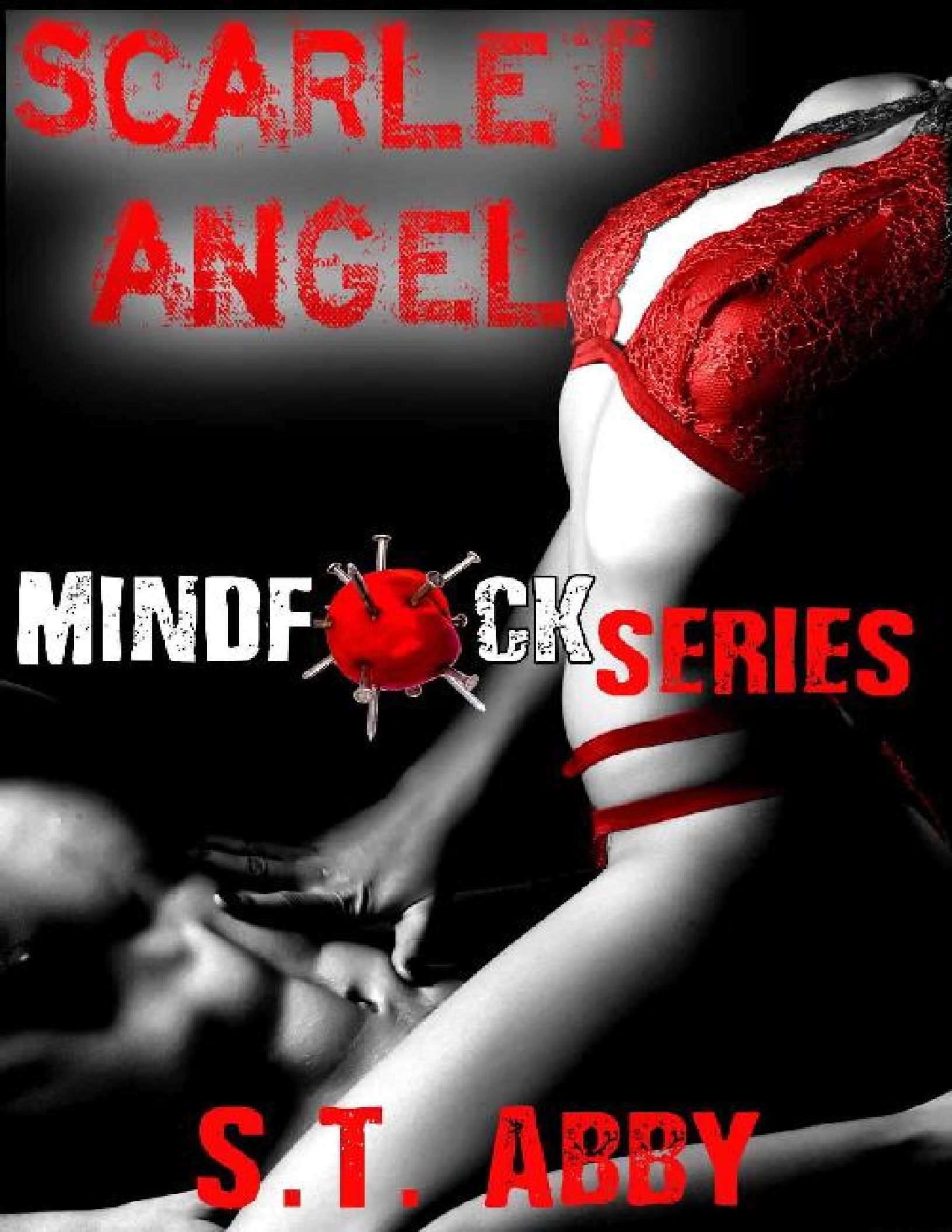
SCARLET ANGEL



MINDF CK SERIES

S.T. ABBY

Scarlet Angel

Book 3 of the
Mindfuck Series

S.T. Abby

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Book 3 of the
Mindfuck Series
S.T. Abby
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

Or email me at stabbyauthor@gmail.com

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

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

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

You’re not alone.

~~Tim Hoover~~
~~Chuck Cosby~~
~~Nathan Malone~~
~~Jeremy Hoyt~~
~~Ben Harris~~
~~Tyler Shane~~
~~Lawrence Martin~~
~~Random alley guy~~
~~Kenneth Ferguson~~

To defeat a monster, you have to be twice as monstrous.
To love a monster, you have to share your soul.
—Lana Myers

Chapter 1

Better three hours too soon than a minute too late.
—William Shakespeare

LOGAN

“I don’t understand why he let her go. It clashes severely with his profile,” I tell Craig as we pull up to the police station. “A sexual sadist who has been on a killing spree doesn’t just release a victim.”

“I don’t know either. The girl is so traumatized that she wouldn’t let them bring her to us. She said we had to come here, and she’d only talk to you. Her father hasn’t even been allowed in yet. She said she couldn’t speak to him until she spoke to you.”

Confused, I walk quickly into the police station, leaving the introductions to Craig. Why leave her in this town? Why let her go at all?

A thousand questions are flitting through my mind as I walk into the room they’re holding her in. She’s shaking, her eyes wide and panicked, and a blanket is draped around her.

Three men and one woman are in there, all of them giving her a wide berth. She’s terrified, understandably so, and has most likely already had several panic attacks if someone got too close.

“I’m Supervisory Special Agent Bennett,” I say softly, trying to keep my tone warm and non-imposing.

Her eyes dart to mine, and immediately she starts sobbing. Everyone looks as confused as me.

“He…told…me…to contact you…just you,” she says through her sobs. “He said I couldn’t show anyone until…you…No one but you.”

I’m at a loss, carefully taking a step forward.

“Show me what, Erica?” I ask her, gingerly crouching in front of her, making myself appear smaller, less threatening.

“This,” she says, moving the blanket and tugging up her skirt to reveal her inner thigh that is bandaged. Blood has seeped through the bandage, and I look at the female officer closest to me.

“She wouldn’t let us check her. She refused until you arrived,” she says, answering my silent question.

Erica tears at the bandage, pulling it off, and I see the words he's carved into her skin.

HER SAFE.

There's even a period.

It makes no sense at all.

"Did he tell you where he was going?" I ask her.

She's a sobbing mess, shaking her head. "He said he'd kill me if I didn't follow his orders. Said he'd come back for me. He took me once; he could take me again. Told me to follow his orders precisely, and he'd let me live."

"And he ordered you to show me this?" I ask, still trying to follow her.

"Yes. To get you here and show you this. That's all I had to do, and he'd let me live."

She's crying so hard that it's hard to understand her words, but I think I understand her well enough to spare her more questions. She's not fit to be interviewed right now.

He's shattered her.

"Can I see my father now?" she sobs. "I did what I was told to do. I did it right," she cries.

"Of course, Erica," I tell her.

We still haven't figured out how to charge her father for what he did. He's been temporarily released just for this.

I gesture with my head to let him in, and they open the door. Seconds later, the broken shell of man runs in, and he grabs his daughter who cries out. I turn and let them have a moment as she sobs into his chest.

"Her safe," I tell Craig as I walk out.

"The rest of the message maybe? You can't," he says, pulling up a picture on his iPad of the judge's wife he strung from a building. "Keep," he goes on, pulling up the photo of Lisa's arm. "Her safe," he says, looking at me.

Donny is standing with him, and he shakes his head. "But Erica is with us. Is he saying we can't keep her safe now that we have her? Maybe notching up his game?"

An icy wave washes over me.

“Logan Bennett, you can’t keep her safe. He carved my name into that body with the first part of the message.”

Their eyes all widen, and I panic, juggling my phone free. Lana’s phone goes straight to voicemail, and I curse, calling the patrol car assigned to her house tonight.

“SSA Bennett, how can I—”

“Where’s Lana? Do you have eyes on her house right now?”

“No…um…sorry, sir. I thought someone told you. We were pulled off to go help find the kids that other sicko buried.”

My stomach twists like a knife in me, and I hang up, frantically dialing Duke.

“Detective Du—”

“Tell me you’re with Lana right now,” I snap.

“No…I thought she was with you. Didn’t I see her back at your headquarters?”

“You fucking left her alone?”

“I thought she was with you! You took her from the house, according to my officers, then I saw her with you!”

“Fuck!”

I hang up, and I start sprinting to the SUV we took here. Craig and Donny are on my heels.

“I’ll stay here and see what I can find!” Donny calls out.

Craig hops in the passenger seat, buckling up quickly as I tear out of the parking lot. I toss him my phone.

“Keep calling her.”

He does, but curses each time, hanging back up. “Her phone is either off or dead. It’s not ringing through.”

I push the pedal all the way to the floor, turning the lights on.

“Get someone over there, now!”

“Already on it,” he tells me, the phone at his ear. He’s shouting orders at someone, telling them Lana’s address, and I weave in and out of traffic, never hitting the brakes.

“They said they’re twenty minutes out,” he tells me, hanging up. “How long has she been home?”

My stomach flips and turns inside out. She left an hour before I did. It would have taken her thirty minutes to get home. It took me

almost two hours to get out here. That's at least two and a half hours he's had her to himself.

With no one to save her.

In the middle of nowhere.

Her closest neighbor would never hear a thing.

"Too long," I whisper hoarsely, dreading the worst as I gas the car harder, hearing Craig hiss out a breath as I narrowly dodge a car. "Too fucking long."

Chapter 2

Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.
—William Shakespeare (The Tempest)

HADLEY

Earlier…

They say children see the magic in everything. The eyes peering up at me as I sit down beside her tell a different story. At such a young age, she's seen some of the worst of the world's depravity. There's no magic in that. Only evil.

Lindy May seems to have jaded eyes as well, but I'm too emotional to think practically right now.

This man kept doing things because I let them convince me it was all in my head. The therapist. Him. My mother…

Because of me, this child is hurting right now. Because of me, so many other children are dead. So many other children suffered what I went through.

Because I was weak. So weak I let them manipulate me.

It's a guilt I can't bear, and I'm barely able to breathe as I force myself to sit by her. To distract myself from my own misgivings, I focus on the fact she knew Lana. There's no doubt in my mind that the child who hasn't waved at another soul waved at Lana because she knew her.

"You know Lana Myers?" I ask her.

Her eyes widen, and Lindy clears her throat. "No. We don't."

It's an obvious lie, but I refrain from calling her out on it. She's fidgeting, uncomfortable since the mention of Lana. Craig has already bailed to go tell the others, so I don't have long to get answers.

Laurel frowns, glancing over at Lindy.

"This man that hurt you…he hurt me too," I say, establishing a rapport with her, giving her something to bond with me about. It's hard to detach myself…to not be emotional. But I manage it, because I've had years of training.

Laurel reaches over, tugging on my sleeve, and I lean down to let her whisper into my ear. I feel her cup her hands around her mouth, as though she's ensuring none of her words escape the tunnel from her lips to my ear.

"My angel made sure he'll never hurt us again," she says, and a sickly coldness washes over me. "My angel saved me. She'll always watch over me. She is right now."

I lean up, letting her words process as Duke barges in. I'm not even sure what's being said when I finally leave. Logan follows me out, caring too much.

Words fly from my mouth before I can stop them, and I'm sobbing, taking in the weight of my responsibility in all this.

I could have prevented anyone else from getting hurt.

The words spill from my lips like vomit, pouring out everything I've had trapped in me since the day I ran away. I'm not even sure what we're saying to each other; it's all a blur.

My mind is on auto-pilot, ruled by guilt and self-loathing.

He doesn't stop me when I finally walk away, but my feet hesitate in front of the breakroom. Lana is casually propped up, watching TV as though she's the most relaxed person on the face of the earth.

She looks over at me, her body attuned to someone's attention being trained on her. That's not an innocent person's response.

She watches me, a small smirk on her lips, as though she's daring me to say something here and now.

My angel made sure he'll never hurt us again. My angel saved me. She'll always watch over me. She is right now.

Laurel's words slap me, and I slowly piece things together that don't really fit. *She.* Laurel said *she*.

And she waved at Lana.

There's no way I'm right.

There's no way Lana killed and tortured him…I mean…right?

She arches an eyebrow at me, as if challenging me to speak first. If she killed a man and waltzed into this place...she's a fucking psychopath.

No. I'm just too emotional.

I walk away, ending the staring contest, deciding to get some answers. She came with Logan, so she'll be here for a while. No way is he leaving until he has answers.

But I plan to get some different answers.

I practically sprint to my car, and I'm on the road when my phone rings with an incoming call from Leonard. I start to not answer, but decide to. I'm sure it's about the sick son of a bitch I let terrorize innocent children by never looking deeper than the surface once I became an FBI agent.

"What's going on?" I ask seriously, clearing my throat from the sob that's on the tip of my tongue.

"Our castrating mutilator killed Ferguson," he says so calmly.

I almost drop the phone.

"What?" I ask in disbelief.

"He didn't want us linking it to him, but he left the kid with Lindy May Wheeler, who, surprise surprise, once lived in Delaney Grove."

"That doesn't make sense. You guys profiled him to be a sadist, and a sadist wouldn't—"

"We're revisiting the profile. He's a revenge killer. Not a sadist. Everything we thought we knew is about to change. We think he feels a kinship with you. He somehow knew about Ferguson and… your past," he says, the last part spoken with regretful hesitance.

I squeeze the phone tighter, driving faster.

"Okay. Keep me updated," I say stoically, my voice not betraying the whirlwind of emotions stirring within me.

As I hang up, I count the ways I'm losing my mind. I suspected Lana to be the one who killed that son of a bitch, but that's insane. I'm too close to this case, not thinking rationally.

But he said the killer knew about my past, focused on it. I gave Lana a reason to focus on me when I stupidly alerted her to my suspicions. She was too calm. Too underwhelmed by my accusations.

It's like she was prepared for those questions.

If it was Lana who killed Kenneth, then Lana would be our serial killer who has been killing men twice her size with psychical domination. There's no possible way I'm right.

So why am I still driving to her house? Why am I still not convinced that she's not the angel Laurel spoke of?

Logan will hate me forever if he learns I've gone crazy enough to accuse his girlfriend—that he finds perfect—of something so bizarrely impossible, not to mention grossly heinous.

The police are gone as I drive into her driveway, trying not to dwell on how insane this all is. It's currently all-hands-on-deck for this case. The PD are looking for dozens and dozens of bodies left behind by a devil I should have killed.

The house is dark, and I carefully twist the knob, surprised to find it unlocked. I leave it unlocked as I head inside. Logan has been in her room, so I skip it, knowing she'd be smart enough to hide all her dirty little secrets.

I ignore the nagging part of my mind that is calling me crazy for suspecting her. She's not even close to being capable of these things physically. Killing Kenneth would have been a hell of a job. First she'd have had to lug him out of the basement. Then push him up the hill that leads to the beach. There's just no way.

But I continue on, letting my gut override my mind.

There's something about her…something eerily composed that Logan doesn't see. Something dark in her eyes when she looks into your soul.

But how dark can a person be if they save a child?

I'm so confused.

I find a door that's locked, and instinct has me immediately picking it. My skills make it easy, and the door pops open in seconds. But it's empty.

Why lock an empty room?

Only four bookcases are against the walls, and all four are empty.

Confused, I turn around, but a scream tears from my throat as a large body suddenly rushes me.

I grab for my gun, but it's too late. The beast collides with me, slamming me into the wall, dazing me as an agonized scream leaves me again.

My gun is stripped from me, tossed to the ground, and another pained sound escapes me as I'm shoved against the wall, feeling my

hands wrenched behind my back as a warm breath floats over my skin with a minty smell.

“Well, isn’t this a nice surprise, Agent Grace?” a man’s voice asks, eliciting a chill that runs up my spine.

“Two for the price of one,” he goes on, still keeping me pinned. “Too bad I’m waiting for another. You’ll have to wait your turn. I’ll even overlook your red hair.”

My breath seizes in my lungs as realization hits me hard and fast. With all the chaos, Logan probably didn’t even think about the cops being pulled off babysitting detail. There’s only one person who would be here right now.

“Tell me, Agent Grace,” he says, binding my hands tightly with my own handcuffs as I remain immobile, pinned as I struggle in vain, “are you afraid of the Boogeyman?”

My stomach lurches, and I try to scream again just as he throws me to the ground. He comes down on top of me, laughing as I scream for help. He laughs louder.

“Scream! Scream all you want!” he taunts. “This is the best place in the world to scream, because no one can hear you, Agent.”

My feet jerk up, and I realize he’s tying them to my hands, forcing my back to arch as he lifts off me to finish the process.

“But you can’t scream when my guest arrives,” he goes on, smirking in the darkness. My eyes have adjusted, and I see his bald head as he shoves something into my mouth.

I try to fight, but he digs his fingers into my jaw, wrenching it open. He ties the gag, securing it, then I hear the telltale rip of duct tape seconds before it covers my mouth.

I struggle again, fighting, but with my hands and feet bound together. He laughs again as he lifts me, carrying me effortlessly down the stairs, intentionally dragging my head against the wall.

I cry out, only hearing a barely-there, muffled sound through the layers of gagging he’s secured. My head slams against the side of the wall when he turns sharply.

“Oops,” he says, snickering.

He drops me to the ground, and I whimper, the sound not escaping at all as my elbow hits too hard, along with my hip. The creaking of two folding closet doors becomes noticeable as I see the

doors swing open, and he slams his foot into my stomach hard enough to crack some ribs and kick me into the small space.

He kneels as he slides me in the rest of the way, and I twist my head away when he tries to brush the hair from my eyes.

“Enjoy the show, Agent Grace. At least you’ll know what’s coming next.”

With that, he slams the doors shut, and the small, blind-like centers let me see through the slats as his feet move away.

Music filters through the house, a soft, classical song. I can see the front door from here, and I watch, wishing I had never suspected her of anything.

A tear rolls from my eye, feeling like fire licking against my skin.

Logan will be with her. He’ll die right in front of me. And I can’t even warn him.

I can feel my phone in my front pocket, taunting me—so close, yet so far away. No matter how I twist, I can’t reach it.

It seems like hours later the door is finally opening, and I try to scream. Try to warn her. But the small sound I’m able to make is drowned out by the music in the house.

It’s just her as she shuts the door; no Logan. No hope of being saved.

It happens fast.

Plemmons blindsides her, punching her right in the side of the face. She drops the keys and phone she’s holding and slams into the wall from the impact, dazed and confused.

He throws his body against hers, and she cries out as he twists her hand that she tries to hit him with, while simultaneously choking her with his arm. Despite the music, I can hear every word he says.

“Feisty. I like that. And so pretty. Agent Bennett picks them well,” he taunts. “He left you all alone finally. Tell me, princess, are you afraid of the Boogeyman?”

He lifts off her and throws her into the wall across from him. She hits hard before bouncing to the ground.

What has my ears perking up is the sound of her laughter as she slowly lifts herself from the ground.

“Boogeyman,” she says, looking up at him. “Took you long enough.”

His footsteps pause as confusion mixed with anger crosses his face. He gets off on fear. On pain.

Yet she's acting immune.

Did Logan coach her on how to act?

Or is she really that fucking stupidly unafraid?

He charges her, kicking her in the stomach, before grabbing her by the hair of the head, jerking her up to her feet.

A strangled sound of pain escapes her, and he pushes her into the wall with enough force to crack something. Her face is to the side, and she's smiling as he comes in behind her.

"Not laughing now, are you?" he asks, reaching down with one hand to start pulling down her pants. "You won't be laughing anymore tonight."

"I think that's enough damage to make this convincing," she says before he can finish.

The weird comment has him pausing, while my heartbeat thrums in my ears.

She throws her elbow around, connecting with his face at such an impossible angle. I suck in air through my nose, shocked as he stumbles backwards.

She wipes her mouth, looking down at her fingers as she flips on a light with her other hand, revealing the bloody fingertips.

Her nose and bottom lip are bleeding, and her face is already bruising where he hit her. Yet she seems unaffected by the pain.

His eyes narrow.

"The Boogeyman isn't so scary in the light," she says, a dark smile turning up at the corners of her lips.

His nose is bleeding from the shot her elbow took, and he releases some sound of fury before charging her. She spins and ducks his fist, and her knee comes up, slamming hard into his ribs.

As he doubles over, she spins again, bringing up her foot, connecting with his back. He slams into the wall, and she grins broader as he whirls around, confused. Furious. Ready to kill.

"I can't leave too many bruises. Don't want them suspicious now, do I?"

My blood freezes inside my body, and I shake my head in disbelief.

He pulls a knife out, the same knife he's killed so many others with. She eyes it carelessly.

"Oh, how I wish I could sit you down and take from you like you took from all those women. Make you feel the same pain and terror they felt," she says, eyeing him with a smirk. "But I can't. I can, however, strip you of all that pride you hold so dearly. All that *power* you think you have. Then I can kill you."

He charges her with the knife, his feet rushing, but she dodges two swipes, almost too easily, as though she's playing with him.

She grabs his wrist on the third strike, and she twists quickly, causing his hand to roll awkwardly as he cries out. The knife drops to the ground, and she spins, kicking his feet out from under him.

When he falls, she kicks the knife to the side, knocking it out of reach. He darts to his feet, rushing toward a table, but she drops and grabs the knife, throwing it into the drawer so hard that it sticks halfway through.

The drawer doesn't budge as he jerks on it, and she laughs as she charges him this time. He tries to grab her, but she's too fast, and her knee collides with his groin so hard that he topples backwards, sobbing as he most likely swallows his balls back down.

"They'll believe a good knee shot to the jewels," she says, jerking the knife out of the drawer before opening it and pulling out the gun. "Nice try, by the way. Too bad I know where I hide my own guns, huh?"

She's the cat and he's the mouse.

The man who has terrorized Boston for so long, and now DC, is just a toy on her strings.

Who the fucking hell is Lana Myers.

I don't make a sound, scared for a whole new reason. I walked in and threatened a girl who has a sexual sadist sobbing on the ground.

"The big bad Boogeyman," she sighs, circling him while holding the knife. "I've always hated the horror movies. You know why?" she asks as he cups his crotch, still rocking on the ground in pain.

"I'll tell you why," she goes on, turning her back on him as she walks toward the living room again. "Because they always portray the women as pathetic little screamers who can't save themselves.

The bad guy is always walking. The girl is always running. Yet somehow the big bad *Boogeyman* catches up to them regardless."

I watch as Plemmons manages to get to his feet, and her back is still turned. My eyes are wide, and I don't know who would be worse to face.

Two devils in one room.

How did this happen to me?

"I also hate how they paint them as the idiots with a stroke of luck," she goes on, oblivious to his stealthy approach. "How the girls grab a knife at the last second, and the killer runs into the blade. So anticlimactic. He usually ends up disappearing when they finally run to call for help too. Then he makes one final attempt to kill them."

He quietly creeps up behind her, then charges at the last second.

She grins, and my heart hits my throat as she drops to her hands, kicking her feet up so fast, and her ankles grab his throat before she flips him, all of it happening in one smooth motion.

Holy fucking ninja assassin.

He slams to the ground, and she chokes him, her legs now binding his throat.

"I like choking men the same way you like choking women," she hisses, her tone so dark and sinister that it makes me sick, confirming my worst fears. "But I don't prey on those weaker than me. I don't prey on the innocent."

She releases him and flips back to her feet with the same ridiculous, almost unnatural speed. Her words slowly sink in, and confusion rattles through me at their meaning.

Revenge killer. Leonard said it was a revenge killer.

Kinship.

All the little pieces try to add up.

Plemmons coughs, strangling on the air that enters his lungs. "Who…are…you?" he asks through labored breaths.

Her smile deepens. "I'm the girl who takes on the darkest of men. Men who've done things dark and twisted to the weak. Men who preyed on the innocent. Men who thought they killed me when I was weak. Just like the women you've killed."

She crouches near his head, as he flops around on his back, still clutching his neck. It's an act. He's a horrible actor. Damn it! He's faking it!

I try to warn her, finally choosing a side, but the words are drowned by the layers of the gag and the steady stream of music.

She brings the knife to his cheek, running the back of the blade against it. He stops struggling, going perfectly still.

"You're like me," he says, more surprise in his tone that fear or malice.

"No," she says quietly. "I'm so much worse and better than you. I'm the thing the monsters in the dark fear. And now I'm even the Boogeyman's nightmare."

She steps away, and he rolls to his feet. When he's facing her, she winks—fucking winks—at him. She's enjoying every second of this.

She's doing what she promised; she's stripping away his pride and power, shattering the immortal feeling of being untouchable he had.

He grabs a lamp, chunking it at her head. As she ducks it, laughing, he picks up the end table, and throws it at her.

She dodges it, using that speed she has to her advantage. It's like she wanted this to happen.

"You can't even get it up like a real man," she goads, grinning when his nostrils flare and fury creases all his features. "You need to cut women up, watch them bleed, just to get a good boner. You're weak," she says, walking across the room. "I shouldn't even bother with you. The men I kill are strong, powerful men who can fuck a woman without forcing her. They only rape when they feel a woman needs to be put in her place."

She's saying all the right things to provoke him, to tear away the façade he's built, and emasculate him. She's so good at profiling because she's studied it. She's learned how to demean and debase all her victims.

The way they debased her.

She's a victim. Or, at least, she was.

Her words add up, telling the story she's yet to lay bare.

“You know what I take from them?” she asks, letting her eyes drop to his lap before looking back up to his face. My stomach roils. I know what she takes. “I take everything,” she says at last. “They have more to give.”

She turns, putting her back to him, acting as though he has no power over her, showing him he’s no threat. The gun is lying in front of the closet doors, but he hasn’t gone for it again.

It’d be too weak to go for the gun.

She’s playing him too well.

She’s playing a man who has played the world.

And she’s winning.

He lunges for her, ready to prove himself, and she spins, the knife at her waist as she faces him. He runs right into it, and I hold back the sounds, now worried about being heard.

She rolls her eyes as his eyes widen in shock, his features paling as he stumbles back, the knife sliding out as she jerks it away.

“And now I’ve gotten lucky,” she mocks. “Just like the horror movies. They’ll never suspect a thing.”

He drops to his knees, the wound in his abdomen bleeding profusely. There’s too much blood for him to survive if help doesn’t come right away.

I’d have been his next victim. Now I wonder what happens when she finds out I know it all.

She could have already killed me, though. No one would have suspected her.

Instead, she tracked down my stepfather, killed him, and then saved a child’s life. A child I let down by not being the hero a devil was.

Lana Myers, or whoever she really is, survived something so dark that she needs revenge.

But Logan is sleeping with her.

He’s falling in love.

And she’s a fucking psychopath.

My own guilt for my failures has me wondering what happens if I stop her. I don’t know enough about her victims to know if they’re hurting others the way I let Kenneth get away with.

I failed so many others by trusting the lies.

She brought his evil deeds to an end.

What happens if others are hurt because I stopped her before she finished? I'm barely living with the guilt I've yet to face.

I have no idea what to do.

As I agonize over the options, Lana sits down, watching him bleed out, holding onto the knife as casually as if it's the TV remote and she's watching her favorite show. He chokes and gurgles up blood, staring at her in disbelief.

He came to kill a weak woman, only to find he was really the prey who ran into the lion's den.

"This is my favorite part," she tells him softly. "The look of resignation. The moment the hope slips away and you know you won't be saved. I've been there. It's terrifying, so I know exactly how panicked you are right now. How helpless you feel. The difference is, you won't get up and live to kill them all one day."

Live to kill them all one day.

I file away each bit of information, deciding to make a list of reasons why I should or shouldn't tell the world who she is.

"They took too much. Left too little. I had nothing to lose," she whispers, the words barely making it to me. "Until him."

My heart thumps faster. Logan. She's talking about Logan.

"Then you wanted to kill *him*. He's too good to die. He's everything opposite of us. His light still shines. I hope they have fun with you in hell. You sentenced yourself there the day you targeted the only thing that makes me feel as though there's still a soul inside me left to be saved. The only thing I love more than revenge."

Just like that, I have my answer. And I watch with her as the Boogeyman dies by his own knife. At the hands of a woman.

The hands of a victim.

In a way, it's poetic justice.

Chapter 3

The course of true love never did run smooth.
—William Shakespeare

LANA

My brother was a Shakespeare lover. He lived and breathed the words of a man his generation took for granted. The people of that time didn't respect or appreciate the anguish and torment tied into each tragedy he produced under the guise of true romance.

Marcus was a romantic to the core, with nothing but light and beauty shining from him.

The world around us snuffed out that light.

They stole his grace.

Shamed his name.

Killed him.

Destroyed us.

With great amusement, I watch as the Boogeyman exhales his last breath. No longer will he steal lights as bright as my brother's.

The Boogeyman will no longer be seen as the immortal that taunts the police or FBI. He'll no longer be the nightmare who terrorizes women, haunting their lives. He'll be revered as a mortal who died at the hands of a weak woman he failed to kill.

A woman who got *lucky* enough to kill him first.

Curious, I pull on a glove and check his pockets, finding a remote. Hmmm…

I look around, and spot what the remote goes to. There's an out-of-place little contraption next to my fireplace. I'm fairly positive it's a cell phone jammer. My phone was working before I came in, so he shut it on at some other time.

Putting the remote back in his pocket, I stand to go to my cell phone. It was dropped within the first five seconds that he blindsided me. Sure enough, there's nothing going on when I try to dial out. No signal.

Good. That gives me an excuse as to why I watched him bleed out for over thirty minutes—the same way he let his victims die.

I glance over my shoulder, a horror movie flashback hitting me, but he's still dead. No disappearing act for the mortal who has drawn his last breath.

I return my gaze to my phone and carry it toward the couch. A normal girl wouldn't notice a cell phone jammer—or even know what one was—so quickly after the traumatizing experience of killing a man.

I turn off the music, removing my iPod from the dock. Asshole.

I hate my things being touched by people. Now he's gone and bled all over my floor too. It'll take me forever to clean all that up.

I'd call him inconsiderate, but since I'm the one that sort of stabbed him, then I guess it's my own fault. I should have let him run into the knife on the tile floor instead of the carpet.

Oh well. I can finally get that hardwood I've been considering. I usually don't update my homes, but with Logan living somewhat close by, I've had more reasons to stay than go.

I wonder how long it'll be before someone checks in on me. Or should I run and scream down the street? How does a normal person act after being attacked by a homicidal maniac and miraculously killing him by fluke?

Do they rock in a corner? Do they cry? I hope not. I can't fake tears, and I don't like rocking. Makes me nauseated.

Do I scream and pretend to be inconsolable or terrified? I don't like screaming. Hurts my throat. And acting terrified will be hard to pull off, because…I can't remember how to be afraid.

Obviously he wanted to rape me. I do remember how to feel after that. Numb. Broken. Suicidal. But that was much more than one man that brought me to that point.

It was much more than the rape that left me so broken.

So really, I guess I don't know, which it doesn't matter. He sure as hell never made it that far.

Do I act stunned or shocked? Do I show remorse even though he deserved to die? I'll start laughing if I try to fake remorse for that sadistic piece of shit.

I may can pull off stunned or shocked. Maybe play it off like I haven't been able to really wrap my head around the fact I just killed a guy?

Normal girls are hard to understand, because I can't remember the last time I was normal. Normal girls spend too much time reacting to their actions. They take for granted the air they get to breathe, because they've never been deprived of those painless breaths.

Me? I've already walked through hell, so I'm desensitized to all else.

I decide to go with shocked. It's the easiest to fake.

So, while I wait on someone to show up—and they will eventually when Logan realizes I'm unprotected—I practice my blank stare. I keep holding the knife, giving it a white-knuckle grip, certain a girl in shock would do just the same.

Yep.

Got this down.

And I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Sheesh.

Finally, hear the telltale *whoops and blares* of sirens, brakes squealing on my driveway. Jeez. I'm glad I didn't need to be saved. An entry that loud would have gotten me killed immediately, giving the fucknut bleeding all over my floor time to escape.

Jackasses.

I am curious when they burst through the doors, using my peripheral to see them training their guns on the air in front of them. How do they know he's here?

I proceed with my blank stare act, waiting.

"Holy shit," someone says, but I remain in *shock*, staring ahead.

How long do I have to do this?

My eyes are burning from how wide I'm holding them open. "Plemmons is in the living room," a loud voice booms.

I don't move my head, but I see him kneel as another man keeps a gun pointed on the Boogeyman.

"Clear."

"Clear."

"Clear."

The voices continue chirping the same word from all around my house. I remain a statue.

“Dead,” the guy kneeling says, then grabs the radio hooked to his shoulder. “Dispatch, Plemmons is dead. The house is clear.”

He clicks the radio, speaking into it again, repeating his words.

“What the hell?” he asks.

Apparently that jammer does more than just disable cell phone signals.

“I don’t know. Mine isn’t working either. Neither is my phone. Don’t disturb the scene. This is a fed case. Clear the house until they get here. They’re already chewing our asses for taking thirty minutes longer than we were supposed to. How was I supposed to know the guy isn’t just overly paranoid? They had us knee deep in an unmarked graveyard, all hands available.”

“Miss?” the guy prompts, coming closer, not responding to the sulking douchebag whilst I pretend to be a sad little girl in shock.

He carefully touches my wrist, and I jerk.

“Shhh,” he soothes, prying the knife from my hand and handing it back to another guy who wraps it and puts it in an evidence bag. “You’re safe, Ms. Myers.”

His voice is so gentle, and I have to keep a straight face to keep from smiling at him in appreciation for his genuine concern.

Something rattles from behind us, a loud *thump thump thump,* and I turn around without thinking as they draw their weapons, aiming it at the coat closet in the room.

My heart is in my ears as they jerk the doors open, and all the color drains from my face as Hadley struggles on the ground, likely thumping the door with her head.

Her muffled sounds reach my ears as my eyes land on the duct tape on her mouth.

I take it back. I remember now what it’s like to be afraid, because the fear is etching up my spine, rising steadily higher and higher. They’ll load me full of bullets before I can get away. There are at least fifteen cops in my house right now.

I also don’t have to fake being frozen in shock either. Nothing on my body is working, so even if I wanted to run, I couldn’t.

Her eyes fix on mine, but she looks away when they start unbinding her feet and freeing her hands from the cuffs. As soon as her hands are free, she starts peeling the tape off.

And I get stiffer by the second, praying against all odds that she's been unconscious this entire time. I mean, it's possible. She hasn't made a sound until now.

As soon as her mouth is free, she starts rubbing her wrists as they help her to her feet. She wobbles, and one offers her support, clutching her under the arms.

"I'm Agent Hadley Grace," she tells them firmly when they open their mouths, probably to get her identity.

All mouths close at once, and the guns lower.

"I came to check on Ms. Myers after learning patrol had been pulled away," she lies, the fib rolling off her tongue effortlessly.

She came to find something on me.

She just did.

Like every stupid fucking idiot in the movies, I showed my hand of cards, let the words roll out of my mouth to a man I knew would never be able to tell a soul. I totally did an evil monologue, for fuck's sake!

I did it to taunt him.

I did it to strip him of power.

I didn't know I was being watched.

She gauges me long and hard.

"What happened?" an officer asks.

She directs her attention to him.

"I was upstairs, clearing the house after I realized the door was unlocked. He hit me from behind, and he tied me up so he could wait on Ms. Myers to get home. He wanted me to watch. He wanted me to see what would happen to me when he was done with her."

Her eyes turn back to mine, and something silently passes from her to me, though I'm not sure what.

"Ms. Myers fought back. She got lucky. Even threw some things at him," she says, causing that shock inside me to expand. She gestures to the shattered remnants of the lamp and the broken disarray of the small end table that *he* threw at me. "She caught him

off guard enough for him to drop the knife. Somehow she managed to get it before him, and she turned just in time. He ran right into it."

She continues to study me, as I try to figure out what the actual fuck she's doing right now. Why is she covering for me? Is it just so she can save the truth for her team instead of giving the arrest to the cops?

"Pure. Dumb. Luck," she says, practically quoting my words from my earlier taunt.

Unsure of her motives, I remain frozen.

"Definitely lucky," one guy agrees.

Hadley's lips twitch as she looks away. "I'll call my guys."

My stomach tilts, growing more nauseated by the second. She lifts her phone, then frowns. But then looks at his body. "There's a remote in his pocket. I…saw it earlier."

Sicker and sicker.

I hate this game she's playing right now.

"We can't touch anything on the scene until the feds get here," one guy says, and she arches an eyebrow.

"I am a fed."

"Until your—"

"Where the fuck is everyone? Why isn't anyone answering their damn phones?" Logan's voice has me snapping my head to the door.

"Lana!" he shouts, the clear sense of panic in his tone.

"Here!" I call out, my voice cracking sincerely. I'm not sure what Hadley's about to do, and the tears that are in my eyes are real.

It may be the last time he ever looks at me with anything but horror and disgust if she tells him who I really am.

His wild eyes find me, and his entire body visibly relaxes as he charges across the room, not even noticing the bloody body before he grabs me, crushing me to him.

My eyes dart over to Hadley to see her watching us with an unreadable expression. She looks away, telling the cops something about the attack—another lie.

Logan holds me to him, his entire body rigid as I lean against him, absorbing his feel. He pulls back, his eyes scanning my face as he grimaces, taking in the damage.

There's nothing physically wrong with me that I didn't allow. Well, other than the first hit. He got in one lucky shot that I didn't see coming.

"What the fucking hell?" I hear him say, looking down now as he sees the Boogeyman for the first time.

He draws me back to him, almost as though he's shielding me from the sight.

"She got lucky," Hadley says, regaining my attention.

He looks over at her. "What are you doing here?"

"I came by to check on her after I heard they pulled patrols," she says, lying again.

"I'll let them brief you on the specifics, but let's just say I'm going to have a hell of a headache." She points to her bruised temple. Her eyes flick to mine before returning to his. "She saved our lives tonight."

With that, she walks out, but I still worry what her angle is.

She wanted dirt, and I gave her far more than she ever expected. Why leave? Why not spill it all?

Logan cups my face, and I wince when he squeezes it too tight, thanks to the bruise that's causing my face to swell.

"Shit," he hisses. "Let's get you out of here."

Craig walks in, his eyes landing on the dead man in my living room.

"Well, that's one way to close a case," he says, his eyes wide in disbelief.

"Let the media know the case is closed," Logan tells him before scooping me up, cradling me to him as though I'm fragile.

I let him. When he's around, I don't feel like I have to be so invincible. When he's with me, I feel like I can just be cared for without being weak.

Like it's okay to be vulnerable, because he'd never use it against me.

He carries me through the throngs of cops that are showing up more and more, everyone coming to see the Boogeyman dead with their own eyes.

"Lana!" The familiar voice has me looking over as Duke comes jogging toward us, so much regret coursing through his eyes. "I

came as soon as you called," he says, looking at Logan in shock. "How'd you beat me here?"

"He drove so fast that my asshole is still clenched. I don't think he tapped the brakes until we got here," Craig tells him dryly. I didn't know he followed us.

"Get your guys out of the house. We need to clear the scene," Logan says.

"What happened?" Duke asks, looking by us. "He really attacked?"

"Yeah. And Lana got lucky," Hadley says as she walks by us, moving toward Craig, tugging his elbow. "Give me a ride home in case I have a concussion."

My stomach tenses, and Logan gingerly brushes his lips over my forehead, not asking any questions about how I killed the man in my house. All he cares about is that he's dead and I'm alive. All the details seem unimportant, as though I'm priority above all else.

He looks down, his eyes tortured with guilt.

"This isn't your fault," I say, knowing the bruises on my face are the reason for that look shading his usually bright eyes.

My wounds are nothing more than superficial. I've survived much, *much* worse.

"It's all my fault. But no one will ever touch you again, Lana."

His lips find mine, and I kiss him, deciding to deal with Hadley later.

When he breaks the kiss, he looks over at a man and woman as they drive up, not getting out of the SUV.

"Give us a ride to town. I'm getting a room for the night," he tells them.

"My purse is—"

"I can manage a hotel room," he interrupts, not bothering to look at me.

My lips try to twist into a smile, but I deny it, knowing a girl who just endured what I did shouldn't be smiling about him being so alpha right now. I'm supposed to be meek and timid.

"Hop in," the woman tells him.

"Someone should probably work the scene," the guy says.

They seem completely unaffected or unnaturally guarded about their curiosity.

“He’s dead. There’s no scene.”

“Dead?” the woman asks in surprise, then narrows her eyes. “I wanted to be the one to take him out.”

“I’m taking a week off,” Logan announces randomly. “This case is closed. Hadley was attacked. Lana was—”

“Hadley?” the man and woman ask in unison.

“He gave her a shiner,” Logan explains. “I didn’t get all the details. But right now, I don’t know if I can handle hearing them. Let Donny deal with it for now. You two can come back after you drop us off.”

He keeps me in his lap as he loads us into the backseat. I don’t resist the seating arrangement, feeling my eyes grow heavy. With all the adrenaline pumping through me, I almost forgot it’s been over twenty-four hours since I slept.

Now I feel beaten and defeated by the clock that displays the hour. It may be closing in on forty-eight hours instead of twenty-four. We spent a while at Logan’s office. It was already closing in on midday then. It’d just gotten dark when I got home.

Now it’s… Fuck, my eyes are so blurry with sleep deprivation that I can’t see the clock. Can’t count the hours.

And I don’t care.

They talk as the dude drives. At some point I hear Logan refer to them as Leonard and Elise.

“Hadley got a hotel room too,” someone says, and that has me jarring back awake. Elise. It was Elise. “She says she’s too exhausted to go home, and too creeped out too.”

“Which one?” Logan asks.

“The new one closest to us,” Elise tells him. “It has a massage place. I’m sure that’s why she chose it.”

“Take us to that one. I’ll check in on her later.”

She still hasn’t said anything. If she was going to spill the pile of beans, she’d have done it by now, right? She’s been in contact with them, apparently.

“That other case was jurisdiction hell,” Leonard states, waking me up again. I didn’t even realize my eyes had closed.

“The cops were all pissing on their territory. Duke said it was his since the murderer was in his jurisdiction. That place said it was theirs since the burial grounds were in their jurisdiction.”

“Yeah, and they called off her patrol because of a pissing contest,” Logan growls. “Tonight could have gone severely different.”

He holds me tighter, but I pretend I’m still asleep.

“It’s a miracle she got that knife away from him. Hadley told me what happened. Sent it all in a long text,” Elise says quietly.

Logan stiffens. “I still don’t think I’m ready to hear it just yet.”

My heartbeat is in my ears.

“She fought, Logan. She fought for her life, and it paid off. She caught him off guard enough that he made a mistake, and he died by his own knife. Ran right into it. I thought that only ever happened in the movies.”

My lips twitch, but I say nothing. Hadley is keeping my secret if she’s spreading the lie to her friends.

But why?

Chapter 4

Death is a fearful thing.
—William Shakespeare.

LOGAN

I almost feel like even a week won't be enough. Not that I'll actually be able to take a week. I'll be lucky to get a few days, regardless of the fact my girlfriend was almost killed tonight.

My stomach is in knots just thinking of everything that could have gone wrong.

We're inside the hotel room before I put Lana down for the first time. Checking in was a pain in the ass, but Lana just took my wallet from my pocket, and handed the very curious woman behind the counter whatever she asked for in sequence.

I can tell she hasn't let the gravity of the situation sink in yet. She's too calm. I want to be here for her when it does catch up.

She killed a man tonight. A man almost killed her.

And it's all my fault.

She curls up on the bed, exhaustion weighing heavily in her eyes.

As soon as I'm down to my boxers, I join her, thankful she's letting me touch her. If he'd…

I can't keep thinking of everything that could have gone wrong. Hadley is a trained agent and still couldn't go home alone. She came to a hotel where someone would hear her if she screamed for help.

Lana has to be on the verge of breaking down. She's just a civilian with no training.

"I'm so sorry," I say against her hair.

She hums, scooting back into me.

"Not your fault," she mumbles.

"I knew my job was toxic for relationships, but I naively never thought it'd put you in danger," I say softly, wondering if she's already asleep when she doesn't respond.

She rolls over, facing me, her eyes fighting to stay open.

“If you’re trying to break up with me after I just survived the Boogeyman, I may kick your ass.”

She says the words with dry humor, but I can see the vulnerable look in her eyes.

“I probably should, to be honest. But I’m too selfish to let you go,” I tell her honestly.

She brushes her lips against mine, and she sighs as she snuggles in closer. “I feel the exact same way. I can’t let you go, no matter how much better I feel you deserve.”

I deserve better? She was targeted by a sexual sadist because *of me.* She was attacked because *I* didn’t call the patrol one night to make sure they were in place. She was almost hurt because *I* failed her.

No. She was hurt. Not *almost.*

The bruises on her face and split lip tell that story plain and clear.

My phone chimes as Lana’s breathing evens out, and I listen to her sleep, holding her to me like I’m worried it’s all an illusion. Worried I’ll wake up tomorrow to realize I’ve had a psychotic break and am now living in my head—in a world where Lana survived.

I read the text from Craig.

CRAIG: Your girl fought back hard enough to leave some bruises on him too. Coroner said it couldn’t have been easy, since he was solid muscle. She’s tougher than you think. Stop beating yourself up.

ME: When your girlfriend almost dies because of a serial killer targeting you, then talk to me.

CRAIG: Touché. How is she?

ME: I don’t think it’s sunk in yet. She’s sleeping right now.

CRAIG: BTW, I know you want time off, but…I sort of found something major.

ME: Fuck. What?

My phone rings, but Lana doesn’t even stir. I answer reluctantly.

“So, this little town is covering up the fact there was a serial killer ten years ago. Sexual sadist much like our dearly departed Boogeyman.”

“Too soon,” I state dryly.

“Right. Sorry. But there’s literally not one mention of this ever in their papers.”

“What does the serial killer have to do with anything?”

“That’s the thing, it doesn’t look like they put away the right guy.”

I slowly sit up, careful not to disturb Lana. I’d normally go to another room, but not right now.

“What?”

“The Godfather profiled him to be in his mid-thirties to early forties, and a blue collared worker. But Leonard—yes, I called him first—said that it didn’t make sense. The guy was well organized, and displayed psychopathic tendencies when he killed. The women were brutally assaulted perimortem, antemortem, and postmortem. This guy was seriously into annihilating the body.”

“What’d he do?”

“In short, he carved them up, with a serrated knife, then drilled nails into their foreheads. It started off being mostly after they died. Then it started happening before they were dead. He developed into a true heartless bastard.”

“He’s a psychopath with sadistic tendencies. Not a sexual sadist. Sounds like sex was an afterthought. What does this have to do with our killer? I admit it sounds crazy to have another serial killer from that town, but this is obviously not a copycat situation. Our unsub’s motivation is revenge.”

“That’s what I was saying. I think the Godfather locked up the wrong guy. Serial killers rarely have kids. Psychopaths rarely have kids. Hell, ninety percent of all unsubs are childless because they can’t form healthy relationships long enough to have children. The guy they locked away was a doting father of two kids. Single parent too. His wife died five years earlier in a car accident. His kids were never late to school or neglected in anyway. They argued how impossible it was that he was the killer, claiming he was home with them every night and helping make supper as a family.”

“Why did he get pinned with it then?”

“DNA. They found his jizz at the crime scenes.”

“Way to be professional. But that is pretty incriminating.”

“Or brilliant. Who gets off on controlling a situation?”

“Narcissists. You think the killer was a narcissist?”

“Maybe it’s because of the Boogeyman thing still being so fresh, but yes. I think there was a whatever you said with some narcissism tossed in there. I think the true killer framed our guy. Why else would someone so organized blatantly leave behind DNA? And get this, they found two types of spermicide on each victim.”

“But spermicide is from condoms. If he left behind sperm, then why wear a condom?”

“Sounds like questions that should have been asked ten years ago. Anyway, he had two kids, but they’re no longer in Delaney Grove. There was an accident that happened shortly after their father was found dead in the county holding cell.”

“What?” I ask, confused. “What happened in the holding cell?”

“Yeah. Robert Evans died the day he was convicted. The coroner’s report had three words: He hung himself. Legit, that’s all it says. Then the kids went missing two nights later.”

“Fuuuuck. What happened?”

“I had to dig deep to find the report, because they went to a hospital five towns over. Long way to drive for a doctor when one is right in town. Supposedly there was a car accident, but the boy—seventeen—had severe signs of sexual trauma, and get this…he was castrated.”

I swallow the bile in my throat. “That’s our unsub.”

“You’d think. But unless he’s killing as a zombie, it’s not possible. He died that night in the hospital after somehow managing to drive him and his sister there, despite his injuries. If he drove from Delaney Grove… Hell, I don’t know how he didn’t die from the blood loss alone. The sister was beat to hell and back, stabbed multiple times, face caved in, a huge piece of glass sticking out of her. She had severe signs of sexual trauma too, but she claimed it was a car accident, just like he did. It’s noted they were too scared to speak, and the girl died later that night from complications. That’s all I could charm out of a helpful nurse without a warrant.”

My hand runs over the scar on Lana’s side, even though it’s covered by her clothing. Lana is sleeping hard, not noticing the way I touch her. The glass part strikes a nerve, reminding how she’s actually come close to dying twice now.

I'm going to put her in a bubble.

"That's fucked up. All of it is fucked up. Get those case files. Why have I never heard of this before?"

"It never made headline news because of some terrorist threat that was going on at the same time. If they locked up the wrong guy —"

"Then that means there's another serial killer who has had ten more years to pile up a body count. And it also could have set the dominoes in motion for this revenge killing spree. Small town justice is always an issue. We usually have to transport prisoners ourselves, but….why the kids? How sick is that town?"

"The girl was just sixteen at the time. The boy had a scholarship to a drama program in New York. They were leaving town eventually. I know that town put them in that hospital. That's why they drove far away from it to die. The guy might have survived if he'd stopped sooner. But he didn't. He just drove as far as he could to get them away from Delaney Grove. I can't prove it, but my gut is telling me that's what happened."

"Talk to the town. See what you can figure out."

He grows quiet. For a long time.

"Any chance he won't take innocent bystanders down?"

"The unsub?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Revenge killers always take it too far, killing too many people for the smallest infractions. Don't try to make him a hero. He may kill some monsters, but he'll take out some good people too. And no one has the right to decide who lives or dies."

I'm not entirely sure I'm convinced of that even as the words leave my mouth. If Lana had died at the hands of Plemmons, I would have stalked the world until I found him and put him in the grave.

I don't say that aloud though.

"Right. You're right. I just… These cases are always the hardest."

"You empathize with the killers when you understand their motives. I get it. Just don't forget we're the law. If everyone goes around killing people who've wronged them, then we're suddenly an

extinct species. It's obviously someone close to them. Dig into their pasts. Dig into Lindy's past too. She was friends with the unsub."

"On it. Leonard is working it too now. Elise is at the hotel you guys are at. Apparently everyone is creeped out by their houses right now since Plemmons broke into Lana's and locked Hadley in a closet."

My hand instinctively tightens on Lana's hip, and she stirs in her sleep.

"I'm getting some sleep. I'm taking at least a few days, and I mean it. I need several days of straight sleep."

"And straight sex," he quips.

Rolling my eyes, I hang up, curl up behind Lana, and she shifts in closer subconsciously, still very much asleep. She's not screaming or tossing around. There's a small smile on her lips like all is right with the world.

Thank fuck for that small miracle.

She's so damn strong. I was waiting on her to break, but she's impressing me more by the second.

"I love you," she says, though it's the confession of a sleeping girl.

My core still tightens, and my body feels like electric wires are coursing over the top of my skin.

Leaning down, I kiss her cheek, smiling as she sighs. And even though I'd rather stay awake and keep my eyes on her all night, the long days finally catch up to me, and I fall asleep with her in my arms.

Chapter 5

Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind.
—William Shakespeare

LANA

“You’re serious,” I say to Logan, grinning as he nods, not the least bit unsure of himself.

“Alright then,” I say on a sigh, matching his bet, pushing in all my Tootsie Rolls. “Show me what you got.”

He grins before putting down his cards. “Read em’ and weep. Flush, baby.”

It’s when he waggles his eyebrows that I start laughing, because he’s pretty cute when he’s competitive.

“Before you get too excited…”

I put my cards down, and his face falls instantly, causing me to laugh harder as he stares in disbelief at my royal flush.

“But…but…but…”

I pull the Tootsie rolls toward me, and he suddenly launches himself at me, tackling me to the bed as I laugh. His lips find the curve of my neck, and I grin as he kisses a small spot there.

“Somehow, you’re cheating,” he says against my neck.

“I just have an awesome poker face,” I say, winding my legs around his waist.

For three days, I’ve had him all to myself. I’ve heard that time heals all wounds, but that’s not true. Falling in love? That’s what makes you forget your anger. If it wasn’t for my brother and father, my quest for vengeance would be over.

The media is all over my lawn, which is concerning. Jake had to sneak in and check my secret kill room, making sure no one had tampered with it. Fortunately, no one realizes there’s a room inside a room.

Craig went to my house and retrieved my purse and some clothes for me. He had to take them to work—which Logan got bitched at endlessly for requesting, since people are still giving Mr. Pretty Boy hell for carrying a purse into the building. They even

checked it at the search point, while he waited in the purse line, apparently seething.

I find this hilarious, of course.

Then, he passed it onto Elise, who put it inside her duffel bag—Craig was pissed that idea never occurred to him—and she brought it and my clothes to us, so that the media wouldn't learn where we were.

Also, there were some paparazzi shots of Craig carrying my purse. I really love the things that interest the news some times.

I also hate them. Because that makes moving down my kill list harder.

I'm going to have to speed up the timeline once things settle down. My bruised face was splashed all over the newspaper and such, but everyone wants an interview with the girl who killed a man that managed to elude all types of law enforcement.

So, yeah. I didn't think this all the way through. Being a woman who took down a woman's nightmare has made me an accidental celebrity. Celebrity status is not fun when you're a serial killer who needs a low profile.

Logan has gone Peter Pan, essentially sewing himself to me like an errant shadow these past few days. Not that I'm complaining. I could get used to having him to myself so much.

Logan's phone rings, and he groans, still on top of me, as he reaches over and grabs it. My legs stay wound around his waist, keeping him where he is as he answers.

"Bennett."

His brow furrows, and he lifts off me, frowning. I release my legs from his waist as he stands up completely.

"When?" When he closes his eyes, his lips tensing in a tight line, I know he has to leave. "Yeah. Don't tell them not to touch anything. I'll see if Hadley is up to it and be there as soon as possible."

He gets off his phone, and he blows out a long breath while studying me. "I need to go speak to Hadley and see if she's able to work. We just got two bodies from another one of our killers."

Ice slithers over me. Lawrence and Tyler. They've finally been found. By now they're steaming piles of rot.

“I’ll go talk to her for you,” I tell him, sliding back on the bed. “We sort of bonded with the whole Boogeyman thing.”

He studies me for a long minute. “You sure *you’re* okay? We haven’t really talked about what went down.”

I nod grimly. “It’s not something I’m ready to move on from just yet, but I’m handling it better than I thought I would.”

It’s misleading, but it’s not a lie. Well, not in the conventional sense. I’m handling the ‘aftermath’ better than I thought I would, considering I expected him to be more suspicious. He just seems relieved that I’m not an inconsolable mess.

“You’re amazing,” he says, thumbing my chin before brushing his lips over mine.

“I’d like to talk to Hadley for a second too,” I say, making sure I have time to clear the air with her before she’s alone in a car with him.

“Okay. Yeah. Sure. Just let me know if she’s ready to work, and let me know when you’re finished if so.”

I stand and throw my arms around his neck, dragging him down for a kiss. He holds me to him, his touch so demanding and strong. I love being in his arms, feeling that security that exists within a simple embrace.

“I’ll hurry,” I tell him against his lips.

He grabs my ass, totally groping me, then winks before heading toward the bathroom.

My smile disappears the second he shuts the door.

I’ve been delaying this, worrying about her game. Wondering why she’s not told anyone.

After tugging on some clothes, I check the hallway, always worried about someone finding out where we’re staying. When I see it’s empty, I take quick steps to the end of the hallway, suck in a breath, and knock on her door.

It opens immediately, and I swallow thickly when I realize I’m staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Been expecting you,” Hadley says, peering around me.

She steps back, but her gun stays trained on me as I step inside, closing the door behind me. I keep two feet of distance

between me and the gun, ready to react if I see her trigger finger get itchy.

“I actually expected you a lot sooner than this,” she says, her eyes watching me, as though she’s waiting on an excuse.

Remaining calm, I stare at her with my coldest expression.

“Logan wants to know if you’re up for a case. He’s waiting for your answer.”

“Don’t pretend that’s why you’re here right now,” she says, an edge to her tone.

“Why haven’t you told Logan who I am?”

She slowly backs up, and she gestures for me to sit on the bed closest to the door. I do as the gun-wielding girl silently beckons, sitting down, and she steps back, sitting across from me on the other bed, never lowering her weapon.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” I tell her, and she snorts out a laugh.

“I’ll be the judge of that. And to your other question, it’s because you told the Boogeyman you were killing him to keep Logan safe. You had no idea I was there, obviously, so that wasn’t a show. I believe you actually think you’re in love.”

“I am in love,” I immediately blurt out, then grimace. Didn’t mean to tell her before I told him.

Her eyebrows go up. “Psychopaths can’t love. They can only imitate.”

“You think I’m a psychopath? I mean, I joke that I’m psycho, but I’m not the true definition of the word.”

“Really? I saw a different story.”

I lean forward, and she wraps another hand around the gun handle.

“Easy,” I tell her, holding a hand up. “Just getting comfortable. You’re calling me names without knowing anything about me. A good profiler digs into the past.”

“I’m not a profiler. I’m a forensics expert and a tech genius. I saw what I saw. And I’m telling Logan. I just wanted you to know that first, since you killed my own nightmare and saved me from Plemmons. Call it a courtesy.”

Tears bubble up in my eyes, and the first one spills down my cheek. The air is sucked from my lungs, and my entire body feels

like it's dipped in a vat of ice.

She cocks her head, studying me, and I bat away a tear.

"Then give me a five minute head start," I say quietly.

I start to stand, and she moves with me, keeping her gun trained at my head.

"This gun is the only thing keeping you from killing me right now," she says randomly.

I spin so fast that I hear her hiss out a breath, and I snatch the gun from her hand, then completely disassemble it, all in less than two seconds. I toss the pieces to the bed, feeling broken and defeated.

"No. I'm not killing you because you don't deserve to die," I tell her as she stumbles backwards. "Guns don't scare me."

"But losing Logan does," she says quietly, her throat bobbing.

"There are only two people in my life that I love. One is like a brother. The other is the first person I've ever been in love with. So yes, losing Logan terrifies me."

"Revenge killers have had a psychotic break. They lose sight of their intended goals and their morals get skewed. Revenge becomes their sole focus, and anything or anyone that gets in the way becomes collateral damage in the name of revenge."

"You're profiling me, yet claim not to profile. You should stick to your day job, because you know nothing about me or what I'm capable of."

I turn to leave, and she calls out, "Wait! It was a test."

Confused, I turn around as she stands up, her body shaking a little bit.

"Care if I put my gun back together? Obviously you're quick enough to disarm me, but it still makes me feel better to have it after what I saw you do to Plemmons."

"Just use the one you have under your pillow," I tell her, watching as she pales.

"How'd you—"

"You've gone through a lot in the past week. It'd make sense to sleep with one under your pillow if you need it to feel safe right now. You'd have more than just your service gun. I need at least two guns to feel safe when I'm at my most vulnerable."

She sighs harshly before grabbing the gun out from under her pillow, and I sit back down, facing her, staying at the exact right distance I need to disarm her again if the need arises.

She doesn't point the gun at me this time.

"Start at the beginning. Explain what could have turned you into this," she says, gesturing toward me with her hand.

"They turned me into this," I tell her softly. "They stripped away my soul and left me devoid of any empathy toward the monsters in the world. I'm not a psychopath. I know the truth from the lies. I know the reality from the delusions. In fact, there are no delusions."

"We've found nothing in that town to point to this level of violence."

I lean forward, but this time she doesn't react. "Dig deeper."

"Just tell me. I'm not deciding what to do until you tell me what could turn someone into a killer so cold that you didn't flinch when you killed Plemmons. You wanted to torture him."

"Just like he tortured those women. Don't you think death was simply too easy?"

She stares at me with the eyes of an unscarred soul, despite the scars I know she bears.

"Fine. You want the story; I'll tell you. But you can't tell your team. They have to learn for themselves," I bite out.

"Why?" she asks. "Why don't you want them knowing?"

"Because I want the town to confess to the sins they covered up," I say bitterly.

"Prove to me you're not going to hurt someone innocent, and I'll make that deal. Tell me the story."

"I could have killed you several times, Hadley. From the day you walked into my house and called me out for stealing Kennedy's identity."

"Why did you steal her identity?"

"To survive," I say quietly.

Her lips tighten, but she gestures at me, meaning she wants to hear what I have to say. Needs to know I'm not suffering a psychotic break. Needs to know that despite the brutal way I kill, that I'm in control of my mind.

So I tell her. I start at the beginning, telling her about my father. Tell her about how he died. Tell her about how small town justice works. I tell her every sick, twisted, demented detail until she's pale and grabs the garbage can, heaving into it as her stomach loses the battle of control.

The vomit doesn't bother me, so I keep talking as she retches. I tell her about Marcus, about his beauty, and how they stole it all away. About how they destroyed him in the last few hours of his life.

About how he was so desperate to save my life that he sacrificed his own by driving so far away from Delaney Grove while trying to keep pressure on his wound.

I tell her about Jake, and how his father was my father's lawyer and best friend. We proved over and over that Dad couldn't be the serial killer they charged him to be. I tell her about how they ran Christopher Denver out of town for trying to save an innocent man's life.

I tell her about how Jake left before the town could turn against him, because he needed to be innocent for my sake. For the sake of justice—not just revenge.

I tell her about Lindy, and what Kyle did to her. About how even her husband believed a rapist over his own, terrified wife. I tell her about Diana, and the threats they made toward her son to keep her quiet. I tell her every dark detail that town covered up. Every dirty secret finally gets aired.

And though I feel free, knowing another person now knows the truth, Hadley looks like she may never recover.

At least I spared her one detail.

The name of the man who will die the most painfully.

The man who started the dominoes back then.

We sit silently for several long minutes, and I check my phone, knowing Logan is showing patience, even though he's in a hurry. No texts.

"How did you survive?" she asks in a rasp whisper, tears streaming from her eyes when I look back at her. I have no tears left for this. I've cried them all already.

"No one knows," I say honestly. "But my mother always believed in avenging angels. Marcus's last words to me were that we'd come

back as avenging angels, and we'd make them pay. We'd do it together. But he didn't come back."

My voice breaks on that last bit, but I force the emotion back. "Jake took his place. He loved my brother as more than just a friend, but was always too worried what the town would say or do if they came out about their relationship. It's his deepest regret."

She wipes away more tears, and she runs a hand through her hair.

"I won't tell the team," she finally says. "Unless someone innocent gets caught in the crosshairs, I owe you my silence. You saved the lives of countless children by ending a monster I let go free. You saved women all over, possibly even Logan, and saved me from Plemmons. Until you have that psychotic break, I'll hold my tongue."

That's more than I expected. My entire chest feels like an anvil is being lifted off it.

"I've trained against the psychotic break. They turned me into a shell of a person. Now I use it against them. But my mind? My mind is whole, even if my soul is not."

"How?" she asks, confused. "How do you train against the break?"

"Every form of martial arts I could squeeze in. From Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, to American Karate, to Colombian Grima, to Taekwando, to Bokator, to Krav Maga… You get the idea. I've gotten various black belts in an array of martial arts. Not to mention the weapons' training I've mastered—knife throwing being one. You learn discipline over your mind with each new form of fighting or training. You learn control. It made me stronger mentally, physically, and emotionally."

She wipes away another tear, then sucks in a sharp breath.

"Then let's hope it keeps you sane enough to finish without hurting anyone who doesn't deserve to be hurt. I don't know if I can handle more guilt."

I start to leave, then turn back to face her. "You tried to tell people when you were a child. Those people failed you. *They* failed those kids, and they warped your young, impressionable mind into believing you made it all up. Everything that has happened since then is not your fault. It's on them. They may not deserve to die for

their failures the way he deserved worse than death, but they do deserve to bear that guilt. Call your mother. Give her the burden to bear. Call that therapist, give her all the nasty details of his sins. Call the police station that ignored the cries of a child in pain. Only they deserve the weight of that failure. Not you."

She sucks in a breath as I turn to leave.

"How'd you get that big bastard out of the basement and up that big-ass hill?"

The question is so random that it makes me smile. "I'm stronger than I look," I say, looking over my shoulder. "But it wasn't fucking easy."

Her brittle smile toward the morbid humor is almost like a peace treaty. We're not going to be besties or anything, but we have an understanding.

"Tell Logan I'll be there in five," she says as I walk out.

As soon as I'm out the door, I text Jake.

ME: Calling in twenty. We need to adjust our timeframes. I have some catching up to do.

Chapter 6

To do a great right, do a little wrong.
—William Shakespeare

LOGAN

We can barely stay in the cellar, because the air is perfumed with the scent of two rotting corpses.

"He's getting bolder by killing them two at a time," Elise says, gagging even as she soaks in the clean air from above. "Escalating his torture by making them watch each other."

The bodies are already gone, since they cut them down from the chains once we arrived and saw the scene. But it's still toxic down there. Hadley is with the coroner, possibly carrying around a garbage can to puke in.

The stench is overwhelming.

"All the other's he's left in their homes to be discovered quickly. Why the shift? It's a risk to kidnap one and drive them all the way from New York to West Virginia," Leonard says, battling his own nausea.

It's hard to take in the scene down there, considering it needs to air out for several days before it's tolerable.

"He's chasing his endgame, but it's obvious these two really pissed him off. Yet there were still no signs of rage," I say absently.

Hadley's name flashes on my screen, and I answer the phone, putting it on speaker.

"What do you have?" I ask her.

"Well, their mouths were sewed shut, as you know, but when we opened them, we found the missing penises."

Leonard gags and turns away, and my stomach roils as well.

"That's…definitely an escalation," Elise says, her leg in a brace and her arm in a sling as she struggles with the crutches, still refusing a wheelchair.

"That's not the worst part," Hadley goes on. "I took blood samples from their mouths, and…Tyler was O positive. Lawrence

was AB positive. I found O positive blood in Lawrence's mouth, and AB positive blood in Tyler's."

"Wait, hold up, are you telling me he sewed Tyler's dick into Lawrence's mouth, and vice versa?" Donny asks, turning an alarming shade of pale.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying."

"I can't tell if he's evolving or devolving," Elise gripes.

"He's definitely suffering a psychotic break if he's getting more stuck on the torture," Leonard says with a grimace.

"No," I say thoughtfully. "These two did something together that pissed the unsub off recently. We couldn't find any footage of the unsub, but Tyler's credit card showed a trip to New York recently. Maybe they met to discuss the deaths of the others, even though it hadn't made the news. If the unsub followed them, maybe heard their conversation, it could have led to this double kill and extra layer of torture."

"That's still a psychotic break," Donny argues.

"No, it's not. There has yet to be any rage found with the overkill. The torture is punishment. It's to prolong the deaths. This unsub is targeting the ones who wronged him, and he's punishing them accordingly, at least in his mind. If they crossed a line, he'd punish them more severely than he's been punishing the others."

I pause, letting them soak that in as I get lost in my own thoughts.

"We need more info on that serial killer—Robert Evans," I tell Donny.

Hadley makes a strangled sound, reminding me she's still on the phone.

"You okay, Had?"

"Yep. Yep. Fine," she says quickly.

"See what else you can get from the bodies. Email me the final report, but call me immediately if something else stands out."

"Will do."

She hangs up, and Donny frowns. "She's acting weird."

"Her stepfather abused her as a child, she was convinced it was all in her head, and other kids died after she ran away. Couple that

with the fact she was almost a victim of Plemmons, and she has every right to be weird," I remind him.

"How's Lana holding up?" Craig asks me as I start typing a message into my phone.

"Much better than I could have hoped. She's a hell of a lot tougher than I gave her credit for being."

"That's good. I was actually worried. I remember the first time I had to shoot someone. It's the reason I went into this field—less need for violence."

I nod, understanding. It was hard on me the first two times, even though I saved many by taking down those two monsters. Didn't alleviate the nightmares. Fortunately, Lana's dreams don't seem to be haunted by those memories. She's fucking incredibly strong.

And it makes me love her even more.

"Plan a trip to Delaney Grove. This unsub would be remembered if we painted a picture of the two Evans kids who were killed."

"There was nothing about that ever mentioned in their police reports," Craig says quietly. "This town is trying to act like the Evans family never even existed. The coroner who wrote that bullshit report on Robert Evans is either dead or playing dead. No phone calls have been returned."

"All the more reason to pay a visit in person."

He nods.

"And deliver the profile to the media. Mention there was something traumatic that might have happened to the Evans kids that didn't sit well with a close friend or family member."

"No family left. It was just the three of them. And the only friends were the lawyer dad and his son," Donny points out.

"We'll pay them a visit, but keep looking. Lindy May was a friend. I'm sure there were others we just don't know about."

He nods, and I walk toward my car, texting Lana as I go.

ME: May be late before I get back tonight.

LANA: I may have to take a business trip today. I've been putting it off and piling it all on my partner. Boogeyman is gone, and now so is the threat to my life.

ME: What about the reporters?

LANA: They don't know about the hotel, and my business is in Kentucky. I'm driving there in a rental car just to be safe.

ME: Then I'll miss you. :(

LANA: I'll be back first thing tomorrow. <3

I put my phone away, hating how possessive I feel. I want to keep her locked away and under me every chance I get. It's selfish. It's ridiculous. It's also a little criminal.

"Just got another body from our night stalking killer," Donny says, sighing harshly. "I think these guys get together to kill at the same time just to stretch our resources thin."

He hands me the iPad with the photos, and something catches my eye. It's not the picture, but the notes. Traces of Siberian tiger fur. "I know who the killer is," I tell him, grabbing my phone. "Call the local PD and tell them to pick up the brother of the first victim. I profiled it to be him, but they ruled him out. Now I know it's him. He's a taxidermist for exotic animals."

"Holy shit," Donny hisses, grabbing his phone as I jog to my SUV.

I love it when they make it easy, and I'm one step closer to catching my Delaney Grove killer too.

Hadley calls back just as I reach the SUV, and I answer, wedging the phone between my shoulder and cheek as I crank the car and let Donny get in the passenger seat.

"You found something?"

"Sort of. The coroner found a nail in Lawrence's stomach. I'm not sure what that's about, but I thought it was worth mentioning," she says.

"Yeah, though I don't understand the significance yet, either. We just figured out the night stalking killer, and we're on our way to Pennsylvania right now."

"You remember how you said you met Lana at a coffee shop you don't normally visit?" she asks randomly.

Weird shift in conversation. "Yeah. Why?"

"Tell me again how all that went down."

I snort derisively. “Okay… Craig went to hit on her and she shot him down. I paid for her food and coffee without her knowledge, and then gave her my card when she acted all pissed off that I was doing something nice for no reason other than the fact she amused me. I wasn’t looking for more than that, but I still told her to call me, because after spending those five minutes with her, I wanted to know more. When she finally called, she was…everything I didn’t realize I wanted.”

“So you approached her, and you sort of chased her.”

“It was all me,” I tell her, confused where she’s going with this.

“And the case…You told her Boogeyman details. Do you always share case details?”

“The first share was an accident, but she helped us identify him. I kept her in the loop later because she was a target, same as we’d do for any target. She doesn’t want me sharing details of cases because she doesn’t like me breaking the rules for her. She respects my position, and doesn’t want me getting in trouble.”

“So she never asks for any other case details?” she asks, still dragging me on a confusing trail.

“No. What’s this about?”

“Nothing,” she says on a heavy sigh. “You know I’m suspicious of every girl you date and their motives. Lisa used your name to get a promotion. I still don’t like her.”

That’s hard not to laugh about.

“Look, Lana is great, Hadley. She’s compassionate, understanding, thoughtful, and she really fucking cares. It’s more than I ever thought I’d have with this career choice. She’s also insanely independent and smart. But if she was using me, I’d be aware of it. She has zero interest in the FBI as a career path, even though I think she’d be one hell of a profiler.”

“Right. You’re right. Sorry. I need to go over some more lab stuff. Talk later?”

“Yeah. Let me know if you find anything else weird like a nail in the stomach contents.”

“Nail in the stomach?” Donny asks from beside me.

“Lawrence Martin had one. Why?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “Sounds familiar is all. Just can’t remember where I’ve heard it.”

Donny, like me, was recruited straight out of college. He’s only been in our unit for six years, but he’s been with the FBI for eleven total years.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I tell Hadley.

“Peace out.”

Rolling my eyes, I hang up my phone. At least she’s starting to sound more like herself. Meddling and quirky.

Donny looks lost in thought, and keeps drawing a nail over and over, confusing me. But it’s his thought process when he’s trying to resurrect a memory.

“You think he’s killed before?” I ask him.

“No,” he says immediately. “I think I’ve heard that before though. Nails in the stomach. It’s actually a brutal torture technique. It tears you up as you swallow them, then punctures your stomach lining. Not to mention what happens if you manage to pass them. But just one nail? It means something.”

“Lawrence was the son of a cop in Delaney Grove. But he left that place right around our ten year time frame. Several of them did. They went on to be successful. They never showed any signs of violence in their lives, and all had a healthy conscience, it seems. Never the self-destructive spiral of guilt-wrenched minds.”

“So you think they are being targeted, but didn’t play a part in what happened that night?” he muses.

“I don’t know. I’m just profiling them. It’s what I do.”

He looks down, drawing the nail again, tracing the lines over and over.

We’ll figure him out, and we’ll stop him. It’s what we do.

Eventually, good conquers evil, because evil works alone.

Chapter 7

The devil can cite Scripture for his own purpose.
—William Shakespeare

LANA

In one week, I've marked off two names from my list. We're getting closer. Jake is sweating bullets.

I've sped up the timeline and started hiding the bodies. I've changed my MO. I've also started adding the nails, something I hadn't planned to do until later in the game.

My wax apple also has a lot more nails to mark the new debts I've collected, but we've moved my murder room to Jake's house.

The media are no longer interested in me since Craig delivered the profile of the Scarlet Slayer. Yes, the media named me. Somehow, Jake got me the name he wanted.

It's ironic the media lost interest in the hero side of me in favor of the dark side of me. Just goes to show how twisted and ugly this world can be.

"I hate how fast you're cruising through the names," Jake grumbles as I mark off the latest victim's name.

"Two in a week isn't too fast. I wanted to drag it out, but I'm sick of this. I'm ready for it to be over."

"Because of Logan?" he asks, studying me from his seat.

"Yes and no. I'm tired of being tied to the past and unable to let it go. Aren't you?"

He leans up, perching his elbows on the rails of the chair. "Tell me something, Lana, what do you think happens when this is all over—if we even survive it. Do you think he doesn't find out? Do you ride off into the sunset—the agent and the killer? I want to know what you think for real. I'm good with ending this where we are, and moving on the best we can. I think that's the only way you're going to be able to keep him, if that's your true endgame."

My lip trembles, and I clear my throat. "Stopping now would be wrong. Marcus and Dad…they're still dead and haunted by the way they died."

He leans back, his eyes on me. “Sometimes I think I feel Marcus. I think he’s right here beside us, keeping us from being discovered. Other times I realize it’s ridiculous, and that our luck will eventually run out.”

“Do you want to stop?” I ask quietly, sitting down on the edge of his desk.

“Honestly? No. I want to kill them all for what they did. I want them to suffer. But it’s not fair for me to expect that from you when you seem to finally be healing. And it’s because of Logan you’re healing. He gave you back something you lost.”

“What?” I ask as he moves to the other side of the room, grabbing a drink from the mini-fridge.

“Your heart,” he tells me, looking at me with sadness in his eyes.

“You could move on,” I tell him, shrugging. “Marcus would want that.”

“I’ll stick to my torrid affairs with no emotional connection for now,” he answers with a brittle grin.

“Every time I think I can walk away…that’s the only time I close my eyes and see it happening all over again,” I say to him, sighing long and hard. “Sometimes I think I really did die, and that I’m truly the avenging angel my brother said we’d be together.”

I feel as though I only have one purpose in life.

“Maybe you are,” he agrees. “But maybe you’re allowed to give up vengeance for hope.”

“Then why do I see the nightmares when I consider stopping?”

His lips tense.

“Exactly,” I tell him, motioning around the room. “If my life was spared to right the wrongs of that time, then I won’t be at peace until they’re all dead. Others in that town are suffering. You know it. People just like Lindy who speak out against the ‘justice’ they dole. Women like Diana who has spent the last ten years worried one day her son would turn up dead or missing. People like my father who was killed for crimes he didn’t commit.”

He nods dully, knowing I’m right.

“It’s your choice, Lana. I’m just saying I’m with you regardless of what you choose.”

Tears. I hate tears. But they keep reappearing in my eyes at random.

I go to plop down in his lap, and he wraps his arms around me, pulling to me to him as I hug him. “You know you’re my second favorite brother, right?” I ask him, a joke I’ve said since we were kids.

He laughs against the side of my face. “Yeah. I know. Just like you’re my favorite sister, but only because you’re the only one I have.”

As we both laugh at the small bit of the past we’ve held onto, my mind turns over the past events of the last few days. The newest additions to my string of kills.

“Scream for me,” I tell Anthony, smiling while he bleeds, his cries of agony like sweet music to my ears. But the melody is off key, not hitting the same notes as it usually does.

This normally feels so much better.

“You fucking cunt! I knew you were evil. Just like your father.”

“No. I was sweet,” I tell him, meaning it, as I slowly slide the blade across his chest, leaving a shallow cut there. He gives me nothing more than a wince. “I was naïve. I wasn’t a virgin, but I wasn’t the whore you labeled me. My body was my temple and all that, until you all held me down, took your turns, and left me for dead. You killed Marcus. And he gave his life so that I could come back and pick you off one at a time.”

He screams when the knife slides down, and I taunt him again with the words he once used against me.

“Scream for me, Anthony. Scream loud. No one can hear you. No one cares.”

He does scream. He screams into the vast nothingness of the basement that is completely underground. Really, they make it too easy sometimes.

But I won’t leave him here. No one will ever know I was here at all.

“You’ll burn in hell. What we did was try to destroy the evil in the world. Evil is hard to kill,” he spits out.

“You seriously want to justify what you did as an act of justice? You claim righteousness even after your acts of violence and sin?”

He grins, his mouth a bloody mess. "You can't sin against the devil. You're straight from his loins, just like your father. They'll stop you. Good always triumphs over evil. I'll be avenged."

My lips twitch, amused at how delusional he truly is. "This is good triumphing over evil," I say quietly, watching as his eyes narrow to slits. He hates me considering myself the avenging angel, and I use it to my advantage. "This is your punishment. The act of good prevailing."

"You and your faggot brother were already going to hell. We just sped things along."

"If you're the one in the right, why isn't there some divine intervention saving you?" I ask him, standing slowly. "I was resurrected from the ashes, surviving against all odds. Yet you're down here, suffering for the crimes of your past. Not me."

He opens his mouth, but closes it. "See?" I muse, smirking. "Even the devil can quote Scripture for his own purpose. William Shakespeare, in case you're wondering. But I'm not the devil, Anthony. I'm the angel who has come to take you all to hell."

He finally screams louder than he has before when I take away that last bit of power he had, slicing it off at the base, kicking it away like the trash it is.

"You'll never hurt anyone else," I whisper darkly, drinking in the sounds of his pain, and ignoring the hollowness I feel for the first time ever.

I won't stop.

I can't.

Now to go back to Kentucky.

"I'll tell the next one you said hello," I go on, talking over the sounds of his sobs. "Your bestie is next."

I'm jarred out of the memory by the sound of someone pounding on Jake's door.

"Shit," he hisses, glancing at the monitor beside us.

I scramble off his lap, my heart thumping painfully in my chest as I see Logan knock on the door again. This *cannot* be happening.

"Mr. Denver," Logan says, looking up at the camera Jake never bothered to hide on his front porch. "If you're in there, we'd like to

speak to you."

Donny is beside him, looking all MIB with his glasses on. Logan opens his thingy and flashes his credentials to the camera.

"We knew this would happen," Jake says as I shake with panic.

One man has the power to undo me, and he's about to link me to everything if he finds me here.

"I'm SSA Logan Bennett," Logan goes on, his voice for once not having a calming effect on me. Not even a little bit. I'm full blown crazy panicking now.

"Calm down," Jake says, amused. Freaking amused. This is *not* amusing at all. "Just stay in here and lock the door. They won't have a warrant. And it's all about to be pointless to question me. We're prepared for this. Remember that."

I nod, then swallow hard, trying to lasso my logic back to me and swallow a massive chill pill. We're always careful for me not to be seen when I come over. I park in town, using a rental car, and he picks me up somewhere with no cameras. I ride back in his van—that I call a kidnapper's van—and he parks inside his garage. No one ever sees me.

They won't know I'm here.

So why am I panicking?

Calm and collected, Jake puts several of the kill-list things under the false panel of the floor, then moves the lamp back over it, hiding it from sight. He flips a button, and five of the monitors on the walls sink into the walls as the false panel comes down, concealing them from sight as well.

"Stay here," he repeats, moving out of the room quickly.

Immediately I go and lock the door, and then I listen through the walls like a total creeper. All I need is a glass stuck to my ear.

Nope. I don't look guilty at all.

Chapter 8

The attempt and not the deed confounds us.
—William Shakespeare

LOGAN

“Think he’s just not home?” Donny asks as I pound on the door again.

My eyes rake over the empty driveway, but there’s a sealed garage. His vehicle could be in there.

“The neighbor said he rarely goes anywhere and never has visitors. She said he left this morning, but came back and has been inside ever since.”

Before I can knock again, the door swings open, and I look down, seeing something I really wasn’t expecting.

Jacob Denver is in a wheelchair.

“Sorry,” he tells us, looking at us with confused eyes. “It sometimes takes me a minute to transfer to my chair. How can I help you guys?”

The blinds are all drawn, but surely someone should have mentioned him in a wheelchair. I hate surprises, and I rarely have to deal with them.

Donny’s eyebrows are at his hairline, just as surprised by this turn of events as I am.

“Um…care if we ask you some questions?” I finally manage to get out.

It’s a whole new line of questioning now.

“Sure. Want to come in? The place is a mess, but it’s not as easy to clean as it used to be.”

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

“Thanks,” I say, moving by him as he backs his chair out of the way.

My profiling mind gets to work as Donny types something into his phone. I glance toward the kitchen that is off to the right. All the

countertops are lower than standard, making it more handicap accessible. I didn't notice the ramp by the porch as suspicious, but now I realize I should have. His floors are all level and seamless, not even threshold plates over the connections to rooms.

The cabinets on top in the kitchen have no doors, but all that's there are decorative things. Nothing someone would need to work in a kitchen.

My eyes scan the living room, finding the chair off the side that is at an angle, a remote dangling, as though he had to get help lifting out of it to slide into his wheelchair.

"It's cheating," he says, drawing my attention to him as he gestures to the recliner I was just eyeing. "But it makes life easier."

He's tone and somewhat fit, but I can't see his legs too well in the sweatpants. Hate it is as I do, I discreetly kneel, pretending to adjust my shoe, and my eyes scan the bottoms of his shoes to see perfectly clean soles. They never touch the ground.

Well, fuck. He's really handicapped.

I rise up, and he wheels into the living room.

"What the fuck?" I hiss to Donny.

"Hell if I know. I just texted Alan to find out."

We break apart when Jake turns to look at us, eyeing us like we're idiots. We are idiots, apparently. Someone better tell me why we didn't know this before coming.

"Mind if I asked what happened?" I ask, wondering if this is in any way related to the mystery that is Delaney Grove.

He shrugs. "Motorcycle accident a few years ago. Paralyzed me from the waist down. It's taken some adjusting, but I've managed to move on with my life."

Definitely not our unsub. And his father has had court cases going on during several of the kill times, alibiing out that way. They were our only hopes, and it seemed so easy. Apparently too easy.

There's no way a man in a wheelchair managed to overpower these guys, and do all the things that have been done.

"So why is the FBI knocking on my door and asking questions about my old wreck?" he asks, seeming genuinely confused.

"Any chance you watch the news?" Donny asks him, pocketing his phone.

“Not really,” Jacob tells us, shrugging. “It’s pretty fucking depressing, and I’ve had more of that than I care to reflect on.”

He crosses his hands in his lap. Not once has either of his legs twitched.

It’s a habit, when one is faking something like paralysis, to get twitchy, giving one’s self away. He hasn’t scratched his legs or *anything*.

I know Donny is watching for the same signs I am.

He’s too calm, too disinterested in us.

“So, you came by to ask me if I watch the news?” Jacob asks, looking between us.

He seems to enjoy the off-balance stance we have.

“No,” Donny mumbles.

“Actually, I was wondering if you could shed some light on the Evans family.”

A coldness crosses his gaze, and he looks away.

“You’re welcome to leave at any time.”

I look at Donny, and he looks at me. We stare, both of us confused.

“Mr. Denver, you were friends with them, and we think a serial killer is out trying to avenge their deaths. Even though the reports indicate they died because of a car accident.”

He looks back at us. “Does a car accident usually castrate a man?” he asks incredulously. “Does it leave a girl and boy so broken they drive for towns and towns to seek medical attention?”

“So you do know something?” I ask, leaning closer.

“I know that if someone is out avenging their deaths, I’d like to shake their hand. Marcus was my boyfriend, though I never had the balls to admit it back then. And Victoria was like my little sister. I was seventeen, like Marcus, when they died.”

My lips tense. He’s holding something back.

“Can you give us anything to help us follow up on how they were really killed?” Donny asks.

“Now you want to know? Because back then, when I went to the FBI dude who had wrongly profiled Robert Evans as a serial killer and told him my friends—the two sweetest fucking humans ever—had been killed by the town, he told me it wasn’t his case. To let the

cops do their jobs, and if it was more than a car accident, they'd handle it."

The bitterness in his tone is real, and he definitely doesn't seem to be hiding his anger over it. Which makes him less suspect. Still… my gut is telling me he's somehow involved.

"Who was that?" Donny asks.

"His last name was Bag, and his first name was Douche. Sometimes he went by SSA Johnson."

Donny chokes back a laugh, but I'm not laughing. Johnson was a terrible profiler, tarnished the reputation of the unit so badly that he was promoted. Gotta love fucking politics. As shitty as he was, he was invaluable because of the knowledge he had, so they "promoted" him to a bullshit position and gave him bullshit tasks to keep him under their thumbs.

He's also the Godfather of the department, because he pretty much took profiling in the direction it has grown to be today, made it an actual thing with actual results, no matter how flawed those preliminary results turned out to be.

"You're saying he ignored two dead kids?" Donny asks, no longer laughing as the words catch up to him.

"I'm saying he didn't give a shit. And now I'm putting one foot in front of the other—metaphorically speaking, obviously—to stay out of the past. Now, unless you have something pressing to speak to me about, please leave. I have things to do."

My phone rings as Donny tries to pry more out of him, just something to figure out what really happened.

I see it's Alan calling, and I stand up, walking down the hall a little to answer.

"What the hell?" I hiss.

"Sorry. Sorry. Sooooo sorry. I don't know how I missed it, but I got Donny's text, and yes, Jacob Denver is definitely paralyzed from the waist down. Happened four years ago, to be exact. A drunk driver side-swiped him—hit and run. He was on a motorcycle. He's been in a wheelchair ever since."

Why does this still feel off?

"Thanks. Don't miss anything this big again. We thought we had our unsub."

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just a small mention in his records. It’s not like I can open hospital files, and I wouldn’t have seen it at all if I hadn’t been looking for it.”

“Right. Okay. See if you can dig up any other friends from the past he might have shared with the Evans family. Something is definitely off with him. He never asked who was killed.”

Something topples to the ground from the room I’m standing in front of, and I try to open the locked door, curious as to why it’s locked.

“Can I help you?” Jacob asks, wheeling over to where I’m jiggling the doorknob.

“Why is this locked?” I ask, putting my phone away.

“Um…because it’s my house, and I don’t like people walking into my office. What’s your deal?”

He seems genuinely private, but why lock a door when you live alone unless you’re hiding something?

“Do you care if we look around?” Donny asks him, trying to sound non-imposing.

He studies us critically before finally blowing out a breath and rolling his eyes.

“Fine. Fine. But then you leave and leave me alone. I don’t need you barging into my life and dredging up memories better left forgotten.”

He wheels back to the living room, picks up a set of keys, taking his time to do so, and he comes back, unlocking the door. He backs away, and I open it, looking around. I see the computer screen is blank, and my eyes land on the cracked window in front of where there’s a thing of tacks scattered around on the floor.

“Damn it. Not again,” he groans, wheeling by me to the mess of tacks. “You can go now. I need to clean this up.”

I nod to Donny, and we walk out, leaving him to his task. As soon as we’re outside and the door shuts behind us, I glance over, seeing the cracked window.

“Someone is in there with him,” I say quietly when we reach the street.

“Looks like the wind caught the curtain, and the curtain knocked over the tacks to me.”

“That window was closed, along with the blinds, when we came up. There’s a closet in there. Someone was there.”

“Why didn’t you open the closet?”

“Because whoever it is may be our unsub.”

I pretend as though we’re taking our time to get in the car as Jacob shuts the window and closes the blinds once again. We loiter on the street, while I call Lisa.

“How close are you to Jacob Denver’s address?”

“Elise and I are about five minutes out. Why?”

“Swing by and sit on the house. As soon as we see you in position, we’ll drive off. If he leaves, I want you to call me. If he stays, I want you to watch him. Someone is inside, and it may be our unsub. Use extreme caution.”

“Shit. Got it. You be careful too.”

I start to hang up, when she adds, “And by the way, thank you for the roses. They were beautiful.”

My brow creases in confusion.

“I never sent roses.”

“I mean from the hospital. I got them, and realized I never thanked you for them.”

“Lisa, I never sent roses. At all.”

She grows deadly silent. “So it was him? Plemmons?”

I don’t have time to ask questions about a dead man’s motives. “It may have been. Call the flower company and find out.”

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll see if Hadley can look into it,” she says, distant now.

As I hang up, Donny is smirking. “What?”

“Nothing,” he lies, smirking more.

I glare at him.

“Just wondering what Lisa would do to Lana if she got her hands on her. She’s a typical scorned ex—perfectly okay with the breakup until you finally get a new girlfriend that you seem to be pretty head-over-heels for. Lisa is a bitch. Keep her away from your new girlfriend or she may scratch Lana’s eyes out.”

“Lana’s already been subjected to her, in case you’ve forgotten. Lisa didn’t rattle her.” I sound dismissive, but I’m masking how uncomfortable this conversation is.

“We all know what a bitch Lisa can be, and right now, she’s feeling that jealousy most exes do when their ex finally moves on and exhibits signs of true happiness. She’s got a nasty mouth on her, and she may eventually seek Lana out in an effort to ruin things between you two. Just profiling. It’s what I do.”

Fuck.

“I’ll keep them apart. Lisa will eventually forget it.”

“When she finds someone who makes her happy,” he agrees with a mocking grin. “Should only take a few lifetimes.”

I flip him off as he chuckles, and I glance back toward the closed window. Lisa and Elise appear just down the street, parking at the curb.

Donny and I load into the SUV, and we drive away. It’s no time before Elise texts us, telling us Jacob is on the move, heading in our direction in a white van. She sends the plates too, just so we know we’re tailing the right one.

As soon as the white van passes us, I arch an eyebrow. It looks like any good kidnapper’s van.

The driver’s side and passenger side have windows, but the rest of the van looks like a work van. He does do some tech work, according to his file, so it could possibly be his work van.

Donny and I follow discreetly, while Elise and Lisa watch the house.

“See if you can get a look inside,” I say as Donny puts Lisa on speaker.

“Trying to get a warrant to go in, but the judge says we don’t have enough.”

“Just get a look around,” I say vaguely, hinting for her to break some rules. It’s a fucking serial killer we’re after. Sometimes rules need to be broken.

“Got it.”

“Just don’t be obvious,” Donny says to the phone.

“I’m not an idiot,” Lisa snips.

He hangs up, and I keep a safe tail distance on Jacob. We pull up to the curb as he pulls into a parking spot. It takes a few minutes before his side van door slides open, and I watch as he is lowered down with the wheelchair on the motorized platform.

“That explains the van. It’s handicap accessible,” Donny points out.

Frowning, I watch as he sits with a basketball on his lap, and then we watch as he locks up his van and starts wheeling down the sidewalk.

When he reaches a basketball court full of kids, Donny hisses out a breath. Most of the kids are suffering some sort of disability. A few are amputees, some are in wheelchairs, and some seem to be struggling with other physical issues.

“We’re going to hell,” Donny groans as the kids cheer, and Jacob blows a whistle, tossing the ball at them.

They start playing basketball, and he plays with them, laughing right alongside them, making a difference in their day.

Elise calls me, and I answer. “Nothing is in this house. The office closet is empty too. I’m sealing it back up so he doesn’t know we were ever here.”

“So it’s empty, and this guy is a paraplegic coach helping disabled kids. He survived losing his mother at a young age, his best friend and boyfriend as a teenager, and he’s paralyzed now. Yet he’s the male version of Mother Theresa,” Donny states dryly. “And we’re accusing him of helping a murderer. I repeat: We’re going to hell.”

“Check his van,” I tell him, frustrated. My gut tells me something is up. There was someone in that house, and if he’s not there now, then he’s in the van.

Donny curses before getting out, drawing his weapon as he goes to the back of the van. He reaches out with one hand, testing the door, as I shift my gaze between him and Jacob.

He opens the unlocked door, and I frown. I could have sworn Jacob locked the van.

All that’s in the back of the van is a box marked MEDIA. The entire back is empty other than that.

Donny arches an eyebrow at me, and I wave him back, rolling my eyes. He shuts the doors and gets back in, and we drive away.

“Forget him. Even if he does know who the killer is, there’s no way he’s involved,” Donny says on a sigh.

I drive away, irked. My gut has always been the driving force, and rarely ever do I feel so strongly about something and end up

wrong.

Jacob doesn't even notice us as we pass him. He tosses the ball into the air, getting it to a one-armed little boy on the other end who scores.

By the time I make it back to the office, Hadley is ready to pounce, but I ignore her in favor of moving toward Leonard. "Hey, I need you to pull everything you can find on the Robert Evans case. Let's see if we can start there, and find out what that damn town is hiding. Somehow, it's all linked to that. It's the first domino that set all the others in place."

He nods, gesturing to his laptop.

"Already working on that. There are so many inconsistencies in that file that it's ridiculous. Essentially the only thing that convicted him was the DNA at the crime scenes, and even that seems compromised, due to the poor chain of custody the evidence went through. I'm not sure how he got convicted, other than the fact the judge pretty much ignored all the laws set in place to keep things fair and honest."

"And we know how the Godfather worked things," I add. "See what you can dig up. Find out why the killings stopped, or even if they stopped. If the unsub successfully framed Evans, he may have just moved towns and changed his MO enough to frame someone else."

"On it," Leonard says, going back to work.

I almost run over Hadley when I turn back around.

"Why that look? What'd you find out on Jacob Denver?" she asks me.

She's wringing her hands, anxious for info. I guess we're all in knots.

"Nothing. My gut told me there was more to him, but I was apparently wrong."

"That gut thing gets tricky," she says, frowning. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Hey, Lisa said she was going to have you look in on someone sending her roses from me?"

"They weren't from you," she says immediately.

"I'm aware," I tell her, confused by how odd she's acting.

“I mean, there was never anything to state it was from you. Just a dozen roses sent with no card. I guess she just assumed it was you.”

Shaking my head, I look down at the file in front of me.

“Can I go? I’m exhausted and no new leads have come in. I also sent all the forensics I’ve been able to sift through. Some of the rest of it will need a few days to run through the lab.”

I nod, waving her off, and she practically sprints out.

Can’t say I blame her. I don’t enjoy spending so much time here either. Lana has been away on business most of the week, but I finally get at least a little time to myself with her tonight.

As for this case, Delaney Grove people are going to be the end of me.

Chapter 9

If it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul.
—William Shakespeare

LANA

I hid in a closet from my boyfriend after stupidly spilling a bowl of tacks. I then crawled into a tiny media box in Jake's van, and hid there for an hour while he did his weekly basketball excursion with his kids that I help fund a special program for. I was stuck there because the box wouldn't open from the inside.

The prick did that on purpose to teach me a lesson, and I'll kick his ass later for that.

I'm exhausted and just ready to curl up on the bed until Logan can break away, when I round the hotel hallway and see Hadley glaring daggers at me, waiting by my door.

I wish she'd leave this hotel.

"You!" she hisses.

"What'd I do?" I ask, confused.

"Roses ring a bell?"

I smirk as I push open the door, and she barges by me, ramming her shoulder into mine on the way.

"Want to come in?" I ask dryly.

The door shuts and she whirls around, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

"Don't get cute, Lana. You sent roses to Lisa. I know it was you. You let her think Logan did it, and now that she knows he didn't do it, she's nauseated, certain it was Plemmons."

I guess Hadley's humor is on the fritz, because that shit's funny.

"The Boogeyman is dead, and what makes you think it was me or that those were ever my intentions?" I muse, hiding my smile.

"I know it was you. The roses were paid for with a prepaid Visa. Plemmons was done with Lisa, but she's Logan's ex, and you chose a poor way to fuck with her."

"She actually fucked with me first. I just sent her some roses," I say with a coy grin.

Her face gets redder. “Don’t fuck with my team, Lana. You have too much too lose to play games with us.”

“Us? I’m not playing games with anyone but her, and she started it. She did everything but piss on Logan. And the roses were ages ago. It’s not even a good joke if she doesn’t get it when the guy is still alive. In case you’ve forgotten, I sort of killed him, so she has no reason to be afraid…unless she’s scared of serial killer ghosts.”

I grab a flashlight and shine it under my chin, and Hadley’s eyes narrow to slits. She seriously needs a sense of humor.

“This is crazy stuff. You know that, right?” she snaps.

I roll my eyes, cutting the flashlight off. “No, crazy is being his ex and getting all bitchy toward me. And you said I couldn’t kill anyone who didn’t truly deserve to die. You never said I couldn’t send roses to a girl who was an utter bitch to me.”

“Don’t downplay this,” she hisses. “You sent those roses to terrorize her. Mind fuck her even. The guy carved an actual word into her arm while she was conscious, and he damn near killed her and Elise before Lisa managed to get a few shots off.”

“And missed him,” I remind her. Who can’t shoot a guy that size?

“Grazed him,” she corrects.

“Missed him,” I say again, smirking at the funny little shade of red she continues to turn. “I didn’t miss him. And, again, the guy is dead. The joke isn’t funny now. How ungrateful is she to just now be thanking Logan for the flowers she arrogantly assumed he sent?”

Her mouth opens and closes, and I half wonder if her skull is going to blow off like it does in the cartoons.

“It’s not funny at all! It’s cruel. And wicked. And—”

“Lisa your bestie?”

“No,” she says, frowning.

“Saved your life or something?”

She shakes her head.

“Do you even like her?”

Her eyes narrow, but she doesn’t respond to that question.

“I’ll take that as a no. So why the self-righteous, indignant act over me poking a little fun at a bully bitch? I couldn’t outright put her in her place, so yes, I fucked with her head a little. And it wasn’t even

a good head-fucking because she caught onto the joke too late. No harm. No foul."

"It's the fact you targeted one of our team members, and you don't even realize how sick and twisted your *joke* was."

My smile vanishes. "I could have sent her a pig's heart or something, if you want sick and twisted. I could have sent a bouquet that spelled *KEEP.* I could have sent her the twisted Russian song of the Boogeyman. I sent her roses, Hadley. A tiny little mind fuck, as you like to call it. That's all. I spared her, if you really think about it. We both know I could be a lot colder."

Her look pales a little.

"No," I groan, rolling my eyes. "That was not me threatening to kill her."

She drops to the bed, running a hand through her hair. "This is too much. *You're* too much."

"You're overreacting to some roses. Calm down, Hadley. If you didn't want the truth, you shouldn't have searched for answers."

She looks up, and genuine exhaustion shines in her eyes.

"Logan's morals aren't as skewed as mine, Lana. If you really love him, you'll stop this quest for revenge. Let us try to figure out a way to take the others down. We can—"

"Take down an entire police force? Take down rapists whose word will be against mine? The daughter of a convicted serial killer who was wrongly profiled by one of your own?" I deadpan.

"Logan knows the profile was wrong," she says, shocking me.

She studies my face.

"This is the first you've heard of it, isn't it?"

I nod, slowly lowering myself to the seat.

"You really don't ask him any questions about your case, do you?"

I glare at her this time. "If I wanted to know what you all knew, I'd have Jake hack the cameras. I don't need to use my boyfriend or betray him like that. I hate lying to him as it is."

"No more games on my team members," she says, frustrated.

"Only if she leaves me alone," I tell her, watching her as she thinks that over.

"Nothing so morbid."

I shrug, grinning. “I have a morbid sense of humor. And I’m territorial. At least I didn’t piss in the roses before sending them.”

She studies me; I grin at her.

“You’re so confusing, and I stupidly think you really do love him.”

“I do love him,” I tell her on a long sigh.

“Nice to know.” Logan’s voice has us both screeching, and Hadley actually drops to the floor.

Logan grins at her as she bounces back up to her feet. If he’s grinning, then he missed all the important bits about me being a killing psycho, right?

“How long have you been standing there?!” Hadley demands, looking every bit as guilty as a killer herself.

“Long enough to hear a confession I don’t think I was meant to hear,” he says, his smile turning into a smirk as he looks at me with heat in his eyes.

Yeah, he totally missed the part where I’m a killer. I need to be more cautious.

“Confession?” Hadley asks, all the color draining from her face.

This girl could never be a killer.

“Yeah,” Logan says, his attention focused on me as he stalks forward.

“Logan, this isn’t what it looks like. She—”

Her words thankfully die when Logan grabs me at the waist and pulls me to him, crushing his lips to mine. I almost climb up him, making it easier to kiss him without so many tiptoes and bending getting involved. Hadley makes a strangled sound, and I kiss Logan harder to distract him from the leaky sink she is.

No wonder the Boogeyman duct taped her mouth shut.

“Right,” Hadley says as Logan continues kissing me. “I’ll just go now.”

He doesn’t even acknowledge her as he kisses me harder, pushing me back against the window that overlooks the city. My mouth stays fused to his, needing this so much after the week of little face-to-face time.

“I’ve fucking missed you,” he says against my lips, still kissing me stupid.

I can't even respond, because he doesn't let me break my mouth apart to reciprocate. Instead, he starts tugging my pants down, pushing me harder against the glass.

My fingers find their happy place, digging into his hair, and I shudder in anticipation when he shoves my pants to the floor. Roughly, he breaks the kiss to tear my shirt over my head, as though he's in a hurry to get me as naked as possible.

"I missed you too," I say while I have the chance, but he's all serious, and that heated gaze could scorch a lesser prepared woman.

He strips out of his clothes as I toss away my bra and shimmy out of my underwear. In the time it takes me to do that, he's fully naked and lifting me so fast my breath catches.

My back hits the glass, and my legs go around his shoulders. My eyes screw shut when he puts his face right where I want it, and he latches on to that bundle of nerves he knows how to manipulate too well.

He's more aggressive than usual, almost as though he's punishing me, taking no mercy on me when I whimper and squirm and try to make him bald with my hold on his hair.

My head falls back against the glass as I cry out, already lost in sensation from the masterful mouth he owns. He drops me to the ground in a smooth motion, and spins me to face the glass.

My palms shoot up, catching me before I slam into it, and he lifts my lower half, lining it up so he can thrust in forcefully.

It feels too good, and he bends, kissing my neck with just as much roughness as he's taking my body. "You should have told me first," he says, giving me insight as to why this feels like an incredible punishment fuck.

If these are the repercussions of disappointing him, I'll never be good again.

It'd be nice if this is how he punishes me when or if he ever finds out who I really am.

I hope that day never comes. I'd rather not know what he chooses.

I push my hands harder against the window, and he keeps me lifted from behind so he can control every second of being inside me.

He doesn’t stop until I’m crying out, and his hips thrust in hard one last time before he rocks in a slow circle, his breaths labored as he bends over, resting his forehead on my shoulder. He’s still holding me in place, and I grin against the window.

“I didn’t mean to tell Hadley,” I say, breathless and grinning. “She figured it out on her own.”

He leans forward, kissing my shoulder.

But he doesn’t say it back.

I’m not sure why that makes me feel a little self-conscious, but I try to ignore the seed of doubt that’s been planted.

“You can’t stay gone that long again. You’ve only been in town one day this week,” he says, kissing the column of my throat, running his hands over my body.

“If this is the reward I get, I may not be able to help myself,” I quip, smiling when he releases a rumble of laughter.

He pulls out of me and slaps my ass, and I turn just as he winks. “Get on something nice. I’m taking you out on a real date tonight.”

Grinning like a girl, I rush into the shower. But as soon as I step under the spray, Logan is climbing in with me, his lips finding mine as he pushes me against the wall.

“We can go out tomorrow,” I murmur against his lips, feeling him grin as he slides inside me again.

Just as he starts a steady rhythm, his lips break apart from mine, and he starts kissing his way to my ear.

“I love you too, Lana Myers,” he says so softly.

And in that moment, I’m completely his. There’s no revenge; there are no deaths staining my hands. I’m just a girl in love with a man who’s destined to hate me when he learns the truth.

And it’s devastatingly tragic; more so than any Shakespearian play ever was.

Chapter 10

Expectation is the root of all heartache.
—William Shakespeare

LOGAN

Lana is wrapped around me, sleeping peacefully, when my phone chimes with a series of rapid-fire texts.

Groaning, I turn over and grab my phone. Lana turns with me, sighing in her sleep as she curls into my side.

I kiss her head before I start reading the texts.

AD COLLINS: We have a situation. Contact me immediately.

CRAIG: The fucking Associate Deputy Director just told me to find you and bring you in. Shit has hit the fan.

HADLEY: I just got to work, and the Godfather is here. You better get in here fast.

Cursing, I bail out of bed, leaving Lana to sleep without me. I'm getting sick of this. My schedule has always been hectic, but it seems to be getting worse with so many high profile killers deciding to go on sprees.

Quickly, I get dressed, wondering what in the fuck Johnson is doing on our unit's floor. I scribble a note for Lana, promising her I'll be back as soon as I can, and bail out the door at four in the morning to deal with the shit that has supposedly hit the fan.

By the time I arrive, Johnson is sitting in my fucking office at my motherfucking desk.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? No one is allowed in here unless I grant them access," I snap.

"Lower your tone to your superiors," he growls, glaring at me.

We've never liked each other, in case that isn't apparent.

"Get out of my office, and you're not my superior, SSA Johnson. In case you haven't noticed, I have the same title. And as for your position in the Bureau, it holds no authority over mine."

He slowly stands, straightening his jacket as he does.

"I was just getting caught up on my case."

“Your case?” I ask, gauging him.

He’s more arrogant than usual, and he’s definitely selling some shade to go with that menacing gleam in his eyes.

“Yes. My case. It seems as though you’re digging into case files that are mine, and apparently the director decided I should come investigate this new case you think is linked to my old one.”

“You mean the director caved and let you do whatever you want because you two are golf buddies by day, and swing buddies by night,” I restate, saying what he should have.

His jaw tics. He hates that a room full of profilers never let your secrets die.

“It’s my case.”

“This is my department. In case you’ve forgotten.”

“Well, take it up with the director if you have an issue.”

I point my finger at him. “Get out of my office. I won’t tell you again.”

He smirks, but he strolls by me, acting as though he’s won something. I immediately stalk toward the elevator, when Associate Deputy Director Collins steps out.

“I told you to call me,” he says quietly, his eyes flicking to Johnson as he moves in on one of the vacant offices.

“What’s going on?” I ask again.

He sighs long and hard. “I don’t know. Johnson got a call from someone, and he called me, wanting to know why you were working on one of his old, solved cases. I told him that it overlapped with one of your present cases. Next thing I know, the director is waking me up with a call saying Johnson will be running point on the Scarlet Slayer case.”

“What the actual fuck?” I hiss.

He gestures to my office, and I pass by Hadley who looks furious as she glares at Johnson. She’s never met him before, but he rubs everyone wrong within a matter of moments.

As soon as we’re inside, Collins closes the door.

“Something is going on with all this. First the coroner’s report was pointless on the dead ‘supposed’ serial killer that Johnson profiled. The profile is full of holes and inconsistencies, just like the case against Evans was. Then there’s a revenge killer who is out

there doling out death sentences for men who used to live in this town. The oldest victim would have been nineteen—as far as we know so far—and the youngest would have been fifteen," I tell him, furious right now.

He drops to a chair, his face as white as his shirt. But I'm not finished.

"Then Johnson shows up, bullying his way into impeding this investigation. What's really going on here, Collins? Did he have something to do with an innocent man being killed? Did he intentionally fuck up the profile to make it fit Robert Evans? I can't find much on that case here. We've been scraping together what we can."

He shakes his head. "I remember the Evans case. It got the least publicity because of terrorist threats going on at the same time, or something like that. I remember the case because I went to that town when several of the unit members said they were done; hell, half of them quit, retired, or transferred, which is why so many slots opened up at once. Johnson was left behind on his own to finish the case. Then he came home. That trial happened so fast. I've never seen a trial come and go faster than that one."

He pauses, sucking in a sharp breath as he stares at nothing. Finally, he continues.

"Next thing I know, what little bit of the unit that remained just up and quit. Johnson was on the market to be replaced after that, even though I don't know why. They hired a bunch in, but you were the one they eyed the longest. You came three years after that mess. They finally had the right replacement, and they got rid of him as soon as you were ready."

"Yet now the director sends him back?"

"He's sending him back to clean up a mess, is what it sounds like."

"He's awfully smug for someone trying to cover his ass," I bite out.

"He's not covering his ass. He's covering the director's. Director McEvoy has been on the verge of being replaced for six months now. I've already been approached several times about it by very high ranking officials. They want me in that chair and him gone."

I drop back to my desk, leaning against it as he sits in one of the two chairs by the door.

“So what do we do?”

“You’re the profiler. Tell me what gets us out of this situation but offers the best possible resolution to a very dangerous serial killer.”

I think it over, weighing the facts and probably outcomes.

“Johnson will profile this guy as a sadist, regardless of all the new information we’ve discovered. He’ll change the game, rewrite the evidence to fit his profile. Then he’ll single out someone who doesn’t fit the true profile at all. Half of his cases were overturned because of that.”

“I’m well aware of his shortcomings,” Collins states dryly.

“If he falsified DNA evidence…” I let the words trail off.

“Then he’ll be locked away,” Collins promises.

I trust him. Always have. He’s not involved in the politics. He’s old school FBI—the kind who joined the Bureau in the quest for the truth and justice.

“So I work the case on the side, running it through my team. I’m still their boss. Any backlash will fall on me, understood? I don’t want their careers jeopardized over any of this.”

“While you’re doing that, I’ll assemble a committee meeting to see if I can overturn this ludicrous ruling. It might take me a week or more, but I’ll get him out of your hair if there’s any way possible,” he offers.

“Tell me it’s on me and not my team,” I repeat, staring him down.

“As you wish,” he says on a sigh. “Hopefully it’ll never come down to that.”

“He’s going to demand we go to Delaney Grove in the next day or so,” I go on. “He’ll want to get ahead of the endgame regardless of the fact the kills seem to be surrounding us right now instead of the town in question. It might work out in our favor though, because we might finally get some answers about what happened there.”

I look up, seeing through my window as Johnson walks toward the center of the room, touching my motherfucking board and erasing crucial profiling information.

“I hate that son of a bitch,” I say under my breath.

Collins turns, blowing out a frustrated breath. “Don’t we all.”

I walk out, listening to what Johnson is instructing half my team to do. Elise and Lisa aren't here yet, but Donny's eyes meet mine, as though he's catching on to how fucked up this is.

"We'll be going to Delaney Grove in two days. Pack a bag. I've called the sheriff, and he's invited us in to help him with this," Johnson says.

"Funny," Craig drawls. "He wanted to act like nothing was going wrong when we spoke to him."

Johnson eyes Craig. "You just worry about smiling for the cameras and leave the real work to us."

Craig's jaw tics, and he glares over at me. I smirk, letting him know I'm up to no good, and he restrains his own smirk in return.

"You have a sadist," Johnson says predictably. "This sadist is targeting alpha males."

Donny turns away, probably choking on how inaccurate that profile is. No one argues. Everyone has heard of Johnson's reputation. He's not a team player who listens or even adjusts. He's a domineering prick who thinks his word is gospel.

A true narcissist.

"Kyle Davenport has been put into protective custody by the local PD," he goes on, finally saying something that surprises me.

"Who is that?" Donny asks.

Hadley lowers to her seat, seeming too quiet for her.

"He's the sheriff's son. I've narrowed down the victimology, and he, along with a couple others, fit the profile. But he's more alpha than the others, so we believe he's the next target."

Donny comes to my side as Johnson begins spewing his own praises about how many sadists he's caught and how easy it is to catch them when they have a specific victim type.

"This is bullshit," he growls. "There's no way he narrowed down the victimology to one fucking possible with as little as we've had to go on."

I rub my chin, staring ahead. "Unless he knows what happened ten years ago."

He jerks his head to me. "Then he'd know this is a revenge killer and not a sadist."

I nod. “But if you fucked something up so bad that you had the director himself insert you into the current investigation, the last thing you’d want to do is profile a revenge killer.”

His eyes widen, then narrow to slits in the next second. “That motherfucker really does know what happened. He could be fired and possibly even serve time for impeding an investigation like this.”

“I’m aware,” I tell him. “Which is why I’m listening to everything he’s saying. I’m building my own subcommittee case. For now, work our case. I’m your boss. He’s not. Follow my orders. Not his. And when it comes down to it, it’ll fall back on me if this goes south.”

“I couldn’t care less if they fire me over this prick, Logan. Don’t take him on alone. He has too many high-ranking friends.”

“Yeah, but I prefer to deal with evidence,” I tell him, clapping his shoulder on my way back to my office.

I’m seated for a matter of moments before Hadley walks in.

“You should bring Lana to Delaney Grove with us,” she says with no emotion.

My eyebrows hit my hairline. “What? Why the hell would I do that?”

“Well, for one, we’ll be gone for a while, if this guy isn’t any closer to his endgame. And for two, Lana is still struggling to be alone at night. She told me,” she says, shrugging.

I tense. Lana hasn’t said anything like that to me.

“Why wouldn’t she tell me that?”

She shrugs, taking a seat. “She’s tough. She doesn’t want you to know she’s struggling, because you’ve been proud of how tough she is.”

I groan, running a hand through my hair. Of course she’s struggling. A man broke into her house and tried to kill her. We’ve been staying in a hotel since it happened.

“She should stay with a friend. It’s too dangerous to take her to Delaney Grove. Not to mention, against the rules.”

“I’d agree with all of that, but we’re looking for a revenge killer, even though that dickhead out there says otherwise. You know a revenge killer doesn’t target someone unless they get in the way. She’ll be safe. As for the rules, the Bureau doesn’t have any say over where civilians do or don’t go. It’s a free country, after all.”

Her lips twitch with amusement.

“And it’d piss that fucknut off if you brought her and used that line,” she adds.

Knowingly taking Lana into a town where a serial killer plans to eventually show up…it’s insanely irresponsible and dangerous.

“Please, Logan. She could definitely stand to be around people, and you’re really all she has.”

Cursing, I run a hand through my hair.

“If the unsub thinks we’re getting too close, he could target her to get to me. It’s too risky.”

“You know that’s bullshit,” she fires off immediately. “If this guy wants to come after you, he’ll come after *you.* He’s not afraid or a coward like Plemmons who preyed on the weak. He’s not a sexual sadist with an interest in pretty brunettes. You’re not thinking logically.”

I look at her like she’s lost her damn mind. “I’m not thinking logically?” I ask incredulously. “You’re asking me to bring an untrained civilian into the field after she was recently attacked once already because of my job.”

She leans forward, determination in her eyes. “Lana saved herself from Plemmons. She saved me. You’re not bringing her into the field; she’ll be locked away nice and safe in whatever place we’re going to be in. There aren’t any hotels in Delaney Grove, so I’m about to talk to Craig to find out where exactly we’ll be tucked in.”

As if cued, there’s a knock at the door, and Craig walks in before I can invite him.

“Hey, so, care to explain to me what the fucking hell is going on?” Craig asks as he steps inside and closes the door.

“I’m currently telling him to bring Lana along because she doesn’t feel safe being by herself. She even hates traveling right now because she feels exposed. Talked to her about it myself,” Hadley quickly inserts.

His eyebrows go up. “That’s completely understandable after what she suffered. She should come.”

Hadley beams at me like a kid who just won the argument over who gets the candy. “You too? You realize how dangerous that could be.”

He bats his hand. “A revenge killer who has been targeting strong, fit males is not going after a helpless woman. If he wants someone on our team, he’ll come directly after us. He’s not afraid.”

“Exactly what I said,” Hadley gloats.

“Neither of you are profilers,” I point out.

“Which is why we shouldn’t be so much better at this than you,” Hadley says on a long, breathy sigh, mocking me with her eyes.

“Why is this so important to you? First you don’t trust her, and now you want her with us?”

Her lips tense. “Things change. Pictures happen. Then things change real fast when shit hits the fan and suddenly SSA Prick Meister walks in and takes over like he’s trying to hide something.”

“What does that even mean?” I groan.

“Lana will be safer with us than on her own right now,” Craig tells me, the two of them doubling up.

Donny walks in, and I glare at him as he shuts the door.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but we need to figure out our next step and soon. He’s on the phone with the sheriff now, but instead of delivering the profile out in the open, he shut the door and said it was a private matter.”

He looks between the three of us.

“What?” he asks, confused at the tension.

“They think Lana should come with us, because she doesn’t feel safe alone right now.”

“That’s very understandable. You should bring her. It’s not like she’ll be in any danger, considering he’d just come after one of us directly if he thought we were in the way,” Donny says, causing Craig *and* Hadley to smirk victoriously at me.

“Un-fucking-believable.”

“Besides,” Donny goes on, ignoring my comment, “it’ll piss off Captain Douchewad something fierce.”

Chapter 11

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
—William Shakespeare

LANA

Shakespeare was one of the few philosophers who believed in revenge. Then again, he was a romantic. Romantics always believe in revenge, because romantics love harder, suffer loss more painfully, and hold onto a grudge that has shattered their hearts. Their hearts are of the greatest importance, above all else—body, soul, or mind.

My body grew stronger and my mind turned calculated when I lost my soul to avenge my heart.

I guess that makes me a romantic.

I'm in the middle of texting Jake, who is also a romantic, when there's a knock at the door, interrupting me.

Logan wouldn't knock.

Warily, I go to the peephole, and I spot a very distinguishable redhead with her back turned.

I open the door, wondering what she's come to say this time. But when she turns, there are tears in her eyes.

She walks by me, shouldering her way in.

The burden of my secret is apparently weighing on her too much. Fuck.

I'm so close now.

Silently, I shut the door, and she takes a seat on the bed, while I lean against the door.

"Sixty-nine pictures and seventy nails," she says, confusing me for a brief second. "Something tells me you're not one to miscount."

Realizing her meaning, I take a seat in the corner.

"This is about Ferguson?"

"I finally had the courage to look at the file today. I got up early to go in and look at it, then some things happened afterwards that

we need to talk about. The point is, there were seventy nails and sixty-nine pictures. What'd you do with the other picture, Lana?"

My lips tense. She knows it was her picture I took. I don't know how she's going to react now.

"I burned it."

"Why?" she asks without a flicker of emotion.

"Because the mind is a fragile thing. Your friends would have seen it; you'd have seen it too. It would have been the thing that broke you. Hearing it existed isn't as critical as *seeing* yourself as that child who was exposed and vulnerable, then knowing proof existed all along. Hearing it is processed differently than seeing it. The mind is more delicate to sight than it is to sound. I didn't want you broken. I didn't want him winning from the grave. So I burned it."

She wipes away the few tears that have managed to trickle down her face.

"I'm with you," she says quietly. "Whatever you need, I'm with you."

That…confuses me even more.

"Why?"

"Because a psychopath wouldn't care about someone, who by my own admission, has made your plans so much more difficult. You show genuine compassion. It's an obvious confliction with a psychopathic personality."

"I have psychopathic tendencies, but I'm not a psychopath," I say on a sigh. "I've told you this."

"Yeah, but I didn't believe it until I saw sixty-nine pictures and seventy nails. Now you have my trust that you're really just someone who is avenging only the wrongs. And if anyone can relate to needing to kill the demons in the world that won't die otherwise, I can."

I blow out a weary breath, not realizing until this moment how much her indecision has been bearing down on me.

The string has been glued into place now, no longer threatening to be the unravelling of this entire thing.

"Then SSA Miller Johnson shows up today, as if more of a sign was needed."

Just his name has my back stiffening, and she notices it.

“He covered this up, didn’t he?” she asks, ciphering my reaction too well.

“He did more than cover it up.”

“What else did you not tell me?”

“I told you everything that happened before. I didn’t tell you anything that happened after. You’ll need to learn it with the rest of your team.”

“Why? Why not just tell the story to them in a note or something?”

I lean forward. “The mind is a fragile and delicate thing,” I repeat. “Hearing it from a letter or from a killer has less of an impact than hearing it from someone who has been dying on the inside from holding in the secret. Several people know the story, Hadley. Find one to tell it. Not to mention, I need that town to feel haunted. The longer it takes for the story to be told, the more questions you and your team will ask. And the more people will start to tremble in fear.”

“You want that fear,” she states, studying me.

“I can’t kill them all,” I say with a shrug. “But terrorizing them will remind them to never hold their silence again when the innocent are screaming for help.”

She nods once, trying not to show how uneasy that thought makes her. She’ll change her mind when they finally get to Delaney Grove.

“I convinced Logan to ask you to come to Delaney Grove with us,” she says, shocking me.

“What?”

“You can’t just walk around a town and not be noticed by our team. Your face was all over the news after the brush with the Boogeyman. People will know you, and it’ll be suspicious if you’re in town and you’re not with him.”

I had thought of that, but was just going to show up and surprise Logan.

“He’ll be out a lot, working on the case. We’re apparently staying in cabins the sheriff rents out.”

My stomach twists. “Those cabins are at the edge of the town, right against the woods. If he thinks you’re getting too close to

uncovering all they did, he'll come after one of you and try to pin it on me. Well, on the other me," I tell her.

"We're smarter than that. We'll know if it's the Scarlett Slayer. And no one from our team will die. I'll make sure of it somehow, even if I have to hack all the feeds from the town cameras and watch continuously, living on coffee to stay awake."

"There aren't any cameras."

She shakes her head. "There has to be some."

"You're right. There are some. They all face parking lots and the insides of stores. There are no cameras anywhere else. The streets have zero visibility from those few camera angles. Trust me. I've studied this town since I decided what I had to do."

She slinks back.

"Why no cameras?"

"Because the mind is a fragile thing," I say once again. "It's easier to pretend the words you hear are just rumors or lies. It's not so easy to ignore something you can see. And the sheriff has plenty he doesn't want anyone to see."

She releases a shaky breath.

"Was the sheriff the man who killed those women? The ones your father was framed for?" she asks me, and my stomach clenches.

Before I can answer, Logan steps in, pausing when he sees us. "You already told her?" he asks, narrowing his eyes at Hadley.

Unlike the last time we were in this situation, Hadley doesn't turn into a babbling fool. She flashes him a taunting grin. "Maybe."

Logan rolls his eyes, then he faces me, and a look softens his gaze.

"I'm on my way to deal with a few things, but you're okay with going? You'd have to stay in at night. You'll feel more like a prisoner, but I'll be able to come see you more."

Why does he look like he's so worried about me?

I flash a look to Hadley, but she blinks innocently at me. My gaze returns to Logan.

"I'd rather be with you than be here without you. You could be gone a while, or so Hadley says."

He nods grimly, and I stand as he starts walking toward me. As soon as he reaches me, he wraps his arms around me, holding me as though he feels I need comfort. I hug him back, glancing past his bicep to see Hadley smirking at me.

What's going on?

"You should have told me you didn't like being alone right now. You're still going to be alone there too, though. I don't really know what to do," he says, sounding truly guilt-ridden and exhausted.

I glare at Hadley, who merely beams at me.

"I'll be okay," I assure him, hugging him tighter, plotting the ways I'm going to hurt Hadley. "Promise."

He pulls back, lifting my chin so he can see into my eyes. I feel like I'm playing him, and I hate that.

"Get packed. We're leaving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Hadley asks as my eyes widen. "I thought we had a few days."

"SSA Johnson decided we should leave sooner after he got off the phone with the sheriff. Maybe we'll get some answers when we get there," Logan tells her. "Go pack. Give us a minute."

Hadley climbs off the bed, and I try not to curse the day she played this part. How am I going to slip away and kill two more people before returning to town?

They still haven't found Kevin or Anthony.

I guess I'll have to pick one and save the other for another day. Morgan was worse than Jason. Jason will die when the time comes. Just not in the order I planned.

"If we're leaving tomorrow, I should go get some things from my house that I need. I also need to speak with my partner and get some business things in order. I should be back tonight," I say, letting him hold me closer.

"You really should have told me you were struggling. And I should have noticed. I'm a profiler, for fuck's sake. It's my job to see things like that."

I'm killing Hadley. No, not literally. Well, maybe a little.

I hug him closer, kissing his chest through his shirt. He smells so damn good.

His blond hair is always tousled these days, mostly from the way he'll run his hand through it when he's frustrated. It's a tell I've noticed about him.

"Logan, I'm fine. I really am," I say, soothing his guilt. Regardless of her intentions, Hadley had no right to make him feel guilty, and it really pisses me off.

He runs his lips over my forehead, and I lean against him, soaking in that warmth he seems to radiate. It always feels like he's sharing his soul with mine, helping it be restored, whenever he holds me like this.

He did what no one else has been able to do in ten years—he made me start healing.

I'll die before I let anything happen to him, and I won't leave him alone in that town, unguarded against dangers he doesn't know exist. He hasn't yet seen the depravity, and won't believe it. Not yet. Not until he's reached the point of being desperate for answers.

That's when it'll register the most. That's when it'll hit home with a knockout swing instead of a simple jab to the stomach.

"I really do have to get back, but get packed. I'll probably be back late, but call me if you need me, and I'll be here as fast as I can," he says softly.

I kiss him to shut him up, letting him feel how good he makes me feel. I kiss him for so many reasons, all of them tangled around one simple, innocuous little four-letter-word that holds more power than I ever imagined.

I now know why my father could never move on after my mother's death.

He was a romantic.

And a true romantic would never recover from losing his love.

Logan's hands slide down to my ass, but before we can get things going, his phone rings. Groaning, he looks down at the screen and rolls his eyes.

"One more reason to hate this son of a bitch," he says, confusing me before he brings his phone up and answers. "SSA Johnson, miss me already?"

I force my body not to tense upon hearing that name. I force myself to keep my face hidden to hide any micro-expressions that

might give me away. I continue to kiss his chest, and his free hand strokes my back affectionately, a gesture absent of thought and packed full of feeling.

It's become natural to him to touch me and hold me, to comfort me even when I don't need it. I never thought I'd have that easiness with anyone. I never thought anyone like him even existed.

"What I do doesn't concern you, SSA Johnson," Logan says curtly, a smirk etching his lips. "Don't forget you're no longer my boss."

My stomach tilts, but then I remember he's only been with the FBI for seven years. He wasn't involved.

I relax again.

"I'll let you know when I'm back in. I'm about two inches taller than you with dirty-blond hair. I'm hard to miss."

I grin into his chest, not letting him see it. I love that he's not a sheep like the others were.

Even though I still hear someone talking, he hangs up his phone, and I continue to hide my smile. Logan's arms go back to embracing me, and he holds me for a moment longer.

"Can I ask you something?" he says quietly.

"Yeah."

"Why don't you ever speak of your past? I keep waiting on you to open up, but I'm worried you're going to keep shutting me out if I just let it go."

My blood chills in my veins. "Not now. Not today. Not like this," I say hoarsely. "But one day, I can promise you'll know everything."

And I hope against razor sharp odds that he'll still love me when he does.

He squeezes me tighter, and I ignore the pang in my chest.

"I need to get back. One of the guys may kill Johnson if I don't come to run interference."

I realize I may need to ask questions, to appear as though I don't know anything and seem suspicious and all that.

"Johnson?" I muse, playing coy as he sighs and pulls away.

He kisses me swiftly, careful not to linger, knowing it will escalate quickly if he does. As he walks back toward the door, he

says, “Long fucking story. I may get to finally have more time to spend with you when this case is over.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, genuinely confused.

He turns and gives me a grim smile. “Going against Johnson to keep him from covering something up will probably cost me my career.”

With that, he disappears out the door, leaving that cliffhanger behind like it’s okay to do.

I have someone to kill much quicker than I intended, so I hurry up and get changed, pulling on some tennis shoes I’ll replace with my big boots soon—if I have to.

I charge down to Hadley’s room and bang on the door, and she swings it open, smiling at me.

“What did you tell Logan?” I hiss, stepping into her room.

“That you were struggling with the whole Boogeyman trauma. It was the easiest way to get him to ask you to come along.”

I glare at her. “I’m not struggling.”

“Yeah, and a normal girl would be. Hell, I’m still scared to go home and sleep in my house, and it wasn’t even my house he broke into. I still feel violated.”

“He feels guilty now. I haven’t faked struggling because I don’t want him feeling guilty. I’d rather endure suspicion than hurt him by making him carry an unnecessary burden.”

Her smile falls. “I didn’t mean to do that,” she says seriously. “Shit.”

Rolling my shoulders back, I check the time on my phone. “I have something to do, and when I get back, you’re going to explain why Logan’s career may be in jeopardy.”

Her lips turn into a thin line, meaning she does know.

I decide killing Morgan can wait a few more minutes.

“What?”

“Miller Johnson is the Godfather of the unit. That sort of infamy has granted him some extra juice with some higher-ups. They wouldn’t fire him when he fucked up so much, but they did move him to another department. The director is bypassing tons of protocols to blatantly have him continue to cover up whatever happened in your

town. But if Logan doesn't play ball, he's going against a lot of very high-ranking officials who will destroy his career with the FBI."

I've always hated corruption. It's why I started this journey. No one would do anything.

No one but me.

"You can't go killing off every member of the FBI who would go against him," Hadley immediately points out after studying my face.

I don't see why not.

"Sure I can't," I say patronizingly.

I start to leave, but she grabs my elbow. My eyes drop to the contact, and she releases me immediately, some of her fear of me still present.

My eyes meet hers. "What happens when this is all over?" she asks timidly.

"In a perfect world, Logan never knows this side of me. In a more perfect world, Logan learns the truth but understands all of this, despite the fact his moral compass isn't skewed like mine. But in reality, he may be the one to put me away, because I'd never hurt him, Hadley."

Her eyes continue searching mine, like she's actually looking for something in particular.

"The research shows that almost all revenge serials die at the end of their crusade, Lana. Usually suicide by cop, or taken down by cops to save lives, because the revenge is all they focus on."

"I'm aware of the statistics," I tell her, keeping my tone and expression devoid of all emotion.

"Don't you dare make him the one to have to do it if that's your endgame. Do you hear me? I'll do it myself before I make him have to live with that," she warns, reminding me which side of the law she's used to standing on.

"I'd kill myself before I made him do it," I say in a rasp tone I can't mask.

She clears her throat.

"But that's not your goal? To die and immortalize your message?"

I shake my head slowly, unsure of what I should say.

She visibly relaxes.

“You should know something before going into the pits of hell,” I say, regarding her, watching as her loyalties truly shift to me.

“What?”

“The sheriff? He owns *everything* in the entire county. You want cable? You can only get it from the local provider—his business. You want internet? He owns the only local provider, and no ‘outsiders’ are allowed to do business there. It gets nasty when they try. You want water? It’s *his* reservoir that provides it; not the city’s. Not the county’s either. You want food? He owns every grocery store in the county. You want gas? Well, you get the idea. He also owns the hospitals in the county. Hence the reason my brother got us the fuck out of that county, knowing we’d die if it took too long, or die if we stayed in Delaney County. The county is named *after* Delaney Grove. He had it changed the day he took office, went through all the proper channels to make it official.”

“So you’re saying he holds a monopoly on basically everything but the air, and no one has stopped it?” she asks incredulously.

“I’m saying he has friends up high too, and he makes those friends a lot of money. It’s not just Delaney, Hadley. I just know this one personally. He has his hands in every little pot there is. He’s their boss and their sheriff. To them, he’s untouchable. You won’t find many to turn against him because of that. Especially since he boasts righteousness to cover his sins.”

“Why Delaney?” she asks, confused.

“His ancestors were the original settlers there. His last name might be Cannon, but he came from the most influential originals there were. And he uses that to his advantage, wants to remind everyone how deep his roots are when they stand against him. And Kyle? Kyle’s the monster he created in his image.”

She looks thoughtful for a moment. “Why is Kyle’s last name Davenport instead of Cannon?”

I cock my head. “Because the sheriff *wouldn’t* ever give Kyle his name. Even his son wasn’t good enough. Only one person ever was.”

“Who?” she asks as I turn, heading toward the door.

“A girl,” I say, looking back as my feet pause. “His daughter. She’s the reason my father was convicted.”

“Why?”
“You’ll just have to see, Agent Hadley.”
I turn again, finally leaving as she huffs out a frustrated breath.
“Where are you going?” she asks as I jerk open the door.
“To buy some lube.”
“Too much information,” she grumbles as I walk out.

Chapter 12

Though she may be little, she is fierce.
—William Shakespeare

LANA

I stare at my future, knowing how bleak it is. And I worry. I worry for my children. What happens to them? They've already lost their mother, and now the sins of another have landed in my lap, destroying what's left of our family with all the dark lies and insinuations.

They'll become outcasts. My name will bring them harm, I fear. My daughter is fierce, constantly fighting for me. My son is fragile right now, barely holding it together.

I worry the most about Victoria. My son will grieve me, but he will recover. My daughter will never stop fighting for me. That could put her in danger. It's obvious I'm supposed to take the fall for this; I just don't understand why.

Why is any of this happening? Why is this happening to us? Haven't we suffered enough?

If I could end my life and spare them the rest of this trial, I would.

But if I do that, then I'm teaching them to give up. I'm setting a precedent my wife would never approve of.

So I'll fight. I'll pray. And I'll hope against all hope that the truth prevails.

For the sake of my children, I'll fight.

I put the journal away, sliding it into my bag just as the sun sets. Any time I need a reminder of why it's important to always fight, I read the journal of a man who had no choice but to fight. To fight for his kids.

To fight for us.

"Lana, you there?" Jake asks, annoyed as I wedge the phone between my shoulder and cheek.

"Still here," I tell him.

“I don’t like this. I haven’t even installed any cameras in Morgan’s house, and he teaches a MMA class for fuck’s sake. You’ll be going in blind with a guy who knows how to fight.”

“They all know how to fight,” I say carelessly.

“Not like him. You know it. You’re rushing this, getting too brave. You’ve reached the point where you think you’re indestructible. We talked about this. We agreed you’d let me pull you back a little if you started to develop that complex.”

He’s frustrated, and I understand. The second I fell for Logan, all our plans became five times more complicated and seven times more fucked up. Not to mention rushed and sloppy.

“I have to be there tomorrow. Morgan has to die tonight. I’m not leaving behind two to run off once they hear what I’ve done to that town. It’ll be hard to kill them afterwards. Well, hard to kill both and not have immediate FBI attention.”

“Damn it, Lana. Let me handle it.”

“No,” I say immediately. “The Scarlet Slayer—as you named her—can’t be in two places at once, or they’ll know I have a partner. It’ll ruin the whole thing. That town once called me the devil’s spawn—and they meant it, Jake. They truly believe that. They’ll believe in spirits and demons coming back to reap their souls when I’m done. I can’t scare the hell out of them without your compliance.”

He curses, groaning. “Fine. Fuck. Fine. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Leave your phone on. If you get in trouble, I’ll hear it and come in, armed.”

“I can take him,” I promise.

“You’ve gotten too cocky.”

“You’ve lost too much faith in me,” I say with a smile.

“Never. I just don’t want to lose my sister to one of them because she got careless,” he retorts.

“At least we don’t have to risk spending time in the house to remove the cameras this way.”

“Still can’t believe they haven’t figured out you’ve been watching them. The FBI, I mean.”

“Two tiny holes in the walls at random isn’t enough for them to suspect your mini cams being installed, considering the NSA is the only who is supposed to have that technology.”

“They shouldn’t be so easy to hack if they wanted to keep that technology a secret.”

I roll my eyes, grinning. “Now who’s cocky?”

He mutters a very unflattering word to describe me, and I grin broader.

“You know the worst thing that could happen isn’t just death here, Lana. If he overpowers you…You’ve studied his past just like I have. You’re not the only girl he’s hurt.”

My smile disappears as icy fury washes over me. “I’m aware. Just like I know his father is friends with the governor, and all the accusations disappear when the women turn into lying whores. Right?”

“Just be careful,” he says on a sigh. “And get him trapped first. Then have some fun with him.”

That has my smile returning.

“I’m going in.”

“Leave the phone on.”

“Yes, sir!” I say with a mock militant tone.

“It’s sir, yes, sir. But whatever.”

Slowly, I push the phone into my pocket and head inside to kill one last time before going home to massacre so many more.

I’ll paint the town red. Just like they painted the streets with our blood.

Grabbing my purse, I step outside, jogging down the street.

“Don’t forget you need to drive to Delaney Grove to start phase one,” I say into the Bluetooth earpiece.

“Yeah. I will. As soon as I make sure you don’t get yourself killed by being reckless,” Jake says too loudly in my ear.

I cut the volume down, and slow my pace, approaching Morgan’s house. I watch through the window, seeing him walk through the house in just his boxers without an ounce of shame.

Fortunately, he lives about a mile from anyone, so as long as no one rolls up on us, I should be able to finish this quickly. I hate rushing the kill. I planned for days and days of torture with him.

No I have to improvise and cram days of torture into one method. Only one way to do that.

“Going in,” I whisper before slipping in through the front door.

I twist the knob, not surprised to find it unlocked. Morgan thinks he's a badass who can't be hurt. Talk about feeling invincible…

I push through the door, grimacing when it creaks. I pause, listening for him, but don't hear anything to alert me that he's coming this way.

The house is mostly quiet, so I push the door shut, leaving it a little ajar so as not to allow it to squeak again.

Jake stays silent in my ear, and I bring my hair down to cover the gaudy ear piece. I've considered everything that could happen, and have different plans for each scenario.

Just as I turn the corner, my heart kicks my chest, and my eyes widen on the barrel of a gun that I *wasn't* expecting.

"Shit!" Morgan shouts, dropping the gun to his side, still holding it though, as he looks at me in confusion. "Damn, girl. What the hell are you thinking just walking into a man's house?"

I swallow down my surprise, realizing just how right Jake might have been, as Morgan looks at me with utter confusion. That gun will be blowing my brains out if he finds out who I am right now.

"Sorry," I say, squeaking the word intentionally.

Morgan won't fear a woman, after all. I'm harmless, at least in his mind. It's his mentality. Women are easily overpowered when he has them under him.

"My car broke down, and this is the first house I saw," I go on, clutching my heart as though it's beating too fast.

He eyes my cleavage, and a slow smile spreads across his lips. *Yeah, I did that just for you, big guy. I know what you like. I'm sexy, not dangerous. Keep thinking that way and put the damn gun down.*

"Oh?" he asks, slowly clicking the safety back into place on his gun.

"Yeah. I saw a light on." I pull my hair back, and point to the Bluetooth ear piece. "My phone died, so I was hoping to borrow one. Unless you know something about cars."

He licks his lips, his eyes still on my cleavage.

A fist slams into my face, and I cry out in pain, unable to hold back the tears this time. Warmth spills down the front of my face, and I know it's blood. Know he just broke something.

“Damn, Morgan, don’t fuck up her face yet!” Kyle hisses. “I still want another piece, and I can’t stare at blood to get off. I’m not like her sick fuck of a dad. And it’s not your turn again, anyway.”

More tears pour from my eyes as Morgan comes down on top of me. “Just worry about her brother’s ass some more. That’s where your dick should be.”

“What did you say?” Kyle growls.

“You heard me. Maybe they like getting their dicks rubbed by anything with a squeeze, but you don’t get to tell me where to put mine. I choose pussy over ass any day. Especially a dude’s ass, faggot.”

Kyle steps closer, but Morgan flashes him a daring grin. Kyle may be running the show, but Morgan is the only one who isn’t suffering from pack mentality. Kyle knows it, and though he might want to kill the sicko on top of me for not knowing his place, he lets it go.

Morgan is only here to fuck me. He’s not here to punish me like the others.

He’s been waiting for a day when he could do this.

His hands knead my breasts, and he releases an appreciative groan. “I’ve always wanted a taste of these,” he says, bringing his lips down on them.

I’m too numb to feel it. At least that is what my mind is telling me. I’m sick of feeling. I want to be numb forever.

Strong hands are grappling my weaker ones, holding me down, but I’ve stopped fighting, so there’s no need to restrain me anymore. The blow to my face has killed most of my fight, dazing me.

“At least I brought lube,” Morgan says against my ear, thrusting in and out, as I try to pretend I’m anywhere else. “I made this feel good, and you fucking bit me?” he hisses acidly against my ear. “I want this to feel good for you, baby. I didn’t have to hit you if you’d just kissed me instead of trying to bite me,” he says, his thrusts building speed. “I want you to come. I want you to know it was me who made you come. I want you to close your eyes for the rest of the night and see me thrusting in and out of you even when it’s not my turn.”

My stomach roils, and I swallow back the vomit.

“You’re going to love every second I’m inside you.” He moves my hair to the side. “Just remember I could have stopped all this if you’d stopped fighting me a long time ago.”

He stills inside me, shuddering his release. I stare blankly at the side as he runs his lips along my neck. I’m drenched from the lube, and the pain is more bearable, but to keep from crying, I picture someone riding in to save us. They’ll start by chopping his head off while he’s inside me.

That way I’ll see him die every time I close my eyes, and I’ll sleep better at night.

“Who’s tapping in?” Morgan asks, laughing as he cups my breasts one last time.

I don’t even fight when I’m flipped over on the concrete so the next one doesn’t have to see my bloody face. I’m tired of seeing. I’m tired of breathing.

I just want it to stop.

“So you’re here alone?” Morgan asks, leisurely raking his eyes over my body, making a tsking sound when I nod. “Must be fate that brought us together then.”

He takes a step toward me, not releasing the gun the way I’d hoped. Disarming him will be tricky. He’s not as untrained as Hadley.

I let him grab me by the throat. I fake shock when he shoves me against the wall. And I cry out, feigning pain when he shoves a knee between my legs. But I don’t make my move until I hear the gun hit the floor.

Then a smile curves my lips, and I make the same tsking sound he just made. His brow creases in confusion seconds before my arms shoot up between us, and the heel of my palm catches his nose, sending blood spraying everywhere as he stumbles backwards.

“Been waiting a long time to repay that favor,” I tell him, tossing the ear piece to the side.

He looks at me, and I see it when rage takes hold. Pissed off people are all lunging and no finesse.

As expected, he lunges, and I slam my knee into his torso before bringing my elbow down hard across the back of his neck. He

slams into the wall, getting dazed, and staggers a step before falling.

Before he can recover, I grab the wire from my purse, and I wrap it around his throat, choking him from behind. He struggles, standing up with me still behind him, forcing me to ride his back like a monkey as I hang on, choking him harder.

He slams me into the wall, but my grip never loosens, and the pain never comes. My tolerance is so much higher than his.

“You made me this way,” I whisper.

I see it in the mirror across from us—the confusion in his eyes.

He has no idea who I am.

I release him when he drops to the ground, not fully unconscious, but not awake enough to fight back.

With quick movements, I cuff his hands and drag the cable connected to the cuffs to tie off at a beam in his living room. I then tie his feet together, and pull out the electric nail gun from my oversized purse.

A bloodcurdling scream erupts from his throat when I use the small—yet powerful—nail gun on his feet, securing them to the ground with rapid succession. Then I pull out the lube while he continues sobbing.

“Who the fuck are you?” he cries out.

An agonized sob rips from his throat when he tries to move his feet. Those nails are too long for him to pull out of the floor without ripping his feet to shreds.

“Don’t worry, Morgan,” I tell him, grinning as I smear the lube on his bare chest. “I brought lube. I want you to enjoy this. It’ll feel good when I’m inside you.”

With one hard thrust, I plant the knife in his side, and another bloodcurdling scream erupts, but I see it the second he realizes who I am.

“Doesn’t that feel good?” I mock.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “No way. It’s not you.”

I lean down, getting right against his ear. “You should have saved me all those years ago. Then I could have saved you.”

With that last taunt, I tug his boxers down, and I pull on the gloves before lubing his dick. The sicko is actually hard. That’s a first.

He watches me, probably thinking I'm going somewhere else with this. The side injury isn't lethal. I know where to stab to inflict pain but spare life.

He's in a lot of pain, but he's such a sexual deviant that he doesn't seem to even care. At least not until I pull out the other knife and slowly slide it down his lubed up torso, nicking the flesh but not slicing into it.

His breathing stops when I reach his most prized possession.

"Don't," he whispers, panic paling his features when he sees what I'm going to do. "I had nothing to do with what they did to Marcus. I swear that wasn't me."

"You held the mirror. You laughed as Kyle took the slice. You're the one who encouraged Kyle to redeem himself in your eyes. You're the reason it happened. Why should you keep this?" I ask, hearing his fearful cry when I nick just the side.

"Don't! Please! I fucking beg you."

A deliciously dark smile curves my lips. "I remember your response when we begged. *Fuck them. Kill them both*."

With that, I take the slice, struggling to cut through the harder appendage than I've worked with in the past.

His screams pierce the air, and his pleads fall on deaf ears. Just as ours did.

The blood starts running, and I squeeze out three bottles of lube, letting it clump on him as he continues to wail, losing his color as quickly as he loses blood. They bleed more and faster when they're hard. Interesting.

Just to be a total sick freak, I throw a knife to the floor, stabbing it through the severed appendage I've dropped beside his face. He screams and screams, and I laugh as I walk outside.

Two gasoline cans are already waiting. Jake has done as he promised he would. Now that he's heard what I'm doing, he's probably on his way to Delaney Grove to execute the first part of our plan.

Singing while Morgan cries and chokes on his own vomit, I spray the gasoline around, then douse his body.

"They say the most painful way to die is by fire. I wonder who volunteered to find out that information," I chirp cheerfully.

Morgan shakes his head, trying to form words, but he's in too much pain, overwhelmed by agony and shock.

I strike the match, and his eyes widen one last time.

"I didn't even need to hear you confess your sins," I say quietly.

I watch the flame slowly eat away at the matchstick, almost reaching my fingers, before I drop it to his body. The flames start to soar, rapidly licking up the trails of gasoline. I slowly start walking out, hearing the roar of the fire as it spreads, chasing each strip of gas.

"Pretty soon, they'll all burn," I say as I walk out the door.

Chapter 13

Lawless are they that make their wills their law.
—William Shakespeare

LOGAN

“What’s beyond these woods?” I ask the sheriff as he tries to blatantly ignore me.

He’s at least 6’3, almost even with me in height. He looks like he spends more time in the gym than any county sheriff I’ve ever seen. His active deputies are more plentiful than small town sheriff departments I’ve been around in the past.

One town hall/sheriff’s department is large enough to host all the deputies also, and it appears Delaney Grove is their central headquarters, so to speak. The police department has five officers on its own, but the county? So many more.

Twenty-three deputies? Who needs that many in a county this small.

“I asked a question,” I say with authority, eyeing down the man with salt-and-pepper hair and dead eyes.

I should have come sooner. I’d have seen more than I expected. Already I see too much Leonard and Elise missed on their visit here.

“Four or five hunters’ cabins, and a whole lot of wild life you city boys don’t want to tangle with,” he says shortly, his tone thick with condescension.

He turns back to Johnson before glancing to one deputy. “You show these folks around. I’m going to go with SSA Johnson back to the fort.”

“The fort?” Elise asks.

“It’s what he calls our town hall,” one of the deputies says, grinning at her like she’s his type.

She casts a glare at Craig when he snickers.

I’m happy to get the sheriff and Johnson out of our hair, so I don’t object to them leaving us behind.

“Okay,” Elise mumbles to the deputy who is still beaming at her. The kid practically has hearts in his eyes. “They seriously don’t have

women here, do they?" she adds.

"Not in uniform, ma'am," the guy tells her, following us as we go to peer into the woods.

A hunter's cabin would be ideal for our killer. He could come and go without being in plain sight. "The women who work in uniform are only in dispatch. Just two. Tonya and Tasha. They have a different office though."

At least Elise can get some information from her new admirer.

Hadley is supposed to be bringing Lana with her when she drives in. Hadley couldn't leave first thing this morning because there was a Delaney Grove related killing last night. Two towns over, in fact. Though no one here has wanted to talk about the death of Morgan Jones.

In fact, no one wants to talk about any of the deaths or the people who died.

We need to dig into his past and interview his family, just as we have all the victims, but SSA dipshit is making that difficult, since he refused to change the plans of coming here today. Why the rush?

And why did the unsub kill him quickly, compared to the others. It was definitely torture to be set on fire, and he was most likely castrated—they're still trying to determine when the penis was removed, due to the scorched remains.

Words I never thought I'd say.

"These are your cabins," the deputy tells us, resting his hands on his gun belt like he's Barney Fyffe. Grinning like him too.

"Okay," Elise says, eyeing him. "We've already seen the cabins."

"I'm supposed to escort you in while they hold the town meeting, and escort you anywhere you need to go in case you need something."

"We're going to walk around and question the townspeople some," Elise tells the lurker.

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head emphatically.

"You can't do that. Sherriff Cannon said to keep you guys here, and take you wherever you needed to go. But he doesn't want our people spooked by this dark issue."

Dark issue? That's seriously how he's wording it?

“There’s a serial killer targeting your people. I held a nationwide press conference. How could they possibly not know?” Craig asks.

“Better yet, why wouldn’t you want them to know?” Elise inserts.

The deputy takes a step back, feeling ganged up on. He’s a nervous little guy.

“The sheriff controls the news stations we get. We have our own broadcasting network if we need the people to know something immediately. It’ll interrupt their regular service for the emergency broadcast.”

I turn away, looking at Craig. “This guy is dominating every aspect of their lives. It’s almost like an occult here.”

“And would be a damn good fit for a psychopath with narcissistic tendencies,” Donny says quietly, while Elise keeps Barney—or whatever his name is—distracted.

The original killer used this town’s faults to his advantage.

“The sheriff is trying to dominate us by acting as though we have no authority in his town,” I go on.

“What do we do?” Craig asks.

“Prove we’re the ones in charge. Print up flyers with the information of our profile, and start handing them out to everyone in town. We’ll divide into teams to ask questions.”

Craig nods, going into his cabin where we’ve set up our temporary headquarters—since the sheriff assured us his place didn’t have the room we’d need.

How generous of him.

“He owns the only spot in town you can rent out too,” Donny tells me.

“It’s one more step of total domination. He *needs* to be in control.”

“Sounds more like an extreme case of alpha personality than a psychopath, though.”

“On the surface,” I say absently, then turn to face the deputy. “Deputy…”

I let the word trail off, making it clear I have no idea what his unimportant name is. However, the guy grins a dopey, innocent grin, and I grow curious.

“It’s Deputy Charles Howser,” he says proudly, rocking back on his heels, completely oblivious and unoffended by the subtle barb.

“How long have you lived here or worked for the sheriff?”

“Been here six months, and been on the force for three weeks.”

I look at Donny, who narrows his eyes. “He puts us with his newest officer. Coincidence? I think not.”

“Likely his most innocent one, judging by the overwhelming stench of corruption everyone else was giving off. Where’s Leonard?”

Leonard walks around like he just heard his name, eyeing us. He joins us immediately as Elise resumes her role, distracting the deputy. But I interrupt.

“Why is the sheriff holding a town meeting if he’s hiding the fact a serial killer is targeting the town?”

“Oh, because we had some weird stuff happen last night. A lot of random doors were found open this morning to houses—at least fifty or so. Some mirrors were found missing, but that’s about it. Weird, huh?” he asks, but doesn’t give us time to respond. “The sheriff is holding a meeting to find out who did it.”

That makes no sense at all.

“It’s way worse now than it was,” Leonard tells us quietly. “The sheriff put on a show when we came to town. He’s been hiding a lot. And now he feels in control for some reason, acting as though he can also control us.”

“Because of the Godfather,” Donny states, reading my mind.

I turn back, interrupting Elise and the deputy again. “We’re going to go make those rounds now,” I tell him, timing it perfectly with Craig’s emergence from the cabin.

He’s holding a large stack of flyers, and Howser’s eyes widen in fear

“But the sheriff said—”

“When the sheriff is my boss, I’ll listen to him. But he has no authority over us or this investigation. At this point, his inclusion is merely a courtesy from my people. We outrank him. Do you understand?”

He doesn’t understand. I can tell it in his pitifully torn look.

Instead of explaining, Craig and I walk off, and Elise hobbles to the cabin to set up shop. Donny and Leonard take half the flyers, and they set off as well.

“When is Lana coming in?” Craig asks as we ignore Howser calling for us to ‘please stop walking.’

“In two days, at most. Possibly sooner. She didn’t want Hadley to have to ride alone. Lisa should be here any minute.”

“Hadley’s seal of approval? Never thought I’d see the day.”

“It’s surprisingly abrupt, but they seem to have bonded after what they both suffered.”

“Nothing forges a quicker bond than a sexual sadist nearly killing you both, then escaping on a stroke of luck.”

My stomach tilts, and I glare at him.

“Too soon?”

Muttering a few names for him under my breath, I snatch the staple gun from his hand and post the flyer on a pole.

We spot a woman coming out of the grocery store, tugging her child’s hand, and I tilt my head as several others start running out, getting out quickly. A few are even panicked as they race away.

Craig and I both dart across the street, hands on guns, when I see the wall in the back.

The water will run red. Just like your sins. The truth won’t be painted over anymore.

What the fuck?

It’s painted in large letters on the back wall, and the guy behind the counter is calling it in.

“What happened?” I ask, moving toward him.

“I don’t know. It just suddenly appeared. Like, it wasn’t there, and then it was. Everyone saw it!” he shouts.

The fuck?

The words are dry, and I go to take a sample, pulling out an evidence bag to scrape some flakes in. I fucking need Hadley here already.

Whispers of spirits hiss around us from the few who are brave enough to stick around.

“It’s dry but just appeared? Know any type of paint that does that?”

“I’m sure there’s something out there, or something someone smart enough could make,” I tell him, watching the people panic over some words. “It’s him.”

“What? He came to paint magically appearing words?” Craig asks incredulously.

“We profiled this town as religious, but with a cult mentality. Look around. They’re all terrified over something this small. In DC, this would have people snapping pictures and rolling their eyes—and that’s if they even noticed it to begin with. But here? It’s already terrifying them.”

He appraises the situation, processing the same thing I am, even though he’s not a profiler.

“He’s fucking with their heads.”

“His endgame isn’t just murder. He wants to terrorize the town,” I say, only elaborating on his theory.

He follows me out, and I head down the street, looking around for anyone who stands out. But I see no one. Until this paint is analyzed, we won’t know how he pulled that off.

We pause, talking to people, watching fear wash over their faces when we tell them about the serial killer the sheriff never warned them about. Most everyone hurries by us, not wanting to hear something like that exists.

One man clutches his heart. “It’s true then,” he whispers. “There’s a dark spirit among us?”

Craig’s eyebrows go up.

“No. There’s a flesh and blood person who wants revenge for something that happened ten years ago to Victoria and Marcus Evans.”

The color drains from his face.

“You speak of the devil’s children,” he hisses, then turns and darts away, hobbling down the sidewalk like we just invited in evil.

“I don’t know about you, but this is the most fucked up case ever,” Craig says with exasperation.

His phone beeps, and he looks down. “I sent Leonard a picture of that message, and he sends me this…” He frowns, holding his phone up for me to see.

LEONARD: People are finding that message in the houses with open doors. It's popping up all over town now. We've seen it literally appear from thin air as if it's being written.

"So he's a master of science as well as an organized killer. Lovely. He'll have the whole town believing in ghosts before the end of the day," Craig states dryly.

"But why a ghost?" I ask.

Screams erupt from all around before we can think about it for too long, and we look as people rush out of the park, hands in the air as they shriek.

Again we're running straight ahead, right into the thick of people fleeing as they scream for someone to save them.

The fountain in the middle of the park is running red water. So are the sprinklers that pop up from the ground. I whirl around as more screams erupt, seeing a woman drop a garden hose that is gushing red.

One girl is slapping the red water off her that is running down her face like thin blood. People are covered in it. It's like a bad massacre horror film from the seventies when the blood was portrayed too red and thin.

"Fuck," Craig hisses. "How the hell did he do this?"

"I don't know, but whatever he wanted to achieve seems to be working. This town is crumbling within one day of his mind games."

Chapter 14

Fishes live in the sea, as men do a-land; the great ones eat up the little ones.
—William Shakespeare

LANA

The screams sound like music, and Hadley shudders beside me. “How’d he do that with the paint?”

“I can’t answer that. They’ll be asking you to solve that mystery. Wouldn’t want you figuring out too soon.” I grin over at her as she rolls her eyes.

Jake, like me, has had many years to plan this. He’s mastered several crafts, and the mind-fuckery is just getting started.

Three years ago we committed to it and started planning it all out. But we’d been fantasizing it and creating hypothetical revenge plans. It was easy enough for me to string together one massive plan, and when I took it to Jake, he just made it that much better by infusing all his ideas.

“I guess you won’t tell me about the cameras or the red fountains either, will you?” she asks as she drives.

“I already helped you with your forensics on Morgan so we could leave sooner. I’m not leaving Logan alone for that long. But I’m not helping you more than you need help.”

She groans.

“Lube is what you told me the reason was for the lesser scorched places on his body. You didn’t give me much else to go on. Why burn him?”

“Figured he needed to get an early dose of what hell would be like,” I say absently.

“Why turn the fountain red? Can you tell me that?”

“It’s not just the fountain. It’s the entire town’s water supply. Don’t worry. It’s not toxic. I wouldn’t risk the children and Logan to that.”

She groans, and I grin, knowing she has a love/hate relationship with me right now. Weirdly, she’s the only female sorta-friend I’ve

ever had, other than Lindy. We weren't ever too close, since Lindy was much older. But she was my sitter when I was growing up and we talked.

Never mind. I've never had a real female friend.

"Want to tell me what you learned from Monroe's crime scene that I didn't tell you?" I muse.

"I learned you didn't walk on the soft ground to leave a boot impression."

"Always a bonus when I get to skip those heavy boots. Love a good sidewalk."

"There was nothing to implicate you," she says on a sigh.

"I'm too good for that. I was just curious what you learned."

"Can we talk about something normal?" she asks, exasperated.

I turn to face her a little better. "Like girl talk? Girls talk about penises, right?"

She grimaces. "Considering you dismember them from bodies, I'd rather not discuss penises with you."

"Logan's penis is safe, just so you know."

"Forget I said anything," she grumbles.

"Oh, never mind. Logan mentioned you were into girls, so I guess penises don't really appeal to you."

She grows quiet for a minute before finally saying, "Logan has a big mouth."

I shrug, settling back into my seat as I watch the people scream and run, just as I knew they would. I love technology. Delaney's terror is conveniently wired to my phone.

The Boogeyman doesn't have shit on me.

"You shouldn't be ashamed of who are," I tell her quietly.

"I'm not. I just don't like people telling my business. Besides, I don't really put myself in a box. I'm not one hundred percent sure of my sexuality. It's just…men are attractive but harder to trust than women," she confesses softly.

I flip through the screens, checking out all the pretty camera placements Jake has found. He was a busy boy last night while I was finishing off Morgan.

"My brother was gay. Jake is bisexual. Jake was too scared to tell anyone he and my brother were in love. People made my brother

feel like he was a walking sin or abomination when he came out a few months before they killed him." I try to say it with no emotion, but it's a lot of effort.

She sucks in a breath, and I rub my chest where the pain, that always accompanies my brother's memory, starts to form.

"Jake always says his biggest regret was being too scared to show Marcus how much he meant to him. Marcus knew he wasn't ashamed of him. He knew how toxic that town was. He didn't confess his sexuality to prove his love for Jake. He did it to be honest with himself. He never once doubted that Jake loved him."

"But Jake is doing this to prove his love?" she asks sadly.

"No. He's doing it because he's a romantic."

The confusion on her face doesn't surprise me, but she doesn't press for me to elaborate. We drive in relative silence after that, until we're nearing Delaney Grove. Then the conversation mostly veers toward a few other cases the team is working on.

Jake sends a text while we're talking, and I read it.

JAKE: Olivia called and said Dad is giving her a hard time about his medicine. I'm going to go take care of that, but I'll be back soon. Step one of our plan is already in action.

ME: Call me if you need help.

JAKE: Don't worry about me. Should only take a couple of hours. Just watch the fun stuff. I'm about to send you some pictures you'll appreciate.

Hadley asks for my opinion on some of those cases, drawing me away from Jake's texts, and I give it. Then she makes voice memo notes.

"Logan will think I'm twice as genius as he already thinks I am if I go spouting off these facts," she says, laughing.

But I don't laugh, because I get distracted. Jake sends me a picture of a street. Of *the* street. Of the words written in red.

The angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

"What?" Hadley asks.

Jake also sends me a picture of Logan studying the message, and I pull up the video footage, watching the man I love as he observes the people around him. Most are pale and terrified.

They know what happened on that spot. They painted over it. Made it black again. Pretended as though the red stains aren't there just because you can't see them.

Logan doesn't seem disturbed or terrorized, just as I knew he wouldn't. He's a logical man, after all. He doesn't believe in ghosts.

But Delaney Grove…they'll fall to their knees soon.

"I don't understand why they're all falling for that," Hadley states.

"It's called conditioning. They've been conditioned to be sheep. Sheep follow sheep," I tell her.

"I don't get it," she argues.

"You have someone you look to for inspiration?" I ask her.

"Queen Latifah. Why?"

I smile to myself. "My father was an Einstein man. My mother loved Confucius. My brother, the hopeless romantic who was too easily emotional, lived and breathed Shakespeare."

"What does that have to do with sheep?"

Smiling, I face her. "Personally, I was always in love with the words of Voltaire."

"All that sounds a little pretentious to me. But your family liked dead people who had something to say that people felt the need to recite. Proceed."

Still smiling, I say, "Voltaire said, 'Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.' For too long, Sheriff Cannon has ruled the county, and very few ever break away from the corruption he instills. Women are beneath men. And his word is gospel."

I gesture to the flock who are crying, panicking, and already on the verge of an all-out mutiny against the sheriff by now. After one single day of mind-fuckery.

"Sheep," I repeat quietly. "Fucking baa."

She blows out a shaky breath as we drive the rest of the way into town, and she texts someone. I look around, seeing the place that has jaded so many and broken many more.

“I’m back, motherfuckers,” I say quietly as we pass the town hall. “And I’m going to make your life hell before I paint your town red.”

I try to find Logan on the cameras, using the app Jake installed for me before the first kill, but can’t. He’s apparently in some blind spots.

I don’t even notice we’re parked until Hadley turns off the engine.

“I’m letting Logan know you’re here, in case—”

Her words end on a shrill scream when my door is ripped open, and Logan reaches in, heaving me out of the car with one pull. I grin against his lips the second he kisses me, and I wind my arms around his neck, enjoying the feel of his body pressing against mine.

“Sheesh! We’re in the middle of Fucking Madhouse Hollow, on the edge of the woods, and you give a girl a heart attack?! Not cool, Bennett. Not fucking cool,” says the redheaded girl who knowingly drove the killer into town.

Logan smiles against my lips despite the crazy he’s had to endure since he arrived early this morning. I’m trying not to laugh at the irony of Hadley screaming and freaking out like he was the killer coming to get us…when…yeah…

As he lifts me, my legs wrap around his waist, knowing their place. He holds me to him as he carries me inside what I assume must be our cabin. I don’t look around, worried it’ll be the cabin where Kyle used to take me.

Back before I knew the monster he was.

Back when I unknowingly trusted someone so dark.

Back when I was a sheep stuck in the same flock I intend to tear apart.

He bends, and a sense of weightlessness hits when I’m momentarily falling, before a bed hits my back. I grin up at him as he tugs his shirt off.

“You act like you missed me,” I say, committing every moment with him to memory.

I’ll need it to hold onto. I’ll need it to remember. I’ll need it to get me through the rest of this. Hopefully alive.

Then I'll need it when it's just me and Jake looking back on the chaos we created; the justice two killers achieved under the guise of avenging angels.

"I'm seriously considering seeing a shrink about this mindless obsession I have with you," he mumbles, but his lips twitch with a smile before he pushes down his pants.

The timing of our arrival is perfect. Halloween is just around the corner.

There's a reason I picked *Myers* as a surname.

But I don't think of any of that right now. Nothing else exists when it's just us, because my time is limited. I know that. He doesn't.

He still loves me like it's the last day when he comes down on top of me, pushing my dress up on my hips.

"You wore a red dress just to drive me insane, didn't you?" he asks.

Before I can answer, we hear Hadley through the door. "I put your bags in here, you horny fuckers. You're welcome."

Logan laughs against my neck, and I run my fingers through his hair, getting high on heaven. That's what he is to me.

"Sometimes I think you're an illusion, and that none of this is really happening. That I really died ten years ago after the accident," I tell him softly as he starts tearing my underwear down.

"I'm real, Lana," he murmurs against my neck as he finally peels off the last of my clothes.

Just the feel of his body sliding against mine as he undressed me has gotten me ready for him.

"And I'm yours," he says before he kisses me, swallowing the words I try to return.

Mine.

Just like I'm his.

For as long as he'll keep me.

"I love you," I say as he slides inside me, shuddering as though the feel of me was exactly what he needed.

I know the feeling.

The words mean more to me than he knows, because they're words I thought I'd never utter in that context. Thought I'd never heal enough to feel that connection.

“I love you,” he says, opening his eyes to stare into mine, watching me as he rocks in and out.

It’s everything I need and more.

He’s everything I wish I could be.

A hero.

A hero loved by a monster.

Chapter 15

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
—William Shakespeare

LOGAN

“One place. Anywhere you could go. Where would it be?” Lana asks me.

“Hmmm,” I say, humming against her skin. “Greece.”

“Why Greece?” she asks, a tangled mess of naked limbs.

I wish I could just spend my days lying on a beach in Greece with her wrapped around me just like this. This job is starting to take too much and give back too little.

Then again, after this case, I may not have a career at all. But I won’t just bow down and let them cover up whatever went on here ten years ago.

“Because my stepdad always said if he had a choice, he’d be drunk in Greece and in love. But he wasted all his sexy years on my mother.”

She laughs, and I grin down at her as she wipes a few tears from her eyes from the surprise outburst.

“He sounds like he was great.”

“He was,” I tell her.

“My father was great too. He did everything he could to make sure my brother and I had what we needed. He was our world, and we were his.”

“What about your mother?” I ask, deciding to pounce while she’s speaking of the past.

“Amazing,” she says wistfully. “She baked. I loved it when she baked. My father always said if she was a witch, children would willfully jump into the oven just because of how good it always smelled.” She looks up as I arch an eyebrow. “He was a bit of a morbid sense of humor type of guy. But my mother loved it. Loved him. I never understood how rare that love was when I was younger. Like most things you see daily, I took it for granted.”

A sadness touches her eyes, and I slide in closer, brushing my lips over her eyelids, kissing each.

“Where would you go?” I ask her, deciding I don’t want to see her sad.

“Anywhere in the world?” she asks.

“Anywhere.”

“I’d go to Greece with you.”

And this is why I’m so fucking obsessed with her.

My lips find hers again, and I kiss her like it might be the last time. It’s the way I’ll always kiss her, because she’s lost love once—the love of her parents. I never want any lingering insecurities to dwell in her about us.

I want her to know exactly how I feel every time she’s in my arms.

When she breaks the kiss, I try not to slide on top of her and take her again. I was way too damn eager to be inside her when I saw her in a dress. I was just going to scare her, but Hadley screamed; Lana smiled. She always surprises me.

And just like that, I had to have her.

“I want you in Greece with me too,” I tell her, kissing her cheek.

“We’ll get drunk and have entirely too much sex,” she agrees. “And of course eat. There’s always something amazing to eat in Greece. Unless that’s just a false stereotype.”

Grinning, I press my lips to her cheek. “We’ll find out one day.”

Her breath catches, and I pull back, looking into those haunted eyes that pulled me under her spell so long ago.

“What?” I ask, running my finger down her cheek, worried about that look.

She turns toward me a little more. “If you found out I wasn’t this perfect girl you want me to be, would you still love me?”

The way she asks it is like a punch to the gut. “Lana, I don’t expect you to be perfect. I think *you are* perfect. At least perfect for me.”

Her lip quivers, and she forces a smile. What’d I say wrong?

“But what if I wasn’t perfect?” she asks again, genuinely distressed over this.

“Then I’d love you anyway. I don’t use that word liberally. Well, at least not since high school. But everyone uses it in high school without knowing what it really means to love someone.”

That look in her eyes chills just a little. I’m trying to read her, but she’s always a mystery. Constantly doing one thing when I expect another.

“But yes,” I say again. “I’d love you regardless. In case you haven’t noticed, I go a little crazy when it’s been too long since I’ve seen you, and you give me a reason to want to live instead of just exist. You accepted every piece of me, and dealt with the scraps I could offer. And never complained.”

She starts to speak, but I go on.

“Those eyes find me when you walk into a room, like I’m the only person you’re looking for. You hold your head up when others would cower. You stand tall when others would fold in on themselves. Your strength is beyond amazing. And you always keep me guessing, which is my favorite part about you, as much as it is infuriating.”

She laughs under her breath, and I kiss the corner of her mouth before continuing.

“And you smile for me like you smile for no one else. That makes a man feel powerful. And when I’m with you, I smile like I never have before. It’s a sense of equality, a partnership even. It’s rare to find someone who matches you step for step, and you do. I love that about you. I love *you.*”

She kisses me before I can ramble on, assuring her in every possible way there’s nothing that could change the way I feel. Just when I decide I have time to prove it a little more thoroughly, there’s a loud knock at the door.

“Logan! We have a break!” Donny shouts.

“He has horrible timing,” Lana says on a sigh.

“They always do. One day, I’ll just throw away the phone and hide from them.”

“When we disappear to Greece,” she says, her smile not touching her eyes.

I feel like there’s more wrong than she’s telling me. I can see it in the way her gaze grows increasingly distant. I’ll fix that. Just as

soon as I figure out what's causing it.

"Yes," I tell her, smirking and pretending as though I don't notice the hint of sadness in her eyes.

I get dressed quickly and meet Donny outside. Then I walk back in just as Lana stands, the sheet strapped around her, and I pull her to me, kissing her long and hard.

She moans against my lips, and Donny loudly clears his throat.

"I'll be back soon," I tell her, then walk out, ignoring the laugh Donny lets go as I step out.

"Gotta say, never thought you'd fall so hard," he quips. "Company men like you usually end up a ride-and-die bachelor type."

"Things change," I tell him as I take the driver's seat. "Where're we going?"

"Craig called and said a guy came up to him and told him we needed to speak to Diana Barnes. He wouldn't say anything else, but Johnson is on a rampage. Says we're inciting terror by posting those flyers, and demanded we tear them all down. Elise and Lisa are putting up more, while the deputies are tearing them down."

"Unreal," I say on long breath. "He's not even trying to be discreet about this."

"Just makes me wonder what we're going to find."

"The cryptic messages the unsub is leaving us to terrorize the town isn't helping matters. They're all sure a spirit has risen, but no one will speak a name aloud," I point out.

"The Evans kids? Or Evans himself? They definitely aren't speaking about it," Donny says in his own unique way of agreeing.

"It's what he wants. He wants to incite terror. He wants them huddled in a corner. The question is why? We know they were raped, but the hospital couldn't give us anything more than that. The kids were too scared to speak." I'm mostly just speaking aloud, hoping that hearing the words will offer something more than just knowing them.

"The whole town is too scared to speak," Donny says, watching as people read the message on the street and walk away, their steps hurrying like they're going to carry home a piece of devil if they dawdle too long.

Donny gestures to the road we need to turn on, and stops me when we're in front of a small, white house. It even has a fucking white picket fence.

"Cross your fingers this one doesn't slam the door on our faces too," Donny says as he climbs out.

I hop out as well, straightening my tie, and we walk up the cracked sidewalk to the house. The blinds by the front window crack open, and all I get is a glimpse of an eye before they seal shut again.

Donny raises his hand to knock, but the woman opens the door, staring at us like she's been expecting us all day.

"You the FBI?"

"Yes, ma'am. We're here to—"

"I know what you're here for. You work for that Johnson guy?"

My lips twitch. "We have different agendas. Mine includes getting the truth about what happened here ten years ago. We may be able to save lives if we know more."

Her lips tense. "Ain't a life you can save that needs saving," she says bitterly. "This whole town needs to burn. Only reason I'm still here is because I knew this day would eventually come. One day, someone would want to hear them babies' story, and finally give them justice."

Donny swallows hard as the woman wipes her tears away.

"Come on," she says, gesturing us in.

Donny shuts the door behind him, and Diana points to the couch where she apparently wants us to sit.

"I can't tell you everything. You'll need to learn about Robert from someone who knows all those details. But I can tell you about my babies. They were good to my son. Always good."

She takes a seat in her chair, and she pulls out her phone.

"Any information you could give us at all would be helpful," I tell her, my gut tensing at the prospect of finally having answers and wondering just how fucked up things are about to get.

We wait patiently while she calls someone.

"Hey, baby. Nah, I'm fine," she says to…her boyfriend? Her kid? No wedding ring or men's belongings around, so not a husband.

"You still dating that pretty lawyer lady? The one with all the security at her apartment building?"

She eyes us, as she listens to the person on the other line.

“Good. Go stay with her until I tell you otherwise. Momma’s about to tell a story that’s been burning a hole for over ten years.”

End of Book 3

Be sure to join the Facebook reader’s group:
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.T. Abby is a lover of all romance sub-genres, but has recently dipped her feet into dark romance. But she wanted to bring a new twist to the genre. So, she created a new name, and yes, it's stabby… Her other pen name is for her lighter books full of laughs. For now, she's keeping her true identity a secret, but one day she'll share. Well, as long as people don't want to find her and punish her for the nightmares she may or may not give them.

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