips part for a breath of surprise to escape, and the knife presses closer to his throat with the motion.

Casually, I pull out my phone with my free hand, dial Jake, and set it on the ground beside me after putting it on speaker.

“I take it you’re still working on phase five?” Jake asks as I stare at the sheriff’s face.

“He’s still letting it all sink in that all this is his fault. What’s the fun in simply killing him if he doesn’t go through at least a little mind torture of the reality he’s spun from all his lies and corruption?” I ask, grinning down as the sheriff’s eyes turn hard.

There’s the arrogant son of a bitch I know.

“Phase six worked better than planned. The personalized messages got through to everyone except three. I’ve just loaded the last one in the car, skipping the dump truck that was unnecessary. I’ll drop them at the safe zone as soon as I check for the whereabouts of the deputies, and then I’ll move on to phase eight.”

“Good. I want the sheriff to hear phase seven, which is why I called.”

I can almost hear Jake smile as I watch the sheriff watch me.

“Getting out my clone of the sheriff’s phone now,” Jake says.

The sheriff’s eyes shift to my phone, curious. I press the mute button, holding it up for him to see it, while still keeping the knife pressed to his throat with my other hand.

“Deputy Hayes, I need you to assemble all the names I’m about to read out to you. They’re the ones I trust. The deputy and uniformed officers not mentioned should go to the outlying borders and start seeing if they can find anything. Understand?”

There's a pause, and I watch the sheriff's face. We can only hear Jake's side of the conversation.

"They'll know it's not me," the sheriff growls, then winces when talking causes the blade to nick his throat just barely. A trickle of blood spills, and I continue to hold him in place.

"You hear Jake's voice. But when it passes through that particular phone, it sounds just like you on the other end," I tell him, grinning as his face pales. "Did I mention Jake is a boy genius?"

Jake starts listing the names of everyone involved with my father's death and the assembly that resulted in the death of my brother and the death of Victoria Evans as everyone knew her.

Even the retired deputies get called in, considering they've already rallied to help 'defend' the town. Saves me an extra trip of paying them individual visits.

"You have one hour," Jake goes on, finishing up the list of names.

I hang up the phone, watching as the hope fades from the sheriff's face. Helpless is a delicious look on him.

"Now stand up," I say, pulling the blade back and slowly standing to my feet.

He watches me warily as he slowly sits up, but doesn't move past that.

"I've had to be patient for ten long years, Sheriff. Stop stalling, because I'm out of patience."

His eyes narrow in challenge. He's planning something stupid.

His arms open wide.

"If you want me up, then—"

His words end on a scream as I stomp his ankle with the heel of my combat boot. A satisfying crunch follows the stomp, and I grind

my heel into his ankle before he lurches to grab at my foot. Then my foot flies up, connecting with his face.

Blood sprays from his mouth as he sails backwards again. He stops his head from pounding the tile, and I calmly walk toward his head.

“I said get up. You decide how much of a beating it takes for you to comply.”

“What’s the point?” he growls, spitting out blood. “You just plan to kill me. You’re a monster. The devil’s own spawn.”

I kneel beside him, keeping a safe distance between us, and my eyes meet his.

“Your son was a monster, Sheriff. Holding a bible or wearing a badge doesn’t offer you absolution from your own inhumanity either.” I tilt my head, watching the fury and unprecedented indignation sweep over his eyes.

“You’re wrong,” he seethes.

“It might have taken you a year, possibly even longer, to realize you’d made a mistake. When there was another rape and kill a year later, maybe? One just outside Delaney Grove? Same victimology as all the others,” I say casually, watching his gaze shift again.

“Once your anger and grief calmed and started to ebb, you realized Robert Evans was never the right man, and you’d framed him, punished him brutally for sins he never committed.”

Every fight in him deflates as those words settle in, and a surprising glisten appears in his eyes.

“You realized too late that a true monster was still killing women and taking from them, and you’re the reason he was free to do it. All that blood is on your hands, Sheriff. It wouldn’t wash away.”

Tears start to form in his eyes as I go on.

“You knew all those claims against Kyle couldn’t all be false either, but you’d already lost one child. You forced yourself to live in denial that the other one was rotten to the core. But then again, you killed his mother after forcibly enlisting her help with framing my father. Tell me, Sheriff, did you collect the condoms yourself? Or was that Johnson’s job?”

He clears his throat, trying to get rid of all the guilt in his eyes, but struggles to do so. It means I’m spot on.

“Because you’d killed your son’s mother in your quest for framing an innocent man, you excused all the disgusting acts of your vile son. Lied to the town. Lied to yourself. That night when you told him to take care of us, you never really expected him to bring all his friends. You never expected they’d reach for the limits of depravity, then cross them even more severely than you crossed them with my father. But you still hid the truth. Covered us up. Acted as though the lives of *two* innocent children never mattered.”

The anger in my voice can no longer be masked, and the sheriff’s lip trembles as a tear drops from his eye.

“I hated your daughter. But I never wished her dead. My father fixed her car window once. Did you know that?”

He slowly shakes his head.

“She’d slept with another girl’s boyfriend from a rival school. The girl wrote ‘slut’ all over your daughter’s car. Then she busted out the driver’s window. Your daughter knew she’d have to explain, but she was too afraid to tell you she was sleeping around. My father stepped in and helped her even though that girl was a despicable bitch to me for no reason. Because my father said she was a kid.

And he could never be mean to a child, for fear that one day someone might do the same to us."

He sucks in a breath, working damn hard to restrain his emotions.

"She didn't even thank him. She acted like it was his job to replace that window before you got home from your hunting trip. She didn't even pay him for the window, and we were struggling for money. But he never said a word. Because she was *just a kid.* Yet you labeled him a monster. You shattered every ounce of dignity he ever had. And you sent real monsters after all three of us, yourself included. Tell me, Sheriff, do you feel as though all your prayers for forgiveness have worked?"

I slide the blade across the floor, watching his eyes fall to it.

"Or do you think a punishment has finally been sent for all your sins?"

His chin wavers, but he continues to stare me in the eyes.

"Stand up," I say again, a harsh bite to my tone.

This time, he lumbers to his feet, his shoulders not pushed up so high.

He doesn't look at me as I gesture toward the bathroom. "Get in the shower."

"Why?" he snaps.

"Either do what I say, or I'll let the entire town watch the video of Kyle confessing everything."

His eyes dart to mine, wide and horrified. "Yes, Sheriff. They may be gone, but they'll still see the video eventually. All his sins on one long video. He's crying during his confessions, by the way. In between the spouts of begging for his life."

The sheriff gags, staving off a breakdown as he turns away from me, tears now leaking.

“All the other videos have them all confessing. Little by little, I had all I needed. They spilled details of where to find all that precious camera footage from both those *incidents*, as you liked to call them. They told me *everything.* And people *will* see that footage.”

“Even Kyle’s?” he asks on a rasp. “Regardless if I do what you say?”

I smile to myself. “I guess you’ve called my bluff. Yes, they’ll see it regardless. But I’ll make a deal to keep all his torture off the camera if you just go get in the damn shower. Don’t make me drag you. I’d have to break your hands to make sure you didn’t try anything stupid, and that will take some time and effort to thoroughly break them.”

He releases a pained sound, swallowing hard.

“How did you turn into this?”

My eyes widen. “Is that rhetorical, Sheriff? Because I’m pretty sure it’d be obvious.”

He lunges suddenly, taking me off guard. But I slam the heel of my palm into his chest, forcing the wind from his lungs, then drop and kick up at the same time, catching him right in the groin.

Always wanted to hit him there.

When he hits the ground, I kick him in the face hard enough to almost knock him out. He stares, dazed, as blood leaks from between his lips.

“Fine. We’ll do this the hard way,” I chirp.

I kick him over to his stomach, grab his cuffs from his hip, and pin him down with my knee against his spine as I roughly jerk his arms

behind his back. He's still too dazed to fight with me, so I hurry before he gets his bearings back.

I have a deadline, after all.

Reaching down, I grab him at the collar of his shirt and start dragging him toward the bathroom, ignoring the groaning fabric. His fight comes back, but it's futile at this point. I grab him by his hair as we reach the bathroom, and force him to his feet.

The idiot tries to head-butt me when he's standing in front of me, but I'm much shorter, and simply dodge it, spin around him, and kick him into the open tub.

A pained grunt escapes him as he lands on his back.

"What are you doing?" he asks, staring up at me while his legs hang over the sides.

"Using you to fulfill a fantasy," I quip as I close the shower curtain. "Two fantasies, actually."

Staring at the white, plain shower curtain, I pull out my knife. A dark smile curves my lips before I start playing the music from my phone, and I stab him through the curtain.

A cry of pain and surprise echoes off the bathroom walls.

But I stab again.

And again.

And again.

Until he's just gurgling sounds.

Then I jerk back the curtain, smirking. "Life goals," I say to myself, still smiling as I leave the dying man in the tub. I walk through the house and back to the living room where his service weapon is still on the table.

It’s the only loaded gun in the house, and shooting the sheriff—with his own gun—is just too poetic to pass up.

The song continues to play as I walk back in, and blood is flowing from all the wounds and the sheriff’s mouth as I watch him from the doorway.

His eyes are barely staying open as I point the gun at his groin. Words try to form, but he’s too injured to make an intelligible sound.

I grab a stack of towels and drop them to his lap, then I press the gun against the towels and fire. The sound is still loud, despite the muffling of it against the towels, but at least my ears aren’t ringing.

I hate guns.

But again…too poetic.

The sheriff jerks as I pull the gun back, and the white towels get redder and redder as he bleeds out. The tub catches all the blood, taking it down the drain as he continues to spill his shade.

I wipe my knife off as the sheriff slowly dies, and I listen to the song that is playing on repeat.

*I shot the sheriff…*

Then I take a picture for Jake once the life finally leaves the sheriff’s eyes.

Just to be sure, I check for a pulse. It’s gone. Then, to be doubly sure, I slice the knife across his throat, leaving his blood to continue to drain.

I wipe the knife off again, place it back in its sheath on my hip, pull my hood up, and walk out with my phone still playing that song.

The town is like an old western ghost town now. I half expect tumbleweeds to start rolling by me as the wind blows. The sun is

three hours from setting, but the endgame is moments away from starting.

Everyone expects sundown to be the endgame time, since that's what we told them.

But we have another set of rules we're playing by.

And we're ready.

Jake is already in my old house when I step inside the familiar home. This house is in the perfect location.

My heart thumps a little faster when I see the inside, because it's like stepping into a different vortex. No pictures of us line the walls the way they used to.

The carpet has been replaced with hardwood. The blues have all been replaced with neutral colors. And they knocked out the wall between the living room and kitchen.

Everything is different, yet there's a pang of familiarity in my chest.

He's put in all his monitors, ready to start this process.

"You took longer than you were supposed to," Jake says as I step in and strip out of my hoodie.

"I shot the sheriff," I start singing, and he grins.

"Time to shoot the deputies."

I strip out of my clothes, and start pulling on my kill clothes. I can't wear a baggy hoody or restricting pants. This is the ultimate kill zone.

"Phase nine complete?" I ask him.

"As soon as you step into the middle of town, all I have to do is press a button. The next button gets pressed when you step inside. Then you're on your own. You know the charges are set; you know

the small window you have to get out; and you know to keep your head down. Don't get killed on a part we could skip."

I tug on my leggings, making sure to do the splits and double check their flexibility.

Jake watches me grimly.

"I'm not skipping this part, Jake. They need to feel the same fear. Just dying isn't good enough. And risking someone surviving isn't any good either."

He blows out a breath as I grab my tank top, ready to brave the chilly air while being sleeveless. I'll warm up once I start fighting.

After getting my boots back on, I grab the bulletproof vest that is thinner and less constricting than most—*thank you, Jake*.

Then I start packing in all the weapons into my many holsters, and use the action game assembly Jake has laid out.

"I'm having a moment," Jake says, biting down on his knuckle as I finish loading the last of the weapons into their designated spots on my body harness.

"What?" I ask, arching an eyebrow.

"Times like these remind me why I can't give up women. Something about a girl with a gun, and right now, you're every nerd's comic-book-sexy fantasy girl."

I roll my eyes.

"Seriously! The tight pants, all the guns, the sleeveless shirt—"

"All meant for functionality," I state dryly.

"Still doesn't shatter the illusion." He mocks a dreamy sigh, and I laugh despite the impending madness I'm close to stepping into.

"You ready?" he asks more seriously as I finish clipping on the last knife.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Then I’ll get your theme song ready.”

“You’re really going to play music?” I muse as I walk to the door.

“Every epic climax needs a good theme song,” he quips, forcing a smile.

He crosses the room in a few quick, long strides, and his arms go around me, tugging me to him as he kisses the top of my head. I return the embrace, steeling my nerves and my breaths.

“I love you, little sister,” he says softly.

“I love you, big brother,” I say back, clutching him tighter.

He pulls back, cupping my chin in his hand as our eyes meet.

“Now go kill them all while I burn the town to the ground.”

I nod. “Phase ten.”

# Chapter 14

*The attempt to combine wisdom and power has rarely been successful, and then only for a short while.*

*—Albert Einstein*

## LOGAN

“Why isn’t anything happening?” I ask Hadley, watching the monitors that have been flipping at random for the past hour on the completely evacuated town.

A screen pops up; the heat signature screen from earlier that Jake shut down. It has the entire town on the screen, but the only heat signatures are all coming from one building.

“Town hall,” Hadley says to herself, echoing my own thoughts. “They cleared out the entire town with the exception of the deputies.”

“What are these?” I ask, pointing to the few near the side of the town, and the one right on the border but still inside the town.

“That’s probably Jake or Lana, just like this one,” Hadley says, motioning to one that is moving through the streets like it’s walking.

My stomach clenches as my eyes train on the moving ones.

“These here are probably some officers who were sent to the edge of the town border for some reason,” Hadley goes on, gesturing to the three dots off to the side.

A message box pops up before I can ask any more questions.

*You ready for this? Or do you want to look away? It's going to get messy.*

Hadley sucks in a breath, staring at the message box.
"Is that Jake?" I ask, leaning forward.
"Yes," she says as she types back.

*Why are there officers outside of town?*

Immediately, another message pops up.

*Because I sent them there. They're innocent.*

Hadley's eyes meet mine, a question in their depths.
"I need to see her, Hadley."
She nods, then types back.

*Logan is with me. He wants to see Lana.*

The monitors flip to a whirl of dark hair from the back, guns loading her down as she carries a backpack through town. But I can't see her face from this angle.

My heartbeat drums in my throat, and another message box comes through.

*He should probably look away. Lana isn't the sweet girl right now.*

"I'm not looking away," I say to Hadley.

She blows out a breath and nods.

*We're in.*

Another message.

*Check your email, and I'll give you a front row seat to the show when you're finished.*

Hadley flips screens on her laptop immediately, and I see an email to her from a weird address. She opens it, and my stomach churns when I see a video download there. I also see tons of files to be downloaded, a complete gathering of evidence.

The computer dings like it has a new message, and Hadley pulls up the message box.

*All you have to do is download it. The files will do the rest.*

Hadley doesn't even hesitate. She downloads the files, and within a matter of moments, we hear the commotion outside.

I go to look through the blinds, seeing everyone standing and moving toward the monitors. On the screen, I see the same footage I saw earlier at Delaney Grove, only this time, there's also a lot of footage of the behind the scenes, including all the guys who were tied up and confessing their sins from that night.

I peek out the door, cracking it just a little.

"You're supposed to fight for the truth. Not fight for the corrupt," the Saw voice says from behind the mirrored mask.

Everyone exchanges wide-eyed horror as the video continues playing.

“Be careful of the eyes you never see on you,” the voice adds, bringing up a new screen with familiar faces.

Director McEvoy rushes in, his eyes panicking when he sees himself on the screen talking to Johnson ten years ago inside Delaney Grove.

*“You helped make this mess, you clean it up!” McEvoy barks, pointing a finger in Johnson’s face. “Get rid of the evidence. Get rid of any reports involving those kids. And destroy anything linking us to this godforsaken town.”*

Everyone’s eyes snap to the director who scrambles to unplug the overhead monitor. But another one just comes on.

*“And what about my team? They’re already trying to get this out,” Johnson hisses.*

*“I’ll handle them,” McEvoy growls.*

Everyone swings their gaze to a horrified director, and he turns and bolts out of the room, probably running all the way to his office.

“Get this down!” he shouts somewhere in the distance. “Find out who is doing this!”

Hadley smirks as I close the door and open the blinds so I can keep an eye on everyone. Someone will probably come to me now.

“Don’t worry,” Hadley says, grinning over at me. “I made it look like those files were put into the system by Director McEvoy himself. It’ll have his IP address all over it. It can’t be traced to us.”

The screen inside Craig’s office flips from the heat signatures to a wide shot of the town, just as music starts playing.

I glance over, seeing Johnson walking inside town hall from a different camera angle, and my eyes flick back to the girl dressed in black leggings and a red tank top as she stalks through town, armed to the guild.

“Disturbed,” Hadley says with a smirk.

“What?” I ask, entranced by the fierceness I can finally see in those haunted green eyes.

“Disturbed. Down with the Sickness,” she says. “The song. It’s almost perfect.”

Lana pulls out a mask, a red one with black lines over it, and she tugs it on.

“Why a mask?” I ask, confused.

“I don’t—”

Before she can answer that, the monitors outside the office change over to a news station with a breaking bulletin that has been leaked from an informant inside the FBI—who is probably Hadley pretending to be McEvoy. It’s the same video we were just watching, minus all the graphic scenes involving Victoria, Marcus, and Robert Evans.

My eyes flick back to the monitor near me that has Lana moving through the empty town streets, heading straight for town hall.

Knots form in my stomach, and my mouth goes dry as I watch her take her time.

On another screen, I see one of the deputies look up at one of the speakers playing the song that’s on a loop, and he says something I can’t hear as he turns back and heads inside the building.

Another steps out, looking at it too, and I hear him yell for them to call the sheriff.

By now, I think Lana has already killed him, considering his absence and hers for so long.

The last deputy steps back in just as Lana rounds the corner, less than a block away from the building now. She reaches back, grabbing her backpack, and she tosses it to the sidewalk next to the building when she reaches it.

My eyes move to the screen in the main room, watching as the newsroom pulls up live feed from Delaney Grove, and my heart sinks when I see Lana on there, tugging out a shotgun.

I see her pump it once, then back against the wall beside the door. Her chest inflates and deflates rapidly and harshly, then she cracks her neck to the side before kicking open the doors.

The screen on that TV doesn't change, but the one near us does, and I watch as all the deputies swing their surprised gazes toward Lana. She fires without hesitation, and my stomach roils as a half a head explodes from a deputy's body before he can even reach for his gun.

Immediately she pumps the shotgun and fires again, this time blowing a hole through another's chest.

It's like the room catches up and their shock wears off, as everyone grabs their guns at once.

Lana dives and slides across the floor, firing with the shotgun again, and nailing a deputy in the waist.

"So she's also a great shot," Hadley says with no emotion.

My heart is hammering in my chest, and I flick my gaze to the news, seeing it still just showing the angle from the outside as they

report on the craziness that is Lana and Jake's revenge against the world.

Everyone is just staring, watching like we're not supposed to do anything. Everyone is too stunned to even react as they hear the blasts of gunfire in rapid succession, windows crashing and blowing out with the force of the gunfire.

My eyes drop to our private viewing screen, and I see as Lana slides across the floor, tugging her mask off. Apparently the mask was just for the news, and she doesn't care who sees her inside there.

Which means…

"She's planning to live," I say on a tight breath.

"Then why the hell would she walk into a room full of trained officers?" Hadley growls, furious as Lana ducks and rolls across the floor again, tossing her empty shotgun aside and pulling out two glocks.

She fires rapidly, hitting the hordes of men wearing badges. One tries to race the door, but it doesn't budge, as though it's been locked.

Another tries to dive out the broken window, but he stops, his body convulsing as he drops. Somehow they set up an electric field, making their station a prison.

"Shit," Hadley hisses as Lana flips over a desk, landing on top of it as she fires and flips back over to duck behind another desk.

My heart is flipping worse than her agile body. Everything in me demands I go save her, but I'd never make it there in time. It's killing me to have to watch her go at all of them alone.

“Oh damn,” Hadley says on a breath as I go to open the door, making it easier to hear everything going on outside us.

“What?” I ask, needing to stop myself from watching Lana tackle an entire army on her own.

“The town is on fire,” Hadley whispers, pointing to another monitor.

A screen flips again to show three unconscious deputies, along with three unconscious people lying on top of each other in the back hatch of a SUV far away from the fire line.

The fire looks to be moving toward the town, spreading around the maze-like structure in a perfect circle, as though an experienced fire burner is controlling the directionality of the flames.

“He knows how to burn shit. Now I’m really turned on,” Hadley whispers to herself as I move back behind her.

“They’ve been planning this for years, him longer than her probably,” I say as I force myself to look at Lana again.

She’s pinned against a corner, smiling as they fire at her in rapid succession. The bullets can’t reach her unless they get another angle, but they can keep her pinned there until they can finally shoot through the steel.

“She looks…happy?” Hadley says, swallowing hard.

It’s like she has a death wish, which would mean she might not have been wearing that mask to keep her identity safe from the world because she’s going to live in it.

“What if she only wore that mask because she didn’t want anyone linking her to me?” I ask on a pained breath.

Hadley’s breath catches, but I fight back the emotions, refusing to give up hope that Lana plans to live.

She flips back from the corner, spinning as she fires her guns simultaneously again. By some miracle, not a single bullet connects with her, but her aim is almost dead on as she puts a bullet in four heads before diving behind another desk.

She flips the desk, and she kicks it into a deputy, who falls down in front of her. Then she grabs him, jerking him up to his feet, and using him as a human shield for a brief second as she fires at two others.

She's pushing them back. For some reason, she's advancing, and they keep getting closer and closer to the basement door.

One finally rushes into the basement, and she drops her shield when a bullet goes through the man and cuts into her shoulder. I blow out a breath of relief when I see it's nothing more than a graze. Jake even zooms in on it, as though he's freaking out as much as I am.

He zooms back out as Lana fires over the top of the desk, keeping them corralled toward the back.

"Call in the national guard! Call in every-fucking body you have!" someone is shouting into the phone from outside the office we're in.

The one who ducked into the basement comes running back out, his eyes wide and panicked as he shouts something to the others I can't understand amidst the gunfire.

Something changes. They start advancing, risking their lives in the open instead of staying shielded as they fire on her hard.

She ducks, covering her head as one grabs a MK 47 and fires rapidly.

She slides toward the front, crawling, but suddenly her head throws back and her mouth opens for a scream as blood spatters

from her leg.

“No!” I shout, racing out of the room, rushing toward the exit.

I’m shoved at the chest, the man guarding the door who has been eyeing me.

“You’re to stay put,” he growls.

“Let me by!” I snap, reaching for my weapon, but Leonard crashes into my side, grabbing my hand before I can.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snaps.

“They’re going to fucking kill her!”

He jerks me back, dragging me toward Craig’s office again. His face pales when he sees our private monitor.

“They’ll lock you up. There’s no way you’ll even get there in time,” he hisses, slamming the door as his eyes turn back to the monitor.

Johnson emerges from the sheriff’s office for the first time since Lana showed up. He comes up behind her, firing rapidly as she drags herself in between two desks.

I see the fear in her eyes turn to anger as she loads her guns again. She pulls out a knife, and I watch as she jumps to stand on her one good leg and throws the knife. Johnson’s eyes widen seconds before the knife sticks into his forehead, but the gunshots ring out faster, and I watch as her body jerks and drops, the bullets hitting her.

“No!” I shout again, slamming my fist into the wall as my heart caves in on itself.

Then I look at Leonard.

“The chopper. Get me to the fucking chopper now!”

He shakes his head slowly. “Even if we could get to it, it’d be too late, Logan.”

My stomach rolls and my heart implodes in my chest as I slide down the wall, gripping my head as everything in me turns to stone, weighing too much to move. Tears burn against my eyes as I watch Lana weakly climb across the floor, firing again at the deputies.

I can’t watch.

I can’t watch her die.

# Chapter 15

*I should like to lie at your feet and die in your arms.*
*—Voltaire*

## LANA

Pain shoots through my body, and my hearing is nothing more than a constant roar of never-ending gunfire.

I cry out as I tie off my leg to help stop the bleeding. My chest and back ache with the amount of bullets that have pounded into the vest, but they didn't break through. My shoulder burns from the graze, but it's overshadowed by the bullet that passed through my hand earlier.

I wrap my hand next, struggling with shaking hands as I fight through the pain. Jake's voice comes through my earpiece, and I take a breath, firing back at the men behind me.

"You have to get the fuck out of there, Lana! They know about the basement!"

"I can't," I say through strain, shooting around the corner and clipping a guy in the knee. He falls, his MK 47 spraying bullets wildly as he collapses. A stray bullet hits one of the other deputies, but not enough to kill the fucker.

"You have to!" Jake barks. "You didn't come this far to fucking die!"

I refuse to let the tears fall as I jerk my head back in time to avoid a new onslaught of bullets. The desk barrier I've built won't continue

to hold back the bullets. The three pushed together will only stop them for a little while longer.

“I need to talk to him,” I say quietly, choking back a sob as I try to stand up, only to fall back down again when my leg hurts too much to cooperate.

“No! You’re not fucking saying goodbye, Lana. I’m not letting you talk to him. Get out of there! The charge can’t be stopped and you know it. It’s a fail-safe. You have nine minutes and fifty-four seconds.”

I bang the back of my head on the desk, my vision clouded by the tears teeming in my eyes. I stare at the door in dismay. Those twenty feet seem so much farther with the never-ending spray of unrelenting fire.

They’re harder to kill than I was expecting. Not as cowardly as we’d predicted.

We’ve been so right about everything else.

“I love you,” I say to Jake, biting back the pain as I twist around to fire more.

“I’ll hate you if you die,” he says angrily.

I hear the tears in his voice, taste his pain from here.

“The fire is coming, Lana. Nine minutes exactly now. Get. The fuck. Out of there.”

“Remember that time when we were kids and we found that stick of dynamite in your father’s basement?”

“Don’t, Lana. Don’t fucking do this!” he begs as the tears start to leak from my eyes.

I fire blindly just to keep them from getting closer, lifting the gun up.

“You told us it was too dangerous to mess with, but I convinced you it’d be fun. Marcus and you tried to stop me, but I refused to listen.”

“Damn it, Lana! Get out! Get out now!”

I try to stand again, but I cry out in pain as I drop to the ground one more time. I blink away the tears, blowing out a breath as I continue to stave off the pain that would overwhelm me otherwise.

I wish I hadn’t turned my nose up at the grenade suggestion Jake made a few months ago now.

But I still wouldn’t be able to get out of here in time. It hurts too bad. My leg refuses to move, and without the speed it prevents, it’s pointless.

“You wanted to study it, but I just wanted to blow shit up,” I say, laughing humorlessly.

“Don’t,” he whispers.

“So we blew up that old barn outside of town. I lit the fuse and threw it, and Marcus covered your body with his when it exploded. The explosion never touched me, but the force of it slammed into my back like a solid wall, throwing me across the field. We had no clue it was that powerful.”

“Stop,” he says again, even as I hear a motor roaring in the background.

He should be on his way far out of town by now.

“You explained it to me later. Explained what happened. I was sore for about two weeks. We laughed. It was a brush with death like we’d never experienced, and the adrenaline stayed with us for days. Every time I ached, a jolt of adrenaline shot through me with the memory.”

“Please stop,” he says again, his voice barely a broken whisper.

“You were always right. I was always reckless. I should have listened to you,” I tell him through strain.

“Get out,” he hisses.

“Don’t cry for me, Jake. I’ve survived because of you. You kept me alive,” I say through strain, still firing blindly over my head to keep them pushed back.

“You don’t get to fucking say goodbye!” he barks before the line goes dead.

“Goodbye,” I whisper.

With my wrapped hand that is throbbing with pain, I weakly try to dial Logan. It’s a struggle, but I finally manage.

He answers immediately.

“Please be you,” he says as though he’s in agony.

“I love you,” I say into the earpiece, still firing in the background.

“No. Don’t do this to me. Fight, Lana. Get out of there. You can do it. I know you can. I’ve seen what you’re capable of.”

Just hearing the genuine plead in his voice is breaking my heart.

“You showed me what living was like again. I’d forgotten,” I say softly, hoping he hears me over the rapid firing squad in the background.

“You’re the only reason I’m still breathing right now, Lana. Don’t give up. Not now. Not after all you’ve survived.”

Tears start pouring freely from my eyes as I close them, letting the sounds drone on.

“You’re a survivor too,” I whisper. “And you make the world a better place. Don’t ever stop.”

“Lana!”

He shouts as I hang up, closing my eyes again, while still firing behind me.

Something loud explodes from somewhere, sounding like a new range of gunfire. I'm too weak to hold my eyes open.

I know Logan is watching.

I know Hadley is too.

I force myself to open my eyes at the nearest camera hole, but it's just a black hole with no reflective spark…no longer watching me. I brought my bag with my entirely new identity; it's lying just outside and waiting for me to retrieve it.

There's an ATV waiting for me to zip through the woods where the fire hasn't made it.

I was going to get on a plane and meet Jake where we promised to meet.

I was going to live.

There were so many other ways of doing this, but deep down, we both knew this was me tempting death to reunite me with my family. I thought I was okay with that.

Too late did I realize I still wanted to live.

Too late did I realize I'm not ready to die.

I cry out in pain as I struggle to no avail to get up once again, tears streaming down my face. But I'm stuck here, pinned down. There's no escape.

I'll die with them.

My eyes flick to the camera holes around me, all of them blacked out with no sparkle, meaning they're cut off.

It'll be a tragic, poetic ending that will immortalize all I've done.

At least no one has to watch the end.

Suddenly there's a face in front of me, and more tears leak out as I see my brother.

"Marcus," I whisper, touching his cheek as more tears race down my face.

His face disappears with the touch, and I break, sobbing as I quit firing back. Logan's face is the last thing to cross my mind before I see the blaze of the fire nearing.

# Chapter 16

*They say miracles are past.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LOGAN

All the screens go blank at once, and nothing but white noise fills the air around us. I shake a monitor as though it'll force the screen to work again.

"He's shut down the cameras," Hadley says, her fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Get them back on!" I snap.

"I'm trying!"

My face is burning with the tears, and it's all I can do not to collapse to the ground.

Leonard is sitting silently, wringing his hands as he stares at the ground and bounces his knee.

The news is reporting the interruption to the live feed, but I can barely hear the words they're saying.

My heart is hammering against my chest.

"Got it!" Hadley shouts as the screens come back to life.

My eyes go to the fire that is now closing in on the town hall, and suddenly it explodes, a deafening sound roaring through the speakers around us. I stagger back as the building continues to erupt, pieces of it blowing up at different times.

Silence falls on the entire room, the newsfeed also coming back up with Hadley's link reactivating it.

Everyone outside the room is staring at the news with the same shock we're staring at our monitor. But I barely notice anything around me as I break, throwing anything I can get my hands on as I fall apart.

Glass shatters around us. Voices call my name. Everything and nothing happens all at once as I slam my fist into Leonard's face, fighting against the hands grappling me to the ground.

Ice and fire wash over me with no mercy, and I shut down. Everything on me turns to stone as I'm restrained and forced to watch the fire join the building, blanketing the town.

There's no way she got out in time.

# Chapter 17

***Three months later…***

## LOGAN

I run my hand over the stubble on my chin, looking at the case files in front of me.

“Welcome back,” Elise says as she passes my desk, looking at me like she’s concerned.

Only three of us know why I broke down three months ago. Only three of us know why I’ll never be the same again.

Everyone else thinks I broke down because we were pulled out of that town when it needed us.

By the time ambulances and fire trucks arrived on scene, there was nothing left but flames they couldn’t put out in time to save anything. The town burned, leaving nothing but charred, empty structures in its wake.

None of the bodies were recognizable. They were too burned to be identified. And the only place with bodies was the town hall and the sheriff’s home.

For three months, the news has spoken of nothing else, giving contradictory reports from truthful and falsified sources.

That’s why I’m back.

Lana gave her life for the truth.

The last thing I’m going to do is let them cover it all up again.

Elise pauses like she's waiting for me to respond. I just dip my head at her in acknowledgement, and she blows out a breath as I finish typing up the full report.

Hadley has been looking for Jake nonstop, but she'll never find him. If he survived, he's long gone by now, possibly stuck in a drunken stupor after having to watch his best friend die.

There's no doubt that's why he turned off the video footage. He couldn't bear to see it. I wish I hadn't.

I should have never left Delaney Grove. I should have risked my career. Now I don't even want to be anywhere.

I didn't realize until she was gone that nothing else mattered at all.

Nothing I stood for was worth more than her.

Nothing I valued held any true value at all.

Everything I have is pointless without her.

I could have saved her, but I walked away instead. She's dead because of me.

Reading over the report one last time, I print it off and stand up. Leonard eyes me on his way to the copier, watching me as I place the papers in a folder.

"Day one back, and you're already putting together a new case file?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm fixing the old report they refuse to go public with."

He sighs harshly. "Let it go, Logan. They're never going to admit any of the truths to the public. The entire Bureau has been humiliated by everything out there. They've given all the concessions they're going to."

“Yet they still claim the allegations of falsifying DNA evidence is a hoax and a lie. They’re claiming the video evidence isn’t authentic. And they’re also not redeeming the name of Robert Evans.”

“And they’re not going to,” he says softly, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Like I said, they’ve given all the concessions they’re going to. The director is gone now. Johnson is dead. No more corruption from this point on, Logan.”

I look at the file in my hands.

“Whatever Collins says today will determine if that’s true or not,” I say when I look back up.

He blows out a breath, and I place the file back on my desk. I have an appointment with Director Collins very soon. Whatever he says will determine my future course.

For the past three months, I’ve been on leave. Everyone agreed I needed a break after the breakdown I had. I was also relieved of my duties temporarily until I go through a department psych evaluation.

If anyone knew what I’d lost, no one would question my sanity. They’d know for certain I’m too fucked up to be here without needing a piece of paper to tell them as much.

During my forced leave, the only way I could keep myself together was to look into the original killer case. No one tried to stop me, and Collins gave me all the information I needed or requested. He even had Leonard drop it off by my house.

At first I couldn’t figure out the mystery.

At first, it made all the sense in the world for it to be the sheriff, with the exception of his daughter. That threw the entire thing into a tailspin.

But finally, I realized the women were surrogate kills. And once I figured out why they were surrogates and who they were surrogates for…everything made perfect sense.

Especially when I linked the trigger to a specific date—the date of the first kill. It's not surprising that Johnson never linked the two together. He focused on one man and made the evidence fit.

He never took the time to look around, which was my problem, until I finally forced myself to rule out the sheriff.

It didn't make sense that Lana would kill so many in such grizzly ways without ever going after the original killer that started all this. It didn't make sense that she wouldn't have figured it out, given how fucking brilliant she and Jake were.

But then I discovered how genius they actually were.

I realized the true depths of their forethought and their planning that went into each and every detail of the masterful plan they put into play.

I just wish I had realized how little the rest of the world meant to me post-Lana before I lost her. I could have been with her right now. The two of us could have survived that firestorm together.

Instead, I let her think my career and morals meant more than she did.

I was wrong.

Nothing else fucking matters but her.

Time passes by slowly as I get the rest of my information, printing off everything in case this thing with Collins doesn't go as I hope it does.

Hadley comes up to my desk, hopping up on the top of it.

“Why are you running searches on this Olivia chick?” she asks curiously, holding up a page she brought with her.

“Because I needed some information.”

She grunts. “Obviously. But why are you looking into a microbiologist who also happens to be one of the original killer’s victim’s sister?”

“Because she was getting payments from a dummy account I linked to Jake. All that money in that account transferred directly to Olivia’s account the same day as D-day.”

She hisses out a breath. “Why?”

“Because they knew who the original killer was. Now I do too. And I know why I couldn’t find any evidence of retaliation before now.”

“Why?” she asks quietly.

“Because they’re fucking brilliant.”

My eyes dart to the clock on my computer, and I stand, shuffling together the file I’ve compiled.

“I’ll talk to you about it later,” I tell her, smiling tightly. “I have a meeting right now.”

She nods, knowing what’s to come, both of us hoping we’re wrong. I’ve supported Collins for so long. He’s always been a man of integrity. I hope the position hasn’t already corrupted him.

Her phone dings, and she cocks her head before darting off to her cubicle. I watch for a moment as her fingers fly over the keys, but then remember I have my own mission right now.

I head up to the director’s office, clutching the file in my hand. Every detail is accurate. It’s from the original case that needs to be

reopened and the true suspect arrested, so he can spend the rest of his days in misery.

Collins answers when I rap my knuckles against his door, and I walk in.

“I’ve prepared the file to reopen the original case,” I tell him.

Immediately, he tenses. “You just got back, Logan. You’re not even technically off desk duty yet.”

“Good thing I prepared this at the desk,” I quip, tossing the file to the top of his desk.

I can tell what he’s going to say before he even says it. He steeples his hands in front of his face before blowing out a long breath.

“I realize Robert Evans was the wrong man, but the killer is either dead or already behind bars.”

“Actually, he’s living not too far from here,” I tell him, narrowing my eyes.

He doesn’t even glance at the file. Instead, he keeps his eyes trained on me.

“You have no idea at the pressure that’s on me to clean this all up. And—”

“You mean to cover it all up,” I growl.

“Damn it, Logan. I’ve already explained this to you!” he snaps, slapping a hand on his desk. “If I reopen this investigation and concede that one of ours really did falsify DNA evidence, it’ll be the end of your unit, as well as possibly allow numerous other serial killers to reopen their own cases and even get out of prison if their lawyers shine enough light on this as reasonable doubt for their clients.”

“So politics,” I state flatly. “You’re no better than McEvoy.”

His lips thin, and his eyes narrow to slits. “I’m cleaning up his mess. But I can promise you no one else will ever go through what that family did as long as I’m in this office.”

“No, an innocent man’s name will just go on tarnished because you’re too scared to stand up for what’s right.”

He curses and runs a hand through his hair. “He’s dead, Logan. Destroying your unit and all the good it has done won’t bring that man back to life. The end justifies the means right now.”

I stand, knowing he’s not going to budge. And I pull off my service weapon and toss my badge on the desk with it.

“Then consider this my resignation,” I tell him.

His eyes widen. “Don’t be stupid, Logan. Take some more time off. You’re too close to this case, and you’re not thinking clearly right now.”

“I’m thinking very clearly. I joined the FBI with the naïve notion we were going to always do the right thing no matter the personal costs to ourselves. I dedicated my every waking moment to this place, sacrificing any chance at a healthy lifestyle or any actual living. I didn’t sign up to be corrupted by the one thing that is supposed to be filled with honor. And I won’t be a part of it. Plenty of corruption is just outside those doors, and at least I get to have a life out there.”

He looks frustrated, but not as frustrated as I feel.

“You’re making a mistake,” he says as I start to walk out.

I turn and face him. “No. I’m fixing the mistakes, Director. Just remember that.”

I slam the door behind me, and I head back to my office to clear everything out. People glance at me as I walk through, and Leonard

reads my face, his eyes dropping to my empty holster at my hip.

I've always hated wearing a tie anyway.

Taking my tie off and tossing it to the corner of my office, I grab a box, and pack up the few things that mean anything to me. Including the picture of Lana and me that I put on my desk a long time ago.

Hadley walks in as I finish up, and she shuts the door behind her.

"Don't bother telling me I'm making a mistake," I say without looking up.

"I'm not," she says, walking toward me quickly.

My brow furrows when I see how wide her eyes are.

"What? If it's a case, then you should take it to Donny."

"Logan, Jason Martin was just found dead and castrated in South Carolina," she says in a hushed tone reserved for blasphemy.

Blood rushes through my veins, and I squeeze the box in my hands as I lower it back to the desk.

"Was it—"

The words break off, because hope like that could destroy me if I'm wrong.

She nods slowly. "They sent me the pictures. I told them it wasn't our Scarlet Slayer because she was dead. But it's her, Logan. The knife is the same type, the wall was painted red, and there were no hesitation marks at all. Also, the shoe was a woman's size. It wasn't Jake. It was her. She's alive, Logan. She's actually alive."

Tears start pouring from her eyes as I sag to my chair, unable to keep standing as my skin prickles all over. I'm almost afraid to believe it, knowing it'd be the final nail in my coffin if Hadley is wrong.

"I've been trying to find Jake since D-day, but haven't found him anywhere. I checked plane logs, and couldn't find any evidence that

they came or went. That body was over a month old, but they just uncovered it. They found it in a cellar of a house that's been on the market for a while," she goes on.

"I know where you can search for them, and I think I know how you'll find them," I say quietly as I grab my things.

"What?! How?"

I look her in the eyes. "If you go to him, you can't come back Hadley. If you leave with me right now, it's the end of your life here. Do you understand that? It'd be too dangerous for them if we keep any sort of attachment to this life."

"I'll be packed and ready within the hour," she says without hesitation. "I can't quit, since this is a mandatory position, but I can disappear. I can make us both disappear if you want to give me two hours."

"Do it," I tell her. "I'll meet you out front in ten minutes."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to talk to the only person who can give me answers. You're going home to get everything ready, including emptying our accounts."

She grabs her laptop from her cubicle as she passes. I don't glance behind me at anyone who might be looking at us.

"Where are you going?" she whispers.

"To learn the truth."

# Chapter 18

*They do not love that do not show their love.*
*—William Shakespeare*

## LOGAN

There's a note on the door when I arrive, and I tear it off, shaking my head as I read it. I pocket the note and walk inside without knocking.

I find the man in the back room with deteriorating health. He's on a hospital bed, monitors and IV's hooked into him, probably keeping the pain down just enough to keep him conscious.

His eyes are droopy when he sees me, and I pull up a chair, staring right at him. The tube in his mouth will prevent him from speaking, but there are other ways to get answers. After all, I'm a profiler. Micro-expressions are my specialty.

"It's funny how even now Lana can surprise me," I say quietly.

He looks confused, and I smirk, knowing he doesn't know who Lana is.

"A psychopath with narcissistic tendencies," I say on a sigh. "That should have been the profile. A psychopath can feign empathy. Can imitate regret, remorse or even emotional pain. Can even become a believable actor in his or her well-adjusted life. It makes them the hardest ones to find, to be honest. You don't always know your neighbor is a psychopath."

I gesture around at the seemingly innocent looking house he's living in.

"It took me a while to figure it out, but when I did, all the pieces clicked into place. Victoria's mother was beautiful, if the photos have done her any justice," I say, leaning up as I study his eyes.

The machine that is monitoring his heart beeps just a little faster at the mention of Jasmine Evans.

"She was just as beautiful when she died in that car crash as she was in high school. It's funny I never even thought to look into her past. After all, all the women who died looked strikingly similar to her when she was in high school, with the exception of Rebecca Cannon. But she died for a different purpose. Someone needed the sheriff to be blinded by rage and ready to take down anyone to punish."

I lean back, studying his face as his eyes narrow. The monitor beeps a little faster.

"Her high school sweetheart was pictured with her in one of the prom photos. I can't believe I never knew it. But I was distracted by an entirely different killer at the time. Turns out she happened to be the girl I love and a guy known as Jake Denver."

His monitor starts beeping a lot faster as his eyes light up with surprise.

"Victoria Evans didn't die that night. Jake helped save her life."

Again, that monitor starts going wild, beeping with even more speed.

"She was beautiful, like her mother, and it's surprising Jake—someone who appreciated both male and female beauty—never saw her as more than a sister. But he loved her brother. He hated anyone

involved who lent a hand in creating the cluster fuck that ended the love of his life."

He continues to study me, unable to speak, and I know it's killing him. A man who loves power is now confined to a bed, living in agonizing pain and never-ending helplessness. Even now, he can't form words with that tube down his throat that is keeping him alive, and all he can do is listen.

"You can't even piss without a catheter right now, can you?" I ask, then notice the sheets are wet.

"I guess Olivia decided to remove it for your final moments."

My eyes pop back up to his, and I see the fury washing around in his gaze.

"You want to write a note?" I ask him, putting a pen in his dominant hand.

His left hand weakly tries to clamp around it, but can't, and it topples to the ground. I grin like the sadistic asshole I feel like right now. His suffering actually pleases me.

"I'd rather do all the talking anyway," I say with a shrug. "Olivia was the final piece of the puzzle. I wondered why Lana—Did I mention Victoria is Lana?—and Jake hadn't bothered to strike out against the man who started the domino effect. But I was looking for a torture-and-kill like all the others."

The monitor beeps grow stronger and stronger.

"But they had figured it out. And they started your torture long before anyone else's. Olivia was sister to Caroline—one of the original victims. Unlike Caroline, Olivia looks nothing like the beautiful Jasmine Evans. Her red hair and lighter complexion did nothing for the killer who wanted to kill the same woman over and

over. Olivia spoke out for Robert Evans, said there was no way he was capable of such monstrosities. She knew Robert, and he'd been alone with her sister countless times, always lending a hand to fix anything in their house that was messed up because Olivia was in school, and neither of them could afford a real handyman."

I sigh long and hard, thinking about how life can be so cruel to such a good man.

"Robert never charged them. He was just a damn good guy. Which is probably what made Jasmine fall in love with him and leave behind a man who was only capable of loving himself. And let's face it, that man moved on to another woman, but the only person to ever sting him with rejection was the one who loved a man so beneath him that it was disgusting. You hated Robert Evans, but you hid it well."

I study his eyes as they continue to burn with hatred for me while I unravel his masterful disguise.

"You hated him so much, but you pretended to be his best friend even as you led the investigation in the direction of him—to punish him for taking a woman from *you.* From a man *like* you. How dare he, right? Am I missing anything, Christopher Denver?"

The monitor beeps faster and faster, letting me know his anger continues to rise.

"I should have noticed the way you put all your accolades up higher on the walls than your son's. I should have paid attention to all the videos you had readily available of the trial. And all the numerous videos you had of Jasmine Evans. You knew her voice immediately."

I pull out a copy of the same file I prepared for Collins. “Your wife died after running her car off a bridge. She died when your son was small. No one questioned the suspicious bruising she had. They all chalked it up to the accident. But it wasn’t an accident, was it? You punished her regularly for Jasmine choosing Robert over you, and she finally ended the pain the only way she knew how.”

I flip the page.

“Your first murder was on the anniversary of your breakup with Jasmine. It was the same day of her first date with Robert, something the profile had suggested to be *his* trigger instead of yours.”

I flip the page again, and I start reading off the facts I’ve gathered since piecing together Olivia’s involvement.

“You mentioned your son had to be forced to show up on holidays, but I didn’t do the math until later. After all, family squabbles are not uncommon. I just didn’t realize his depth of hatred toward you until I finally pieced it all together. Jake stayed with the Evans family more than he stayed at home, because even back then, he hated you. But he didn’t know for certain you were a monster until last year. When he finally figured it all out around last Christmas.”

I hold up the file, and his eyes try to read into what I’m saying. He thought he was too brilliant to ever be discovered.

He’s clueless. His hubris is his own downfall.

“You see, you thought you were smarter than everyone. After all, you’d gotten away with countless murders. You didn’t stop after Evans went to jail for the murders you’d committed. After that, you killed another girl, almost as though you were taunting the sheriff,

using your same MO. But then you borrowed from other serial killers across the country after that, stealing their style and linking those kills to their names. Anyone who had a similar victimology to yours. You still wanted to punish Jasmine Evans even after all this time."

I turn the page again, flipping through the countless credit card hits that put Jake in this town for two solid weeks, right about the time the first phone call was made to Olivia from this very house.

"But you never realized your son was smarter than you," I say, taunting the man who grows more furious by the moment. "You never realized he crafted an even more elaborate, masterful plan than yours had ever been."

He still hasn't figured out the best part yet.

"Olivia was a microbiologist for a prestigious lab last year when your son gave her a call. It was right about the time he spent two solid weeks in your home, probably finding every bit of proof he needed to solidify his resolve. I'm sure he called Lana—she hates being called Victoria these days."

His eyes shift as he starts trying to assemble the pieces I'm laying down.

"You suspected Victoria had survived, didn't you? You even hinted as much to us. But you didn't know for certain. Even before Jake found out the truth, he never trusted you with that secret. His loyalty was to her and her alone," I go on, watching the utter fury continue to build.

"You assumed Olivia was a sweet girl who loved you for trying to 'save' Robert Evans. After all, you defended him. Very poorly, I might add. A man as smart as you should have worked a little harder to get his best friend out of the murders he didn't commit. But you weren't

really his friend, were you? I'm sure Jake learned the same thing when he watched that trial footage all over again with a clear head and from a distance."

I flip the page once more.

"But why would Olivia quit her coveted place at the lab—something she'd worked so damn hard to achieve—to come play nursemaid to you when you got a strange sickness? Weekly deposits started going into her account from your son when she came to help you. Weekly deposits also came from you. Why get paid twice?"

I smirk as I lean forward, watching the realization spread over his paling face.

"Microbiology… It's a fascinating field. You learn all about parasites. The right person could use that knowledge to slowly kill a man. To strip away all his power over a year. To make him gradually sicker in a way the doctors—who aren't specialists in that field—could never understand. Especially if someone used an exotic parasite or something. I'm not saying that's what she did, but she's brilliant enough to have figured out a way to kill you slowly without anyone detecting the cause, all while taking care of you when the doctors gave up and just handed you half the drug store."

I gesture to the tray of drugs near the wall. The number of bottles have multiplied since my last visit.

"But the endgame was coming, so Olivia bumped up her regimen, tipping you over the edge faster, reaping revenge for her sister and all those other women. And your son funded her. Lana conceded her own revenge for someone who needed it more. And

here you are: impotent, weak, powerless, utterly helpless and literally pissing yourself."

The tears start gathering in his eyes; angry tears lined with pure, unadulterated hatred.

"She did her part, and left this note for me. Somehow she knew I was coming," I say, lifting the note, and I read it aloud. "It's too late for him. I drew out his agony as long as I could. But you can't save him now. Good luck finding me."

I lower the note and smirk at him.

"She thinks I want to save you and find her so I can lock her up. She doesn't understand why I'm really here."

I pull out my gun, cocking it as I stand and push the note back into my pocket.

"You should know, your son was twice the mastermind you ever were, because he didn't kill just to be powerful. He killed for revenge. And his own father helped aide in the murder of the boy he loved."

I point the gun at his groin, even though I almost grimace at what's to come. But Lana needs to know I'm not going away once I find her. One irredeemable act will mean I can never come back.

"As much as I want you to die slowly, I need to show my girl how serious I am about staying with her. Originally, I was content to watch you die slowly. But something changed today. Something I'm still too scared to fully embrace until I put my eyes on the physical promise of it. For the first time ever, I have hope."

I put the earplugs in, cracking my neck to the side as I finish. He makes a sound, his eyes widening as I put my finger on the trigger.

"Have fun in hell, Christopher."

With that, I fire the gun into his groin until it's empty. The monitors go crazy as he crashes, and his body starts to convulse as blood plumes form across the sheet and blankets.

They played the longest game of torture for the worst offender. As I said, I underestimated the true genius of dark minds.

As I put my gun away, I pull out the earplugs and pick up my phone. I have limited time before this body is discovered. Collins and my team will know it's me the second they find out who it is.

I labeled him the original killer.

He ends up shot in the groin over and over.

It's not rocket science to piece it together.

Dialing Hadley, I walk out of the house, leaving behind the last piece of the intricate puzzle.

"You ready?" she asks.

"I'll be there in fifteen. Did you find them?"

"Not yet. But I will."

# Chapter 19

*Wherever you go, go with all your heart.*
*—Confucius*

## LANA

Three months ago, I thought I was going to die.

But once again, I was saved by a brother, though not the same one.

Jake walked in, firing rapidly, and threw in a smoke bomb. I wish I'd thought of a smoke bomb. I was too busy thinking I was invincible.

I'd thought I saw Marcus, but it wasn't him. It was the other brother. The one who had stood by me through hell and high water, and dragged me out of the pit one last time, saving me just barely in time.

And we made it out before the fire caught up. Before the building exploded. Before anyone ever knew he'd saved me.

He'd already paid off a hospital staff who closed off a wing like I was royalty, and they patched me up enough to travel by sea—on the yacht Jake also bought, since flight plans had to be changed to avoid anyone noticing my condition.

From time to time, I check in on Logan—or try to. He's been on leave, but Jake won't hack the FBI data base to find out more than that.

We know we have to let Logan and Hadley go. It's what's safest for them.

We can't condemn corruption then drag more souls into our own damnation without facing our own hypocrisy.

I pick up Jake's underwear and groan as I toss them into the laundry basket he can never seem to find. I still have a small limp, but I'm getting stronger with each passing day.

My hand has healed up much quicker than my leg, but the doctor swears I'll make a full recovery with just a scar as a reminder. At least I won't mind my new scars. They tell a better story of survival than the others.

We're both a little lost right now, trying to find a new purpose to channel all our energy into. Jake has gotten good at fishing—weirdly enough. We've both gotten really good at being drunk half the day.

The pain in my leg is barely even there anymore. I'll be glad when it's gone completely.

My wax apple is proudly stationed next to a portrait of the ashy remnants of Delaney Grove, and I smirk at all the nails sticking out of it. The last one was added over a month ago. There's only one more nail to go before the apple art is complete.

Something falls, and I whirl around, a knife in my hand, just in time to see a black blur of fur as it dives behind my couch. I see the coaster that has been knocked off the table, and I curse Bennett.

"Bennett," I hiss at the fur ball.

A small meow follows the scolding as Bennett pokes his head out from behind the couch and peers at me with innocent eyes. Damn cat.

I fill up his food bowl, and he slides across the slick, tile floor when he tries to tackle it. Then I kick on some sandals and head out for my daily walk, making my leg stronger and stronger.

At least I'm good at rehabilitation.

Per the usual, I plug in my earbuds and start playing my music, while also internet searching for any news from the states that might pertain to the FBI finally fessing up to the truth.

I know it's doubtful, despite the mounds of evidence, but I keep hoping they'll eventually exonerate my father's memory.

Delaney Grove has started rebuilding, according to one article. The people are trying to piece their town together, and the dorky but sweet deputy has been named the new county sheriff. It might have helped that we spared his life, along with two others who weren't involved.

The rest of the world may forget us and the legacy we left behind, but Delaney Grove will forever be changed. No one there will forget.

And maybe Jake and I took a long trip back to the states just to kill Jason for the purpose of letting Logan know I was alive.

Jake had to help me subdue him, considering I'm still not as fast, given the leg injury.

But I don't know if Logan ever figured it out. It took them longer to recover the body than I expected. Sheesh. That house must have the lowest interest in the market.

However, it was discovered over two weeks ago, and nothing suspicious has happened. Jake is too busy fishing and still too mad at me to hack anything for me, so I'm stuck with the regular articles everyone sees.

Most of the buzz is still going, and weird conspiracy theories have formed, overshadowing the actual conspiracy theory.

But one article has me almost tripping over myself when I'm right in front of my house. My eyes read over it quickly, trying to understand the words.

The same day Jason's body was discovered, another man died, though his body was just recovered yesterday afternoon.

It's the man's name that has my skin prickling.

Christopher Denver.

Olivia hasn't called to tell us anything. At least Jake hasn't mentioned it. Then again, he's still pissed at me for almost dying, so prying information about following events has been difficult, since that's part of my punishment.

I turn and look at the beach where Jake is lying down, a pole between his legs as he sleeps and fishes at the same time. I trudge through the sand, wincing when I try to run. Then I kick the jerk.

A loud *oomph* leaves his lips as I kneel beside him.

"What the hell?" he snaps, rubbing his side as he glares at me.

"When did Olivia call? And don't tell me she hasn't."

He looks genuinely confused.

"I haven't felt it safe enough to contact her with a new number yet, considering there was some federal activity on her name. I set her phone up for alerts to notify her if anyone got wind of her trail, and had her a new identity ready and waiting. If she has to leave, she'll go to the safe house, and I'll get an alert when she does."

He holds up his phone and I sink to the sand a little more as I hand him my phone to read.

He skims the article at first, then bolts upright to a seated position.

“Olivia wouldn’t have shot him,” he says, shaking his head. “She was content with drawing it out as long as possible once his organs started failing.”

“Apparently something happened. I never pictured her as a crotch shooter, but that’s where he bled out from.”

“Maybe she spent too much time with you,” he quips, still reading it.

I remember the day Jake figured it out. I’d already been suspicious, but couldn’t bring myself to fully believe it. Not until Jake walked in and we both confirmed the worst case scenario together.

He had all the copies of his father’s DVDs in his hands, and tears were in his eyes. We watched the trial again together, saw the occasional slip up when Christopher would smirk as my father sobbed.

It became overtly obvious during one home video when his father couldn’t look away from my mother at a birthday party. And his jaw was grinding when my father came up and kissed her, causing her to giggle in his arms.

It was the most painful realization.

My father’s best friend.

My best friend’s father.

The same man who had sat at our table for holidays when we were growing up, was the same man who’d sentenced my father to the worst death imaginable.

That’s when we called Olivia.

Jake didn't even hesitate. He hated him already, but he said his father was dead to him after that.

He started the regimen Olivia concocted—a new synthetic parasite she'd been working on in her lab—and so it began. The first thing to leave him was his sex drive. Not even a little blue pill could fix that.

The second thing to go was his energy.

From there, things just slowly, agonizingly, started getting worse and worse. She assured us the pain would grow to be unbearable, and she was all too happy to make it happen.

Jake helped her get the synthetic parasite off the lab property and even hacked the files that held the information about it. She also took a few extras for later on—the endgame.

My part was miniscule. All I had to do was be the lookout during the planning of this.

This wasn't just my revenge. It was theirs more so than mine.

Christopher Denver wronged my father in more ways than I can even fathom, even played his best friend and lawyer, but at the end of the day, Jake was his own son. He was wronged the most.

Because of his father, Jake lost the love of his life back then.

Because of his father, Olivia's sister was raped and murdered.

My misery was placed on the backburner. I had enough people to kill.

"This is crazy. Olivia should be on the run if they suspect her," Jake says thoughtfully, drawing me out of my own reverie.

"It says they have a male suspect they're looking into," I say, confused. "They don't suspect her."

"Can you find more on it?" he asks as I try scaling down.

“No. It’s just a small article that barely even cares to mention this at all. I’ll see what I can find, but I know someone far better at all this computer stuff than me.”

I shove at his chest, and he grunts while rubbing the spot like I hurt him as he winks at me.

“Not right now. I was in the middle of dreaming up a good threesome. I’d like to return to that dream.”

I narrow my eyes at him, and he groans while lying back down.

“I’ll look into it later, Lana. I genuinely don’t give a shit who killed him. I’m just glad the fucker is finally dead.”

He covers his face, his breathing already steadying as he starts drifting back off to sleep. Rolling my eyes, I push back up to my feet and walk back to the house.

For once, Bennett doesn’t attack my feet the second I walk in, and I kick off my shoes while looking around and making kissing noises. “Bennett! Come on, Kitty. I need to give you a bath.”

He doesn’t come, and I frown. Usually he’s all over us after we’ve been gone for a minute.

Deciding to chase him down later, I go to the fridge and grab a bottle of water, but my hand hovers over a bottle as I stare and tilt my head.

It’s a habit to count things and take in my surroundings, always aware of any change. And I’m positive there were three beers beside my water this morning. Now there’s only one beer.

Slowly, I grab my water as a chill slides down my spine. It’s possible Jake has already started drinking, but doubtful, considering there were no beer cans near him.

It feels like someone else is here, but I don't make it obvious by looking around. The living room is just beyond me, and I grab a knife and an apple, acting as though I'm about to peel it.

Abandoning the water bottle, I stab a new nail into my wax apple to represent the man I wanted dead the second most, but I pause, noticing it's been turned. I look at this apple every single day. I know it's not facing the right angle.

I move through the house, seeing nothing obviously out of place, but there is more sand in the dining room than normal. Bennett should be all over my feet right now, but he's not.

Slowly, I start peeling the apple as I move into the living room, and the chill in my spine has it stiffening. There's no doubt that I feel eyes on me right now.

"If you've hurt my cat, you have no idea what that will cost you."

I spin around, the knife in hand as I drop the apple, but my entire body turns to stone when I see someone smirking at me from the corner.

Logan pushes off from the wall, and I'm tempted to pinch myself just to be sure I'm not hallucinating or dreaming.

"Your cat's name is Bennett?" he asks, his lips twitching as the knife tumbles from my hand. "I'm not sure how I feel about that," he goes on, stalking closer.

My bad leg tries to give out, and I stumble, but Logan's arms are immediately around me, his scent engulfing me as those hands grip my waist.

I tilt my head back as unshed tears start clouding my eyes, and he stares expectantly.

“You’re here,” I rasp, which is a ridiculous thing to say after three months.

“You let me think you were dead,” he says, his voice strained.

“I didn’t want to risk contacting you and getting you in trouble,” I quickly explain. “They were monitoring your calls because you were stirring up trouble even on leave and—”

He puts a finger over my mouth, silencing my babble.

“They still don’t know it was you. Did you kill Jason as a sign to me that you’re still alive, or was he just unfinished business? The torture was mild in comparison to the others, almost as though you were in a hurry.”

He pulls his finger down from my lips, dragging it, and I shudder against him while staring into those too-familiar blues.

“It was the safest way to tell you. I didn’t think it’d take them so long to find him. And I couldn’t do it sooner because I couldn’t even walk without crutches until—”

He silences me when his lips come down on mine, and I melt against him, reveling in the feel of his kiss. Tears spring from my eyes as I kiss him harder, clinging to him like I can’t let go.

I’m breathless and dizzy when he finally breaks the kiss, but I manage to blink the tears away and speak.

“How’d you find me?”

“You said if you could be anywhere, you’d be in Greece with me. I hoped that meant you came to wait,” he says softly, thumbing my chin.

“But your job—”

“I left it,” he says, studying my eyes.

“And your life—”

“Is wherever you are. Guess you shouldn’t have been so perfect if you didn’t want me to love you this much.”

I blow out a frustrated breath over that word. Perfect. He knows the truth is so far from that now.

“I didn’t want you to sacrifice everything for—”

He kisses me again, most likely to shut me up, but I don’t care. Any reason for his lips to be on mine is a perfect reason.

Finally, he breaks the kiss.

“I signed up to ensure justice,” he says, brushing his lips over mine. “I didn’t sign up to play politics. I’d rather be in Greece with you than sitting in someone’s pocket back home. And before you get the clever idea to leave me behind because you think you’re ruining anything for me, you should know I can’t ever go back.”

My brow furrows. “Why?”

“Because I made sure there was no way to leave you with any doubt.”

My eyes search his, and it finally dawns on me. “It was you who shot Christopher,” I whisper in shock.

“That was my message to you,” he goes on. “Didn’t realize it’d take them so long to find the body.”

I shiver in his arms, realizing how fucked up this token of love would be to the rest of the world. But to me, roses and poems can’t compare.

“So you’re here to stay?” I ask, still reeling.

“You can’t ever leave me again. I’m assuming there aren’t any other secrets?”

“No other debts to collect,” I assure him.

He stares at my lips like they're fascinating, still cupping my chin as he starts backing me toward my room. I guess he's been getting familiar with the home.

"Where's my cat?" I ask, which sounds stupid.

"I was surprised you had a pet," he says, amused as he dodges my question.

"Did he run out?"

"No," he says, smiling broader. "He's probably purring away with __"

"Oh, good. You're here." Hadley's voice has me snapping my head around as she walks out of my room, holding a purring Bennett in her arms. "Your cat has bald spots that are confusing me."

"What are you doing here?" I ask, shocked.

She shrugs, inspecting Bennett's ugly coat that is gradually getting better.

"Where else would I be? Now about your cat… What's wrong with him?"

"He was a stray and had something stuck in his fur. Jake shaved off the glue-like stuff about two weeks ago when we found him."

She rolls her eyes. "Speaking of Jake, where is he?"

"He's the bum with his arm over his face who is sleeping on the beach."

Hadley grins at us and puts Bennett down as she skips toward the door. I hope Jake is prepared to be surprised. I also hope she wasn't just a fling to him, since she's sort of in Greece right now.

"Back to where we were," Logan says, turning my face back to meet his. "I had Hadley do a search of a list of surnames. I knew you wouldn't change your first name. Lana Vorhees was pretty obvious,

considering I watched *Friday the Thirteenth* all the time when I was a kid."

I smile like an idiot for no reason at all.

"Me too."

He brushes his lips over mine again, still backing us toward my room.

"Then it was even more obvious when I saw Jake Vlad listed under this address as well. Not sure that Vlad is the best name for him."

"He used to dress up as Vlad the Impaler every Halloween when we were kids," I explain, still smiling.

We're so morbid.

"I picked a little less obvious name," he says with a shrug.

"Oh?"

"White," he says, shrugging while smirking.

"As in Carrie White?"

He nods slowly, still backing me toward the room until my legs finally hit the bed. In one motion, he bends and tosses me to the bed, and I squeal like a little girl.

He comes down on top of me, and I giggle like an idiot, smiling up at him as he kisses the tip of my nose.

"So this is real. You and me. We're actually going to get to be together?"

"Not possible for you to get rid of me," he says, kissing my lips.

"I can't believe you're actually here," I moan as his lips start trailing down my neck.

He leans up on his elbows as I start stripping. He watches me, but finally he decides to shed his clothes too. As soon as we're both

bare, he settles between my legs, but he stares into my eyes while pushing a piece of hair away from my face.

“I decided if I could choose anywhere in the world to be, it’d be wherever you were,” he says before he kisses me, silencing whatever girly, swoony thing that would have come out of my mouth.

And I kiss him back with everything in me as he thrusts inside me, filling me so completely that every nerve in my body feels electrified.

“I love you,” I whisper across his lips.

“I love you, Lana Vorhees,” he says, grinning.

It’s our own twisted version of perfection.

# EPILOGUE

*Three years later…*

# LOGAN

Lana is laughing with Hadley as they read Laurel's latest letter. Lindy May sends all of Laurel's letters to Olivia. And Olivia sends them to a home in Greece that Lana owns, but we don't ever stay there.

Laurel has turned into a fun, witty girl who has managed to put her past behind her and move forward. Lindy has given her all the tools to do that, and she's finally moved on herself in her quest to save Laurel.

Her ex-husband killed himself a little over two years ago. Lana and Jake broke out the champagne to celebrate, since they'd apparently driven him to that.

Olivia also writes, telling them about Cheyenne and Alyssa, who both still live with her. No one ever suspected Olivia after I put a round of bullets in Christopher Denver.

Diana Barnes went to live closer to her son. He bought her a home, and she's finally able to enjoy her life without the past hanging over her like a daunting shadow. She thinks Lana died in that explosion, and Lana says it's best if she believes that.

I check in on my team from time to time, using a burner phone to contact Leonard. He assures me that no one on our team is looking

for me. Most everyone thinks I snapped. He's the only one still there who knows the truth.

He said Craig is just happy that he's officially the prettiest face in the unit.

But I know what I did still weighs heavily on all of them, because they're worried it could be them one day. They just don't understand how unlikely that is. And it's not like I can tell them.

Jake walks down the stairs in just a towel. It'd be nice to *not* share a house with him and Hadley, but this home is massive, and I'd never tear Lana away from her best friend after all they've been through.

Besides, I sleep peacefully at night, more so than ever. Our house is the most dangerous place in the world to try and break into because of the four of us.

A guy walks down the stairs, also wearing a towel, and Hadley whistles at him as she stands and struts from the dining room, her hair mussed and her clothes disheveled.

"Glad you two finally finished up. I couldn't go another round," she tells Jake as he tugs her to him, nipping her lips with his teeth as he grins.

"You still have to go another round with just me tonight," he says. "And next week, you get to pick who joins us."

She beams like he just offered her Christmas. Personally, I don't get it. I'd fucking kill someone if they touched Lana, and there's no doubt she'd cut someone to pieces if they touched me.

Literally.

But Jake and Hadley are both bisexual, and though they'd never cheat on each other, they do include select individuals in their

bedroom on occasion.

Twice a month to be more precise. Trust me, I know more about Hadley's sex life than I *ever* wanted to.

"I want a girl," she says as the guy they spent the night with goes to the fridge, making himself at home.

"Deal," Jake tells her, and she grins again while I carefully maneuver my way out of the threesome afterglow.

Lana is holding back a laugh when I near her, because she knows I hate hearing all the gritty details Jake and Hadley love to share.

She takes my hand, and I pull her up, my thumb brushing the red ruby on her ring finger.

"You ready, Mrs. White?" I ask her, waggling my eyebrows.

"I've just been waiting on you."

"As of now, I can't wait to get out of this house and out on the boat."

She laughs again as I practically drag her away from the house. Her leg is completely healed now. She walks with no limp, and she's back to taking classes—kickboxing classes to be exact. Though I think it'd be smarter for her to actually teach the classes, since she's a little too good to still be a student.

Her fingers thread with mine, and I drink my beer as we walk down the beach, heading to where the boat awaits us.

This has been our life for the last three years. I had no idea how much I was missing out on. Life is pretty damn good when you take the time to live it.

Most importantly, we dance every night.

Hadley and I took over the online site for Lana and Jake, since they started another internet business that needed their attention. Lana outsourced the appraisal jobs to some trusted people who needed the extra income.

Five years ago, I never pictured myself leaving the Bureau and spending my days with a semi-retired serial killer, while walking the beaches of Greece. I never pictured me sharing a house with another couple. I never pictured anything at all about my life as it is today.

Which is why I love Lana so much. She still continues to surprise me, and I'm fairly positive I'd be the one burning the world down if anyone ever tried to take her from me.

She calls me a romantic for that.

It's a life I love.

"What are you thinking about?" Lana asks on a sigh as she leans her head against my arm.

Two months after I showed up in Greece, Lana and I got married. It was just the four of us with one officiate, but it was perfect. Hadley and Jake took two years to follow our lead.

"How crazy life can be, and how good it can turn out," I tell her, lifting her hand so I can kiss her fingers.

She grins as she snuggles in closer to my side, her white dress blowing in the wind.

Today's our anniversary, and we're taking the boat out for a long weekend away from the house.

"Our story is definitely unique," she says, sliding her arms around my one and hugging it.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say, balking mockingly.

She laughs while rolling her eyes.

“Yeah. We’re just a typical romance,” she deadpans, but her lips lift in a small smile.

“Horror romance. That’s a genre, right?” I ask, smiling when she laughs.

She spins, turning to walk backwards as she faces me.

“You want me to be honest?” she asks, biting her lip.

I grab her waist, loving the way she laughs when I lift her.

“Yes,” I say, nipping her chin before kissing it.

Her legs slide around my waist as she tightens her hold on me, and I continue to carry us in the direction of the boat.

She grins as she says, “It’s my favorite horror story of all time.”

I grin against her lips as we reach the pier, and she slides down to walk beside me, locking our fingers together. She’s getting giddy. I can feel it.

There’s something you need to learn about loving a girl like Lana. She had to open something up inside herself to do what it took to end Delaney Grove’s reign of terror.

And that something can’t just be locked away.

She has special needs. Needs that I tend to once a year, because I love keeping her sane. And she can’t live in denial of who she is.

We load up on the yacht, and she takes care of pouring the champagne, while I get us away from the pier and start driving us out into the ocean. We toast the champagne, and I brush my lips over hers as she stays close.

We're floating with no land in sight before I anchor us down and check the monitors to make sure we're completely alone and no one can bother us.

She flashes me a smile, anticipation sparking in her eyes.

"You ready for your present?" I ask her.

She grins.

"Yes."

I tug her hand in mine and guide her to the lower deck. She follows, practically walking on my heels in her excitement. As soon as we reach the downstairs and her eyes fall on her present, she stops walking, her smile growing bigger.

"Where'd you get this?" she asks.

"It was actually a favor called in from a friend. Apparently, this one has raped numerous girls up and down the coast, but his father's diplomatic immunity status has prohibited anyone from being able to touch him. They were in the process of getting that status revoked when his father sent him back to Columbia."

Her eyes flash with excitement, as Juan Alvarez's eyes widen, and he struggles, cursing us through his gag. Lana tilts her head, watching him as he jerks against the chains.

"And you trust the source?" she asks, looking Juan over, her fingers itching to take action.

"Leonard's the one who called. The last girl was just fifteen, and he slit her throat. I trust Leonard, and I reviewed the file myself. They have enough physical evidence to prove it, and he hasn't bothered denying it. They just can't touch him."

She gets up on her toes, smiling as she kisses me. Juan continues to struggle in vain.

“Thank you,” she murmurs as I hand her the knife.

She clutches it as her body shudders with the impending high. Too much steals her soul. Too little could cause her to lash out from denying what she had to become.

But once a year? That’s just right. And Leonard uses that to his advantage, because not all monsters can go to prison.

Lana’s unique, and I wouldn’t change anything about her. Because now I see the world the way it really is, and I know my only place is right by her side.

I move in behind her as she cuts on the music, and my arms go around her waist as we sway to the rhythm. She’s eager to get to work, but savoring the moment, taunting him with the hope he hasn’t released just yet.

Her head falls back against my chest as she revels in the moment, drawing it out.

I put my lips against her ear and whisper, “Happy anniversary, baby.”

**THE END.**

Thank you for reading the Mindfuck Series! Hope you take the time to review, as that really helps spread the word about books. <3

Keep reading for a sneak peek at the NASH BROTHERS, starting soon, and will be released quickly after the first one hits.

# *Power Exchange*

*Nash Brothers Book 1*

*Strength is earned, never given, and always tested.*

## Chapter 1

Three days ago, I was standing on an actual ledge outside my one-bedroom apartment and looking down at the long drop as I struggled to breathe. Today I'm standing on a metaphorical ledge, looking up at an enormous, unwelcoming home. Breathing isn't much easier.

Funny how one led to the other.

The lush, green lawn surrounding me is only obstructed by the long, wooden deck that extends from the center of the yard, leading down to the lake beach. The large patch of white sand looks to be imported and stretches from side to side as far as I can see.

Woods surround the home on the back of the house, which is probably the view I'll have. It's doubtful there are any lakeside views left available. It's going to be one hell of an adjustment to go from being an only child to one of four.

The three Nash boys won't be overly enthused to share their comfortable lifestyle with me, either.

The empty driveway I'm standing in has a circle at the end, and a massive fountain that has a weird abstract sculpture is in the middle. I glance behind me as the cab driver pulls out of the end of the long driveway, heading back to pick up someone else. He's probably hoping for a better tipper next time.

Sighing, I tug both my suitcases behind me, keeping my purse over my shoulder and a backpack strapped to me as well. Maybe I'll get lucky and Olivia and Hal won't be here.

After keying in the code I was given and pushing the door open, I glance back, letting my eyes search the lake one last time. For miles and miles, all I can see is the water straight in front of me. But off to the side, there's a small island nestled in the middle. It's definitely something I plan to visit.

Maybe I'll pack a tent and move out there when this doesn't work out.

Finally, after taking one last breath, I move inside the house, dreading this with every fiber in my body.

Silence.

Nothing but painstakingly brutal silence.

Mom always had music playing because she knew how much I hate silence. But Hal doesn't give a damn.

Each creak and rustle seems to echo in the massive entryway. Two staircases start and arch, slowly spiraling upward. Well, hell. That's going to be a bitch to get my suitcases up. Especially since Hal wouldn't enjoy scuffs or scratches all over his shiny, dark-cherry hardwood. I forgot all about the damn stairs.

I haven't been here for over five years, so the staircases didn't register high on the need-to-remember list.

My throat is dry, considering I slept on the plane and never bothered to get a drink during the three layovers I had. It's hard to go from New York to Russette, Utah.

Leaving the city to live in the country… It's odd. No longer am I surrounded by noisy traffic and beautiful skyscrapers. Nature encompasses me now, and the smell—though amazing—is also a little… too new. It's almost as though there are no scents here at all,

but then you hit one patch and your sense of smell is overwhelmed. Or the wind stirs and carries new scents to you all the time.

The second I sneeze, I silently curse, remembering why I hate nature so much. This is going to take some getting used to. I used to only stay for a few short days at a time, back when I still visited my father.

Abandoning my luggage in the foyer, I head toward the kitchen. It's been a while since I've been here, but I know the layout well enough.

There's another staircase after I pass through the main part of the house, and I brush my fingers over the smooth banister while I move on, heading all the way toward the back where the kitchen is.

The patio doors are off to the side, and I glance through the windows of them as I pass by, taking in the sizeable pool they seem to have upgraded. Or maybe it was always that big. Who knows?

I've always preferred swimming in the lake while I was here, as opposed to playing in a pool. The outdoor area in the back is set up for parties, probably able to hold large quantities of people.

This place is so huge, that it seems to take me forever to reach the kitchen, but when I finally do, it takes me twice as long to find a glass.

No sooner do I pour the water, I hear the front door open and close, the *thudding* of it echoing through the otherwise silent house. Loud, male laughter fills the vast space, resounding off the walls, but it's suddenly gone all at once.

"Guess that means she's here early," one of them says, though I don't know which one. I haven't seen any of the Nash boys since I

was fourteen, and that voice is much deeper than any of them were back then.

I've only ever seen my three stepbrothers a total of five times. Now I'll have to finish out my senior year of high school with them, so I suppose I'll be seeing them all the time.

As I said, I have no luck.

"Did she seriously just leave all her shit down here for us to carry up? Can we say *spoiled*?" another deep voice asks, singing the last word.

I've never been spoiled—ever. My father is wealthy, but my mother never was. So we always lived modestly.

Cackles ignite, and I hear the first voice again. "What the hell are we supposed to do? Did Mom or Hal tell her we'd take the shit up for her? Think the princess would tattle if we left her to deal with her own shit?"

Those are the jokes I've been expecting. They always referred to me as the *princess*.

"Fuck that. Leave it. We have to hurry." And there's the third voice. More than likely, given the surly attitude, that's Ethan.

Their voices turn to mutters as their heavy footfalls echo through the house, and I release the breath I was holding. Deciding to avoid them until they come down, I rush toward the foyer, staying light on my feet so as not to make any noise, and slide my bags into the small alcove under the curved stairs.

Just then, I hear the rumble of laughter again, and the stairs are pounded by the three boys. I don't want to face them yet, so I dive into the alcove with my luggage, silently cursing my stupid luck the whole time.

“Damn. She must have come and gotten her shit.”

“That was fast. How’d she get by without us seeing her?”

“You know Mom doesn’t want her being alone. Think she’ll get pissed if we leave her here?”

“Who fucking cares? Mom would be here if she was so damn worried,” says the one I assume is Ethan in a bored drawl. “Let’s get to Miranda’s party before the sun sets. Everyone will be too damn drunk to talk if we show up much later. Practice is putting us behind a bunch of them as it is.”

“Speaking of Miranda…”

“How long are you going to fuck that shady piece, Luke?” one groans.

At least I know which one is Luke now, even though I’m not brave enough to peek out and see their faces.

“Better than Elise. When you gonna stop hitting that?”

“I haven’t fucked Elise in at least… two days.”

Their laughter bellows out again as the door shuts, the thick buffer only allowing remnants to slip through, and once again I have a breath to release. If I’m already hiding from them, this is going to be a really long year.

## Chapter 2

They redecorated my bedroom. The dark gray walls are coupled with deep plum curtains. The oversized bed could hold five people on it, and the sofa is soft enough to sleep on. Why did they change it? I'm not staying here past graduation.

This room is large enough to be an apartment. It's hard to see the two walks of life colliding. Mom didn't like living in lavish surroundings.

My phone rings, and I sigh while dropping down to the bed that matches the drapes.

"Hey, Liz."

"Damn, Sin. I miss you already. Why the hell did you have to go and do something as stupid as hang on a ledge?"

Groaning, I inch up the bed until I'm resting against the padded headboard.

"Really?"

"Too soon?" Liz asks.

"Yes, too soon. That damn ledge altered my life… in all the wrong ways. Now I'm stuck in Rusette. There's no chance I'll find a friend like you while I'm here. You were one in a thousand. I don't think the senior class in Rusette will even have one-hundred people."

She snickers, but then she sighs sadly.

"Your dad told my mom he'd fly me out there to see you in a few days—before school starts back. Then I'll get to see your smokin' hot stepbrothers."

It's doubtful my *father* thought of this. It's more likely that Olivia had him call Beverly—Liz's mom—and make the offer.

I snort derisively while shaking my head. "I doubt you'll see much of them. I haven't even seen them since I turned fourteen. And that was briefly at a thing my grandparents had."

"How is that possible?" she asks in disbelief.

It's no surprise she knows very little about this part of my family. It's not like I discuss this, considering it's not exactly discussion worthy.

"They were only married for a few months back when I still came here to visit Hal. I saw the Nash boys a handful of times. Then I only saw my father on certain holidays when he visited my grandparents. Usually the Nash boys went to their dad's house on those same holidays. I've maybe had a total of three conversations with all three combined. Ethan and Luke have never spoken to me at all. Jax is the only one who attempted to speak to me. And that's the story."

I decide not to tell her that Jax wasn't nice the few times he spoke. They usually ignored me, but if I ever pissed them off, Jax was the one who warned me. His tongue had daggers, but Ethan was the worst. I was always grateful I never pushed hard enough to deal with his wrath.

"They were at the funer—" She stops short, sucking in a regretful breath, and I exhale slowly.

Deciding not to make her feel worse, I continue on as if she had finished that statement and it didn't bother me. The wound isn't as fresh, but it still hurts. Considering my current predicament, it's best not to act affected. What's sad is that she thinks they were there on their own accord instead of their mother's authority.

“I didn’t notice them that day.”

I didn’t notice anyone. I was numb. My tears blurred my vision when I wasn’t staring absently at nothing at all. I don’t even remember my dad or Liz being there that day.

“Well, they were certainly the talk. Every girl there was asking their names.”

So glad my mother’s funeral was such a fun party where lonely girls could crush on my stepbrothers.

“Well, the Nash boys aren’t the heartthrobs everyone seems to think they are.”

They’re assholes if you ask me.

“You sound terrible, Sin. Keep sounding that way and your dad will ship you off to some sort of counseling camp or something. You have to remember that they think you’re suicidal.”

I curse, slapping the bed under me. “I’m not suicidal. I wasn’t going to jump. I just needed to breathe. It was a panic attack, and I had a moment of claustrophobia. I was just sitting on a ledge.”

“You were on a ledge five stories up. For over forty-five minutes. And you were wide-eyed, freaked out, and shaking. Rescue workers had to pull you to safety when they found you to be nonresponsive.”

I don’t have any recollection of that, for the most part. I remember being hauled backwards, but I was so out of it. It was like I was in twelve places at once, the walls were closing in on me, and then I sought out air. I just needed to breathe.

Then… nothing. I spaced out until the hands started pulling me back, and I ended up in the hospital. They didn’t let me leave until they prescribed me the anti-depressants that I don’t need—or take.

It’s as though a girl can’t have a simple panic attack these days.

“What happened, Sin?” Liz asks, reminding me that I’ve been sitting here in silence.

Trying to block out the mental image, I answer, “It was a nightmare. In my dream, I was back in that car, and it was so real. I heard our screams, felt the jolt and the glass scraping across my body. Then I saw *her*… I was pinned under her all over again. When I woke up, I couldn’t breathe. I just needed air. I know it was a panic attack, but everyone thinks I was contemplating suicide. Spend five days getting a psych evaluation and see how lovely life looks. It’s not fun to have everyone hovering over you like you’re crazy.”

Which is why I’m shocked no one is here. Apparently Olivia panicked when she learned my Aunt was rarely ever at home, so that left me unsupervised. That’s what forced me to have to come out here.

And here I am unsupervised. The irony.

“It sucks you had to take an earlier flight.”

“Yeah, the—”

“Sinclair! Are you here?” Olivia’s panicked, screaming voice startles me and I jump on the bed. *Sheesh*. Is she trying to give me a heart attack?

“I need to call you back. Olivia sounds like she’s—”

“Sinclair!”

“—freaking the hell out.”

Liz sighs before making me promise to call her later, and I head out the door.

“Up here,” I call down the stairs, but Olivia rounds the curve of the staircase almost as soon as the words leave my mouth.

She heaves out a breath and doubles over, looking as though she can't grasp air. It takes her a second to compose herself.

"I just now saw your message. I got here as soon as I could. I had planned to pick you up from the airport. Why on earth did they make you take an earlier flight?"

I might should have told them that before today. It just slipped my mind until I was at the first airport. I'm only about seven hours early.

"They had a plane tear up, so they had to shuffle around everyone who was on the flights scheduled for it. I had to come today or yesterday, because most of the later flights were booked up. Sorry. I sent a text."

She forces a grin, and then she tugs me into her arms almost forcefully, hugging me so tight that it hurts.

"It's so good to have you here," she says in an emotional whisper, and I inwardly groan.

Everyone thinks I'm the girl who wants to die, and they're smothering me. Well, they're going to suffocate me to damn death.

## Chapter 3

Hushed voices and muffled laughter jars me awake. I turned into the lightest sleeper in the world after the accident.

“Boys!” Olivia barks, and several grumbles and muttered curses escape their lips.

I glance over to the clock, noting that it’s three in the morning. They must be out past curfew. I’m about to get to witness a serious showdown.

Grinning, I move to the door and open it as heavy footsteps thud against the hardwood stairs. “What?” I hear one of them snap, sounding entirely too pissed. She’s the only one not afraid of them, and despite their cruel mentality, they allow it.

“What?” she growls. “You’re asking *what?* I told all of you that Sinclair can’t be alone. And the first day she’s here, you do just that. I know you came home after practice, and Sinclair would have been here by then.”

Ah, hell. This is humiliating. In fact, it’s so degrading that I could crawl into a ball and hide from the world.

Before they can retort or defend themselves, Olivia sets in again. “She’s going through something terrible, and she needs your help. All of us are responsible for her right now. You’re grounded until school starts.”

“What the fuck, Mom?”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Deciding I’d prefer not to become a target for the ruthless Nash boys, I storm through the door as Olivia continues berating them.

Just as I come into view, I see Olivia's blonde hair bouncing as she adamantly scolds her three sons.

The backs of three heads with jet-black hair are in my view. I'm actually a little shocked by the fact they're so tall now—well, I can only see how tall two of them are. Even though they're halfway down a few stairs, they're still almost as tall as me. That means they're well over six feet tall.

Considering they're brothers, I'm not surprised to see them similarly built, but I am surprised to see how *built* they are. Their shoulders are broader, and I can tell they're toned and full of muscle. Their waists are all narrow, but still much wider than mine.

One stands leaning against the banister, looking bored. One is sitting on a step, leaning back casually as though he's watching a rerun instead of a new show. And the other has both of his hands resting on top of his head, more leisurely than frustrated.

"They didn't know I was here," I say loudly, but not yelling, letting my voice cut through hers.

Two of the guys tense, but the one sitting down doesn't bother acknowledging that I just spoke. Olivia looks horrified when she sees me. I guess she underestimates the acoustics of this house and my light sleeping.

As one, two of the guys turn to look at me, piercing me with eyes that I can't see through the subtle light drifting up the stairwell. The one sitting still remains leaned back, his elbows resting on a step as his legs stay crossed at the ankles.

Olivia stutters, "Sinclair. I… I'm so sorry."

Pretending I don't hear her apology, I continue. "I had already taken my bags to my room when they came in," I lie, and the two

looking at me exchange a look, keeping their faces impassible—cold. “I was getting a drink of water after a long day. I heard them, but they never saw me.”

Even with the dim glow of the light, it’s then I realize how long a few years can be. They don’t look hardly anything like they did when I had just turned fourteen. Immediately I recognize Jax, because his cold eyes still haunt my nightmares. He’s the youngest, and he’s a junior in high school. Or will be when school starts. But he has a black heart full of spite and fury just waiting on a host to unleash it on.

The other I think is Luke. He and Ethan are twins, and while they strongly resemble each other, they’re not identical. Their features back then were distinct and different. Liz would die if she saw Jax or Luke. They’re both so different, older, more mature in appearance.

“See, Mom?” Ethan says from his seat on the stairs, still not bothering to look up at me.

Luke and Jax exchange another look as Olivia tightens her lips, looking ashamed, but not because Ethan is taunting her. She hates that I overheard.

Ethan continues, “We never even knew she was home. Where were you?”

Before I can let the guilt settle over Olivia’s face, I answer him, snarling at his back, even though it’s stupid as hell.

“My flight landed early. I didn’t text her soon enough. Not that it’s any of your business.”

Stupid son of a bitch. How dare he talk to her like that. Olivia is the nicest person I’ve ever met—other than my mother.

He tenses ever so slightly, but I see it before he relaxes again. Balls. The last thing I need to do is drive myself into the line of fire Ethan Nash can unleash.

“Nobody asked for your input,” Ethan says coldly, still not bothering to look back.

“Ethan!” Olivia scolds.

“Nobody objected when I came out to save your asses either. Some of us like to sleep, though, so I’m not crazy about screaming at three in the morning for no good reason. That’s the *only* reason I came out. Night, Olivia.” After turning back around, I walk three steps before I add, “And I’m not suicidal, so babysitters aren’t necessary.”

She apologizes to my back, and I roll my eyes. I wasn’t trying to make her feel bad. That was directed solely at Ethan. Well, maybe the last part was directed at her. But the rest was for Ethan because he was a complete and total asshole when we were kids, even though he never spoke directly to me. At eighteen, he’s managed to make the Guinness World Records for biggest jerk.

Jax and Luke snicker, but smother it when I toss a look over my shoulder. I force a smirk, acting as though I’m as badass as I just sounded, but as I turn around, I take in a heavy breath of air.

“Get to bed,” I hear Olivia say to her laughing sons just as I reach my room. As I shut the door, I lean against it, dropping my head back to stare at the ceiling. Definitely going to be a long year.

STARTING 2017!