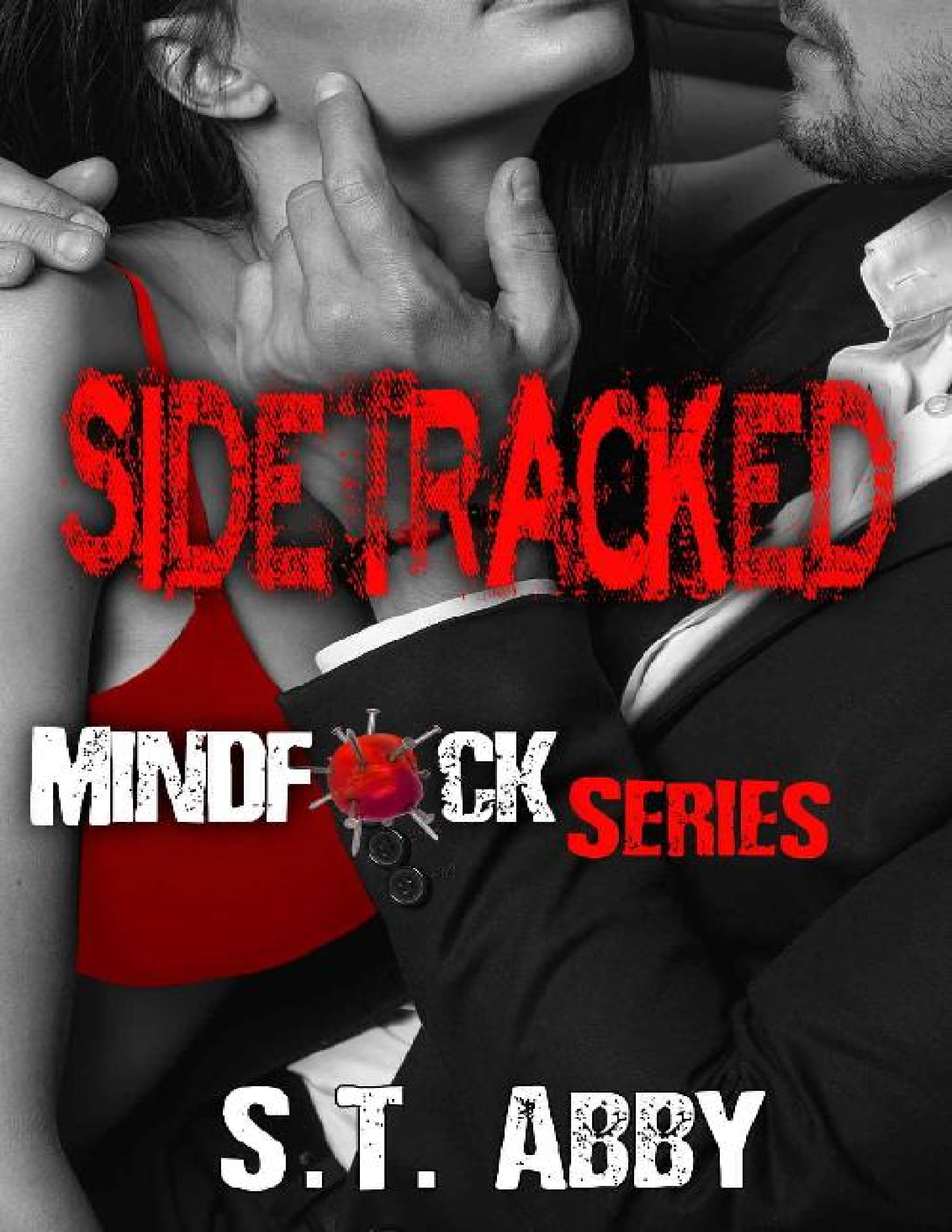

SIDETRACKED
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S.T. ABBY

Sidetracked

Book 2 of the
Mindfuck Series

S.T. Abby

Sidetracked

Book 2 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~~

Getting closer…

Chapter 1

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.
—Confucius

LANA

My mother was a Confucius woman when she needed some motivational words. My father was an Einstein man when everything was crashing down on him.

Neither of the dead wise men are helping me out right now. Neither are my parents and all their words of wisdom.

To be fair, they probably never would have condoned me stealing another girl's identity, taking her inheritance, and using it to get some very disturbing revenge on all the men who scarred me for life.

Five minutes ago, my world was just fine—well, for me it was fine.

Then Hadley showed up at my front door. I never should have opened the door.

"I'm Hadley Grace."

Her name sounds vaguely familiar, though I'm not sure why.

"Okay." I shrug, letting her know that name holds no importance.

"Logan Bennett is my boss."

That's…surprising. "Shouldn't you be in DC? Heard the Boogeyman dropped another body."

Her eyes light up in surprise, and she jerks her phone out from her pocket, cursing when she reads something.

"I'll make this quick," she tells me, holding up a file.

She thrusts it at me, and my blood pumps quickly through my veins as I flip it open to see my worst fears starting to come to life.

"Actually, you make this quick," she says flatly. "Tell me why the hell you stole the identity of a dead girl."

My mind races through a thousand scenarios, wondering how much she knows. I know without a doubt my inner panic isn't showing on the surface. I'm the picture of composure. I've prepared for this, just not to this extent and with someone close to Logan.

“You always so thoroughly invasive with a friend’s girlfriend, or am I just special?” I ask the girl in front of me, keeping my tone cool and aloof.

“You really want to play this off? Fine. I’ll just call Logan. Tell him some lying bitch has been playing him like a fiddle.”

“Feel free to call him. As for stealing a dead girl’s identity, that’s a false accusation. But by all means, go ahead and make yourself look like a crazy jealous girl.”

I start to shut the door, but she slams her foot in the crack and stops it from shutting.

Got her.

Slowly, I open it back up, arching an eyebrow.

“Ten years ago, Kennedy Carlyle was in a car accident because she was high as a kite. Her wounds were ruled as fatal, but she miraculously survived. Now how’d she manage that?”

She’s purposely referring to Kennedy as a separate person from me. She’s trying to make me slip up.

“Ten years ago, *I* was a different person. My name was legally changed, and I got sober, made some real life decisions. I was a sixteen-year-old kid back then, angry without a cause. New name, new life, new choices, and a healthier mentality. It *was* a miracle I survived, and I didn’t take it for granted.”

That’s the shit I’ve been rehearsing, preparing for the day when someone called me out.

She snorts derisively. “You don’t even resemble her. And I’ve run facial recognition software; not even close.”

Okay, so when I was rehearsing all this, never did I plan to face down the FBI.

“Did you happen upon my medical charts while you were invading my privacy and breaking the law to do so?”

“I broke no laws, including hacking your medical files.”

“Yet knew my injuries from the car accident were so fatal that I should have died.” I turn the tables, calling her out on her lies now.

Her eyes narrow to slits, and I tug my shirt up, surprising her.

Her eyes land on the jagged scars. She hasn’t even seen the ones on my back. Logan hasn’t even mentioned them since I froze up about the two long and nasty ones on my torso.

“You’re right. I barely survived.” It works that Kennedy was sliced and diced almost like me. “I have the proof. I can always remove my makeup and show you some of the faint scars on my face. I was lucky there. Ten facial reconstruction surgeries by one hell of a plastic surgeon saved my face from looking as horrendous as these two scars.”

She backs down a little, her lips tensing. The eyes never lie in facial recognition. Unless you have your face so smashed in that it’s ninety percent metal plates in there. But it should match now. Jake fixed all that a long time ago, so she may just be bluffing.

“My face was the worst of the damage. You’ll see that on my medical reports. It was so smashed in that it was practically rebuilt. So yeah, it’s miraculous I survived. Feel free to dig into my plastic surgeon’s file on me. His name is Dr. Calvin Morose. I’m sure you’ll offer your apology to Logan when you’re finished.”

I start to slam the door again, but her foot catches it one more time. This time when I open it back up, I’m glaring daggers at her, trying to seem offended more than sick at my stomach.

“Kennedy Carlyle was barely a D student. Yet suddenly she turns her life around after the accident, finishes school with a nice GPA, and manages to go to college as well? Also, she now profiles serials as well as a FBI trained profiler?”

Ah, so this is all because of that damn Boogeyman. I really want to kill that fucker.

“I pointed out the fact he cleaned like someone in the custodial line of work. That’s hardly profiling. Rich kids spend more time with maids than they do their parents.”

“You told Logan your father was friends with a janitor,” she says, smirking like she’s catching me in another lie.

Just how fucking close are they? Why is she so hell-bent on finding dirt on me?

Do I need to kill her?

No. No. I can’t kill her. Not unless she’s a rapist.

Any chance she’s a rapist?

I look over her slim body, her puny stature, and wonder. After all, looks are deceiving where I’m concerned. Same could be true for her.

I've officially lost my damn mind.

"My father was friends with numerous janitors. He called them butlers. Sorry I didn't want to tell my boyfriend that I was a rich brat from a privileged household who concentrated too much on bad things before I almost died. I had a wakeup call. As for withholding all this from him… Logan and I have only recently started dating. Vomiting my past into his lap is never a good way to start a relationship. And going psycho crazy jealous and invasively tearing into his girlfriend's past is no way to steal him away. Now kindly fuck off."

"And if I show this to Logan?" she threatens.

"Then I guess I'll show him all the plastic surgeon reports and things done. Then I'll end things with him if he makes me feel as violated as you have."

I slam the door in her face, ignoring the trembling in my hand as I lean against the door. Fuckity fuck.

My past is solid. Jake has made sure of it. Kennedy Carlyle's records have all been adjusted to match me. Her scars. Her injuries. Her blood type. Her fucking DNA. He's covered every single trail there is.

I *am* Kennedy Carlyle.

Well, actually I'm Lana Myers.

Victoria Evans and Kennedy both died, and Lana was born.

It's a wonder I don't have an identity crisis.

As soon as I grab my phone, I turn it back on and dial Jake back.

"What the hell?" he barks. "Why'd you hang up and turn your phone off?!"

"Find out every dark detail on a girl named Hadley Grace."

"What? Why?"

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for his inevitable rant. "Because she just became a problem."

Chapter 2

The superior man is aware of righteousness; the inferior man is aware of advantage.
—Confucius

LOGAN

"Where the fuck is Hadley? She should already be leading the forensics investigation by now," I snap, looking over at Elise.

"I've called her several times. She just sent a text saying she's on her way."

I run a weary hand through my hair as they finally get the poor woman's body pulled back inside.

That bastard is here.

He's taunting me.

He's calling me out.

He put my name on a dead woman's body, as if stating it was all my fault he was here.

"I want every surveillance camera footage for a five-block radius. I want to know where he came from and where he went!" I bark at Elise, and she nods before running off to do as ordered.

I've never been so pissed. In the seven years I've been working for the FBI, I've never been called out. I've never had a serial killer go so far as to carve a personalized message on the chest of a woman.

My stomach churns with fury as I stalk through the throngs of people. I will find him.

Lana was right. He wants more attention. He's shifted his fixation onto taunting me with his kills now.

I need to stay away from Lana until this is all over with. Until that bastard is behind bars, she's not safe. A sexual sadist won't come after me personally; he'll go after the woman I care about. Not that I pointed that out to her. Then again, I never thought he'd crave this attention.

She saw this coming before I did. Until now, he's shown no signs of needing this sort of attention.

I blasted his face and name all over the news, and instead of lying low, he kills a woman near my front door.

Donny looks as furious as I feel as he comes toward me. The weight of this is bearing down on us, and everyone is ready to point fingers in our direction, as though we created the monster.

“He’s developing a narcissistic personality that will clash with his sexual sadist—”

“We just got a lead,” Lisa says, interrupting Donny. “Gerald Plemmons was spotted downtown half an hour ago.”

I’m already loading into my SUV. Lisa and Donny join me, and we peal out toward the newest lead.

“Director called. We have the shoot-to-kill order,” I tell both of them.

It’s one time that I don’t mind that order.

“You think?” Lisa snips from the passenger seat. “This guy went and made it personal. He’s a sexual sadist displaying narcissistic tendencies, and I’m your ex. I think it’d be wise for me to stay with someone.”

“He won’t focus on you,” Donny chimes in from the backseat. “He’ll be more focused on Lana.”

My grip tightens on the steering wheel as Donny echoes my own worries from earlier.

“Who is Lana?” Lisa asks, confused.

“I’m going to send two black-and-whites to her house until this is over. Let’s not assume he’s just fixating on me though. He could be fixating on the whole team.”

“I haven’t had a relationship with anyone but my hand in over a few years,” Donny goes on.

“Who’s Lana?” Lisa asks again.

“Elise, Lisa, and Hadley are the only females on the team. We should set up patrol for them as well,” I tell him, still ignoring Lisa as she huffs out an annoyed breath of air.

I don’t even hesitate to call in the protective detail as I drive toward the lead. That probably won’t help. This guy is too smart to stay put for too long.

He knows I’m coming for him.

Chapter 3

Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated.
—Confucius

LANA

Two cops are sitting outside my house, guarding me, keeping me safe from the Boogeyman. Yes, I hear how ridiculous that sounds as well.

I have an entire hidden room with tons of information and surveillance shots of all my next victims. That hidden room is where I am now, as two guys hang out in their cruiser, being all kinds of conspicuous.

Do they not know how to keep a low profile?

And their windows are down. Have they never seen a horror movie? Windows down equal throats slashed.

I'm watching through my own surveillance cameras from my murder room, since this room has no windows. The cameras are only on the outside, and I put them up today for the purpose of keeping an eye on the cops.

Logan is pissing me off, not listening to reason. I don't want cops here. Cops hinder my plan. Not that I can tell him that. He's determined to keep me safe. I'm determined to slice and dice a serial killer who may or may not get spooked by the blues outside.

I also check out the monitor that is watching Anthony. My next victim. I've only been able to get two of my cameras installed so far. I'm going closer to home for him. It's getting close to sprint time. I'll have to get creative to continue torturing once I reach that sick, twisted town. The FBI will be all over me.

And my boyfriend has the cops watching my house. The house where I have all my murder supplies that I have to use. Cops that follow me to the store when I get milk. Obviously they can't follow me and guard my kill zone for days on end while I torture people.

Stupid Boogeyman.

I wish I could castrate him. I wish I could dole out the true justice deserved by the ones he's hurt. But I have to make it look like a

stroke of luck.

Sighing, I head out of the secret room, move the empty bookcase back where it belongs to cover the hidden door. Then I lock the door to the actual room, concealing the room inside a room.

It's all cloak and dagger right now. That's what happens when you're a serial killer dating a FBI profiler who hunts serial killers.

Somehow, my simple life got very complicated.

After about thirty minutes, I see a familiar SUV pull up, and I grin when Logan steps out, talking to the policeman nearest to the house. What I don't like is the fact he has a guy and a girl with him. Because that means he's not staying.

Walking out the front door, I measure the two unknowns, regarding them. The guy smiles genuinely at me, even offering me a small wave so much less awkward than the wave I gave Logan once upon a time.

The girl, however, doesn't look too happy with what she sees. At least I'm wearing pants. I decided until the Boogeyman is gone, pants are a good idea.

Apparently all the girls on his team seem to have an issue with me, especially since this is the second one I've met and she's regarding me with a scowl. Don't these women know that it's dangerous to piss off a highly trained killer?

Turning my gaze away from her, I refocus my attention on Logan as he walks toward me, his expression grim. His hair looks blonder in contrast to the standard black suit he wears on duty.

As soon as he reaches me, his hands are in my hair, surprising me as his lips come down on mine. I forget about the audience in my yard as I kiss him back, leaning against him as he slides a hand down my back, pulling me closer.

It's not until a loud whistle sounds out that he breaks the kiss. The man he came with chuckles before whistling again and heads toward us as Logan sighs.

"Can we come in?" he asks.

I just nod, and he laces his fingers with mine as the whistler and the staring bitch come into my house and shut the door behind them. The girl looks around, as though she's trying to get a read on me based on my minimum decorations.

“I’m so fucking sorry about this,” Logan says against my forehead as he places another kiss there.

“I think I’ll be fine, Logan. The cops are overkill, and very annoying. They park in plain sight, so it’s not like they’re doing much good.”

“He’ll avoid law enforcement,” the unknown guy chirps. “He wants to be free and able to taunt right now. He can’t risk being caught. He doesn’t know if there’s another cop inside or not.”

“Which is why I’m here,” Logan adds, looking down at me with a grimace.

“No,” I say adamantly. “I don’t want anyone in the house. Unless you’re volunteering.”

“Show some gratitude,” the girl chimes in, earning a glower from Logan. “These cops are here for your protection. Having someone in bed down the hall would be safer, and they’re going out of their way to provide that.”

I really don’t like her. Can I cut her? Just a little?

“Lisa, go sit in the car if you can’t shut your mouth,” Logan tells her, a bite to his tone that I haven’t heard before.

She glares at him, and I slowly put the pieces together. Bitterness. Lots of bitterness in her look.

It’s not hard to recognize a woman scorned.

Logan talks to her like he would an ex he was frustrated with, not a normal co-worker.

I really don’t like this situation right now.

And I might actually cut her. More than a little.

She drops to a chair instead of leaving, much to my disappointment, and Logan takes my hand, pulling me down the hallway to my bedroom. As soon as he shuts the door, I turn to face him, trying not to go all jealous crazy girl on him.

“You never mentioned you dated someone from your team,” I say calmly, like a total rational girl and not a cutting psycho.

“It was over a year ago, and completely unimportant.”

“She’s jealous.”

His eyes spark with humor.

“So are you. Glad to see I’m not the only one losing my mind in this relationship.”

His lips twitch, and I stifle my own stupid grin that tries to form in response. He can do that; dissolve my anger with barely any effort at all.

No one else has ever been able to accomplish that.

I toss my arms around the back of his neck, and he wraps his arms around my waist.

“Let someone sleep inside the house. I’d feel better knowing I had every angle covered. I’m going to be sleeping in my office for a few hours at a time at most. This case is priority above all else right now to my department, but you’re *my* priority.”

“No,” I say simply. No way am I risking a cop getting nosy in my house. “I don’t feel comfortable with a random stranger sleeping in my house. A badge doesn’t make him noble.”

His smile falters, and he cocks his head, confused.

“What?” I prompt.

“Nothing. It’s just…one time I made a mental note that you seemed trusting of me because I had a badge. I profiled you as not having an issue with law enforcement, meaning you’d never had any bad experiences with them.”

“And now I’m throwing you off?” I muse, then smile, trying to mask the flurry of emotions I don’t want him to accidentally see. “One day, I’ll tell you all there is about me. But no. I don’t trust men because they have a badge. Where I grew up, badges just meant people got away with more. It was a corrupt town.”

He brushes his hand over my cheek, and I lean into it, hating that I’ve said too much about my life as Victoria instead of Lana or Kennedy.

“Sorry. I’ll try to get some free time to come sleep here for an hour or two with you. Maybe you can tell me some of those past experiences soon.”

I shake my head, gripping his wrists. “Do your job. I’m a big girl. I stopped being scared of the Boogeyman by age five.” I smile to lighten the morbid joke, but he frowns.

“This is serious, Lana. If he got his hands on you—”

“I’ve had self-defense training. I have two guns. I also plan to run out the back door instead of up the stairs. We’re good. I can handle this.”

“If he gets his hands on you, there’s nothing you’ll be able to do.”

I can tell he’s getting nauseated just thinking of such an outcome. Little does he know…

“Okay,” I say, just to appease him. “Someone can stay inside. Someone you trust. I’m sure you’re friends with the local PD.”

The relief that washes over his face makes it worth all the million and one things that can go wrong. He genuinely cares about me. He’s terrified *for me* right now because a merciless killer might be after me.

The irony isn’t lost on me.

“Not friends, but I know several reputable guys who are definitely trustworthy,” he says on a quiet breath. “I’d never leave anyone inside I didn’t feel I could trust.”

I don’t tell him I’d just castrate them and nail their dicks to the wall if they tried anything. Instead, I let him feel as though I’m weak and need protection. Because right now, that’s how he needs to feel.

The truth is just too dark to overcome.

And I wonder what will happen if the truth ever comes to light.

He kisses me, tugging me to his body as he melts away all the concerns lingering in the back of my mind. For now, this is worth losing it all. It’s almost worth losing my revenge.

But the revenge isn’t just for me. Souls beyond the grave beg for a reckoning as well. Those souls need their peace.

It’s too soon when Logan pulls away, and I hold back the frustrated groan. “Be safe. I’ll be in and out as I can. I’ll need to see you with my own eyes to believe you’re really safe.”

“I won’t object to seeing you, but do your job. Don’t let him hurt someone else because you’re so focused on me. That’s what he wants.”

He thumbs my lower lip, staring at it for a moment. “Have I told you today that you’re perfect?”

I smile against his touch, even though it feels weighted. Perfection. He thinks I’m perfect. It’s so far from the truth, but I’ve told him that before.

“That girl?” I ask, deciding to get some answers before he leaves.

His grin only grows. “We dated a few months. She wanted a commitment. I was married to the job. She transferred to my department, and I broke things off with her because it’s against the rules to date within the department.”

That has me stiffening. Sheesh. When did I turn into a girl?

“But you’d still be together if she hadn’t transferred?”

Even I hear how pathetically clingy I sound.

But Logan, the bastard, grins broader. “No. It was just the easiest way to get the point across that it was over. You’re the first woman to make me wish I could skip work, Lana. You make me question my priorities and if it’s all really worth it.”

My stomach flutters with excitement.

“You know it’s worth it. You stop killers. You’re a hero.”

His smile slips, and he clears his throat. “I don’t always stop them in time. It seems like two spring up every time we take one down. And now this is happening. I put you at risk because of my job. Your life is sure as hell not worth it.”

I pull him down and kiss him again, and he grips me tightly, tugging me even closer. He lifts me with two hands on my ass, and I land on top of my dresser as he steps between my legs, still devouring my mouth.

When I moan, he swallows the sound, and then someone bangs on the door.

“We need to roll if we’re going to meet Elise and Leonard to deliver the adjustments to the profile!” the girl harps.

Definitely cutting her.

Logan doesn’t break the kiss. If anything, he kisses me harder, as though he’s assuring me she doesn’t matter as much as I do. As though nothing matters as much as I do.

It’s me who finally breaks the kiss, and his forehead rests against mine as we both take steadying breaths.

“Be careful,” I tell him softly. “Don’t worry about me. And you do make a difference.”

He groans before brushing his lips against mine again, and he tugs me off the dresser, threading our fingers together. The profiler ex is waiting in my living room when we rejoin them.

“Call Chief Harris and tell him to send one of the guys off my list,” Logan says to the guy profiler, as though he was just waiting for my permission.

The chick just watches us before finally turning and walking out. Logan runs his fingers along my cheek one more time before kissing me quickly and following them out.

The girl gets in the back of the SUV, and the guy gets in the front seat next to Logan, who takes the driver’s side. Not surprising. I’ve noticed he’s sort of a control freak. Not that I mind.

As he backs out, he honks the horn twice, and a stupid grin lights up my face. I remember my neighbor always honking as he pulled out, as though it was one last temporary goodbye to his wife.

Annnnd I’m back to being two steps away from that name tattoo on my ass.

After shutting the door, I groan, realizing I never asked him about his relationship with Hadley. Damn women. How many of them should I have to deal with?

I jog upstairs, head into my secret room, and touch the apple on my desk. It’s a wax apple, brilliantly red, and there are seven nails sticking out of it. Still many more to go.

Glancing around, I question how stupid it is to leave a murder room inside a house with a cop. Logan respects my privacy and would never snoop. But this guy? I don’t know anything about the guy coming to stay in here.

I really hope that hidden door stays hidden. I also hope the metal door with a combination lock is enough to keep a nosy cop out if the door doesn’t stay hidden.

Chapter 4

Without feelings of respect, what is there to distinguish men from beasts?
—Confucius

LOGAN

“He’s been quiet for two days,” Elise says, still studying the latest reports from the forensics found.

“He’s being cautious. He wants attention, but he doesn’t want me to win, and especially not before he reaches his endgame.”

“What’s his endgame?”

“Lana,” I say, gripping my pen tightly.

“We don’t know that,” Lisa argues.

I ignore her. She’s acting like a jealous girlfriend, after having not acted that way in over a year. I’m not sure what her issue is all of the sudden, but it’s petty and pointless, especially now of all times.

“We have a problem,” Donny says, taking brisk steps on his way to my desk.

“We have a board full of problems,” I remind him, gesturing to all the unsolved cases.

“Two guys from Delaney Grove are missing.”

My skin prickles, and I sit up straighter. “Is it just a coincidence? The unsub has been killing them in their homes.”

“He’s also been targeting single males who live in seclusion. Lawrence Martin lives with a roommate, and is a twenty-nine-year-old ad executive from New York. He went missing sometime in the past ten or eleven days.”

“Holy shit,” Elise says. “All of them have been found no later than four days. It has to be a coincidence, especially since he doesn’t fit all of the victimology.”

“Too coincidental,” I tell her, then focus on Donny. “Why didn’t the roommate report him missing sooner?”

“He wasn’t sure if Lawrence had hooked up with a girl, or if he was staying at the office. I also got the impression he didn’t really care, but rent is due, and he said Lawrence is always there to hand

over his half. He never showed up yesterday, he's been missing at work, and no one has seen him."

"And the other?" Elise prompts.

"Tyler Shane," Donny answers. "Twenty-seven-year-old tech analyst from West Virginia. Moved there from Delaney Grove straight out of high school. His girlfriend just reported him missing today."

"So he has a girlfriend?" I ask, confused. "Our unsub has been targeting single males only."

"He also has a wife," Donny says, his eyebrows raising. "Apparently she got pictures and screenshots of messages between Tyler and a Denise Watkins—the girlfriend—from an anonymous tipster. She left that day and hasn't been back. She didn't even know he was missing, and I don't think she cares."

"Any chance she's responsible for him missing?" Lisa asks, glaring daggers through me. "After all, crimes of passion are more likely than a serial kill."

Everyone looks between us, as though they're asking questions, but I have no clue what her problem is.

"She's been in L.A. since she left," Donny says, clearing his throat as he gets back on point. "Her work requires a lot of travel, and she just decided to stay gone this last time and take a couple of days to herself. Across the country is a damn good alibi."

"Check it out," I tell him. "Make sure she's legit. Check into Lawrence Martin's financials too. See if he made any large withdrawals. Same for Tyler Shane. Also check into the roommate and girlfriend. Our guy hasn't been taking them from their homes, and has only been targeting single, solitary men."

"And if it is our guy?" Leonard asks, joining us.

"Then we'll need to revisit the profile and finally deliver the story to the media. A sexual sadist was a stretch to begin with. If these two are linked to our unsub, then he's not a sexual sadist. He's just a sadist. Look into anyone who might have tortured animals."

I grab my notebook, scratching down some notes. "There were never any hesitation marks," I say quietly, studying photos of the first victim. "This guy is comfortable around death and killing. No patterns of rage have been found. He's only targeting people who have left town."

“Which means he could have killed before,” Lisa adds.

“Hence the tortured animals bit,” I say, shifting the photos around on my desk. “He may be bitter these people left that town and have successful lives. We’ll deliver the profile to the media if we find the bodies.”

They all nod, and I pick up my phone, dialing Lana. She answers almost immediately.

“Hey, you, how’s the hunt?” she asks, sounding breathy and happy.

“Quiet right now. Hadley is running some of the forensics in an effort to see if we can get ahead of him. Why do you sound out of breath?”

“I’m on the phone. I’ll be right back,” she calls out to someone. “Sorry,” she says into the phone. “I was working out with Duke. He’s showing me some moves.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline as I stand up.

“Duke?”

“Detective John Duke. He just showed up today to start bunking with me. He said everyone just calls him Duke. He’s the guy you assigned to my house, remember?”

No. No I don’t remember. It was supposed to be Marley St. James, an older guy who is on the verge of a promotion. He’s been there since the day I had to leave. Why did they pull him?

John Duke…I’ve never heard of him.

“What happened to Marley?” I ask distractedly.

“He had something come up, I guess. I didn’t pry for details. We never really spoke. He mostly kept to himself while he was here.”

I quickly lean over my chair, remaining standing, and type the new name into the computer as Lana continues. John Duke’s picture flashes across my screen, and I almost drop my phone.

Motherfucker.

Twenty-eight. Fit. Single. Ambitious. Newly promoted to homicide detective—a coveted spot. Definitely not ugly—can’t believe I’m admitting that.

And he’s in my girlfriend’s house. Sleeping there. Staying with her while I’m here. Alone together.

I’m going to kill someone for fucking this all up.

“Logan?” Lana prompts, sounding worried. “You okay?”

“Just curious how a homicide detective has time to come babysit,” I say casually, grabbing my bag from the floor and heading toward the door. I’m due a few hours of sleep, and I know where I want to take those few hours.

“Um…he said his boss dude told him to come here. The department is taking this threat seriously. Duke is who they thought would be best to surprise Plemmons if or when he shows up.”

Throwing a tantrum is not on my agenda. The local PD want to make the arrest, and are using this as a way to get a leg up on us, since we’re outsourcing her protective detail to them. Since *I’m* outsourcing her protective detail to them.

I’ll deal with Duke when I get there.

“I don’t know him, Lana. They apparently sent in someone they want to take credit for any arrests.”

“Kind of figured as much,” she says quietly, but there’s a mocking lilt to her tone.

“Why’s that?” I ask, getting into my SUV.

“Because there’s no way you’d send *that* guy to come stay in my house while you’re gone.”

I snort derisively, then relax when she laughs.

“Don’t worry, Agent Bennett. I normally don’t play with boys who wear badges. You’re my only exception.”

Then there’s that. I’m still confused about that. No criminal record means no run-ins with police. Unless there’s a sealed juvie record, but nothing popped when Hadley ran her name through the system.

“Keep me awake while I drive,” I tell her, not commenting on any of the other.

“You want me to tell you about how I broke my vibrator this morning?”

I swerve the car, cursing as a horn blares.

“Logan? You okay?” she asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Yeah,” I grumble. “Fine. How’d you break your vibrator?”

This girl… I swear she gets off on surprising me. Every time I think I have her figured out, she throws me another curve ball.

She laughs lightly. “Well, I pulled it out of my drawer, peeled my panties off on my bed, and when I slid it down my body, building up the anticipation as it buzzed…it slipped out of my hand, hit a crease in the bed, and crashed against the floor. The fun part broke off.”

Laughter escapes me before I can stop it, and I feel her smile.

“What if I told you your vibrator could retire for the night?”

“I’d say *duh.* Because it’s worthless now.”

“I meant, I’m coming there,” I say, still partially laughing under my breath.

“Really? You can get away?” The excitement in her tone has me driving a little faster.

“On my way right now,” I tell her, smiling when I hear her sigh like she’s content.

“Well, good, then you can—”

My phone beeps with an incoming call, and I groan, cutting her off mid-sentence.

“You need to let me go, don’t you?” she muses.

“Yes. Unfortunately. I’ll see you in about twenty though.”

“Be safe.”

I hang up and answer my call without looking to see who it is.

“Bennett.”

“I found a few things that could give us a lead. Where are you?” Hadley asks.

“Just left a few minutes ago. Take what you found to Donny. I’m going to crash for a couple of hours and get some sleep in an actual bed.”

“Your bed?” she asks, an edge to her tone.

“No. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Logan, we need to talk about something,” she says hesitantly.

“Which is?”

After several long seconds, she finally exhales a loud, frustrated breath. “Nothing. At least nothing for now. I’ll let you know if I find something.”

Weird.

“Right. So get with Donny on what you’ve found, and—”

“You seriously don’t want to look over this yourself?” she interrupts.

“Is it going to break the case? Will it lead us to him?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then give it to Donny. I need sleep, Hadley. I’ll be back in as soon as my eyes aren’t trying to close on their own.”

A loud yawn sneaks out, as if cued, and she sighs harshly.

“Okay. See you later.”

Hanging up, I run the case over in my head and resist the urge to call Lana back just because I hate the idea of her being there alone with a single guy. A single guy who might be touching her because of their ‘workout.’ A single guy who is apparently trying to connect with her.

My grip tightens against the steering wheel.

I have to get ahold of this jealousy thing.

Chapter 5

To see and listen to the wicked is already the beginning of wickedness.
—Confucius

LANA

I dodge a slow punch from Duke, smirking at how easy he's taking it on me. He wants me to have some skillset in case things get out of hand. He walked in and demanded we spar so he can see what I need to work on.

He's weak on his left side, constantly leaving himself open to attack. His form is sloppy, amateur boxing style at best. Most likely he was raised in a militant household where the father showed him a few techniques—archaic and outdated techniques.

In a real fight, I'd have him pinned and begging for mercy in under two minutes.

But I'm supposed to be a normal girl. I eat an excess of calories daily to stay a little soft, hiding the skill behind femininity so that I don't tone up too much and cast a sheet of transparency over my façade.

Duke is grinning when I throw a weak, pathetic little punch at his left. He easily bats it down, and I bite back the smirk I want to reveal. I love little secrets.

There's a certain high you get from fooling the world into thinking you're the lamb instead of the rabid wolf.

"Alright. Let's train on the wall. Plemmons always chokes the women to the brink of unconsciousness. I'm going to show you how to break the hold, and you're going to replicate it."

I nod, following along as he wipes sweat off his brow. It's good he's not as apt at profiling as Logan. He'd notice I'm not sweating, meaning I'm in better physical shape than he is. You can't fake sweat.

He stands against the wall and gestures for me.

"Hands on my throat."

I do as instructed, overlapping my thumbs as I form a choking hold with my hands. It's a terribly inefficient way to choke someone. A little bit of wire does the trick much better.

He grins down at me as I tighten my hold, and his arms dart up between mine, shoving them open in a blink. He spins me, and I let him, fighting really damn hard against my reflexes as he slams me against the wall. His hands go around my neck, and he arches an eyebrow as he squeezes just tight enough to piss me off.

"Do what I just did. Okay?" he asks, squeezing a hair tighter.

I feign imitation, acting as though I'm struggling to mirror his earlier movements, when I hear the door shut and something drop.

"What the fucking hell?" Logan's voice has me grinning, but when I try to move, Duke holds me steady, gripping tighter to my neck.

"She needs to be prepared," Duke says, tightening even more.

When breathing actually becomes difficult, my mind shuts down the little fuse that holds back my reflexes, and my hand shoots up between the stupid gap he's left between our bodies.

A pained yelp leaves him as the heel of my palm connects with the soft tissue of his throat, and he falls backwards, choking on air as my senses slam back into me.

Ah, shit.

Logan smirks then recovers, banishing the reaction as Duke heaves for air. I don't think I hit him hard enough to collapse his windpipe.

I hope.

"Sorry," I say with forced contrition. "I panicked."

Duke coughs and then a loud sound of an inhale resonates in my ears as he slowly stands. Thank goodness he's breathing.

He rubs his throat, his cheeks flaming with a blushing hue.

"Good instincts," he says, swallowing hard. "Just do that if he comes at you."

Plemmons won't leave that large space between our bodies. He's an experienced choke-artist. Detective Duke is not. If you're going to choke someone face to face, you give them zero room between your bodies.

But I obviously don't point that out. A good, sane, non-stabby girl wouldn't know that.

I move to Logan, wondering if he suspects anything, but he looks like he's more amused than anything as he tugs me to his body, wrapping an arm possessively around my middle.

"You must be SSA Bennett," I hear Duke say from close behind me, but I don't turn around as Logan keeps me pressed to him.

With one arm still around my waist, Logan reaches over with his free hand, and I look over my shoulder as Duke shakes it.

Logan's hand that's on me slides down to my spandex-clad ass, and he rests it there, as though he's proving a point. He's cute when he's jealous.

"I wasn't aware homicide could spare someone to help watch after my girl," Logan says, though I hear the edge he tries to hide.

A slow, calculated grin curves over Duke's mouth.

"We're taking the possible threat very seriously, SSA Bennett."

"I'm sure it'd be a dream come true to get an arrest this high profile, especially in a field that is always overshadowed by the FBI, since we're just down the road and all."

Logan is taunting. Duke is arrogant. And I'm worried there's about to be a sword fight in my living room. And not with actual swords.

"You mean arresting a man you brought to DC? A man who is killing high class residents because the *FBI* slipped up and let him get away, even after figuring out his name?"

Logan's jaw tics, and I internally curse Detective Dipshit.

"Logan, I'm sure you're exhausted. I'd rather not waste what little time I have with you so you can throw down the gauntlet in a pissing match."

Duke snorts, and I turn and glare at him. "You shut up."

He grins and walks down the hall, heading to his guestroom.

"Remove him from my house, and that will solve the problem," I tell Logan, but he shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair.

"I have Donny running a thorough check on him, but if he's as clean and decorated as his file suggests, then he's the best option for keeping you safe."

I'm the best option for keeping me safe. I think it's adorable that he believes Duke to be more capable than me though.

I start tugging at his arm, pulling him toward my bedroom. "You look exhausted. Stop worrying about me and get some sleep."

His eyes are heavy, and I can tell he's tired. The sun set a few hours ago, but it's likely he hasn't slept in over twenty-four hours.

He follows me without argument, and I can tell he's already close to being asleep when he drops to the bed, fully clothed. Grinning, I start undoing his tie, and he smirks as I do.

"Don't get any ideas," I say, pulling away the black fabric and tossing it to the ground. "Sleep first. More later."

"Only if you sleep with me."

I help him shed his jacket, shoes, shirt, socks, and pants, getting him down to just his boxers. It's very tempting to run my mouth over all the lines of lean muscle, but I refrain. The exhaustion shining from his eyes curbs all of my other urges.

In my tank and tiny shorts, I snuggle in next to him, and his arms come around me, holding me close. "Wear pants around that guy. No more of this," he murmurs against my forehead, squeezing my ass through the little spandex shorts.

Grinning like an idiot, I roll my eyes. "You're a total caveman."

"Not normally," he says around a yawn.

He doesn't even know how saying things like that does weird things to my soul, adding back the lost pieces I thought were forever gone. I feel more human with each passing day. Less like a soulless monster with a thirst for blood.

Not that I want to stop killing; I just want to feel more like the carefree, happy girl I was before they stole it all. Before they ruined me.

"You should stay in a hotel with more security than this," he says, half asleep already as his body slowly relaxes.

"I'm fine here. You need to stop worrying about me."

I run my fingers through his hair, and he groans as he leans into the touch, getting even more comfortable as he fights sleep.

"Hadley said you're loaded. You can afford something with higher security than any law enforcement can offer. I just want you safe, Lana. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

My entire body goes rigid.

“Hadley? What else did she tell you?”

“Mm?” His eyes are closed, and I hate prying right now. “She said you were loaded, and I told her to stop prying.”

Obviously she didn’t stop prying.

“Were…um…you two also involved?”

He release a lazy rumble of laughter as his arms tighten around me. He keeps his eyes closed as he answers.

“We’re a pair, aren’t we?” he asks in a soft, sleepy tone. “How long before we trust each other?”

Trust…

Yeah, that’s a whole other issue for another day.

I’m not talking about trust. I’m talking about a crazy girl who showed up with more information than she should have pieced together. I should have anticipated him asking me those questions, but I thought all was clear after the first few weeks.

I never saw her coming.

I hate surprises.

“Well?” I prompt.

He grins, still keeping his eyes shut.

“She’s like a kid sister. I took her under my wing when she first started in our department. Hadley doesn’t date, and when she does date, she doesn’t date men.”

She’s into women? Women only?

A sense of calm washes over me. He’s making me ridiculous. I have a kill list a mile long that could put me on death row—since some of the states still have death row. I’m playing a constant game of life and death.

He snuggles in closer, content to just hold me. Instinctively, I continue running my fingers through his hair, and he moans as he slowly drifts off. When he starts breathing evenly, I know he’s down for the count.

I don’t stop running my fingers through his hair. Something inside of me seems to fuse together, and my heart beats to a steadier rhythm than it has in years.

His arms stay around me, and for once in ten years, I feel safe. I feel treasured.

I feel something other than empty.

I don't even realize how much time has passed until his phone is going off with an alarm. My eyes dart over to the dresser to see it's close to midnight.

He groans as his arms leave me, and a chill settles onto every spot his touch has abandoned. He cuts off the alarm, and he rolls back over, wrapping me into his arms again, and kisses the side of my neck.

"I bet you didn't have this in mind when you signed on to date me," he says in his sexy, sleep-gruff voice.

"You warned me your schedule was crazy. I don't mind."

"I meant all the extra craziness," he says, running his lips up higher, nipping my ear enough to elicit a small shudder from me.

His hand starts working down my shorts, and I lift my hips, eager to give him access.

Then that damn phone rings.

He curses.

I mutter a few words.

"Everything okay in there?" Duke asks from outside my bedroom door, reminding me he's in my house.

A serial killer sharing a house with a homicide detective and a FBI agent.

Life doesn't get more complicated than this.

I just hope it takes Logan forever to find Tyler and Lawrence, that way I have him to myself a little more. He works too much, and I can tell he's exhausted.

It's sad that I want to hide my bodies now so that my boyfriend gets a break and can spend more time with me.

How twisted can one person possibly get?

"It's fine," Logan calls out, glaring at the door.

He grabs his phone, answering it with his last name only, and I sit up to kiss his shoulder as he talks.

"No, I'm at Lana's house, why?"

He grows stiff, and I remove my lips from his shoulder. When he blows out a harsh breath, I run my hand up his back.

"Yeah. Come get me. It's on the way. I'll grab a shower and something to eat before you get here."

He hangs up before turning to me, brushing his lips over mine just barely.

“Care if I use your shower.”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t even have to ask.”

“I’d ask you to shower with me, but we have another body. I need to be ready before Craig gets here.”

I gesture toward the bathroom, and he groans as he stands.

Following him in, I hop up on the sink, admiring the view as he strips out of his boxers and climbs into the shower, turning the spray on. I grimace. That has to be cold.

He doesn’t so much as flinch.

“I feel like you’re getting screwed out of all the good stuff and skipping right to the worst case scenarios,” he says over the sound of the water.

“I’m currently not getting screwed. Did he leave more messages?”

He grunts, and I watch as he tips his head back, running his hands through his hair to wet it. I think shower times should get watched from now on. This is hot. I want to video it so I can perv more later—after I buy a replacement vibrator.

“Just his media name and the words ‘You can’t’ were carved. Two bodies in two days is a rapid devolution. He’s getting too bold.”

I dropped two bodies in one day, but I hardly feel like now is the time to brag about my awesome efficiency.

“How’s he choosing his victims?”

We shouldn’t be talking about an active case. It’s against the rules. But this one actually concerns me, considering I’m probably a target. So that makes it…okay?

“He’s choosing mostly brunettes in their mid-twenties. All were low risk victims, but none were put on display until he came here. This latest one was found tied to the top of her car, and the car was moved to the middle of the street. That’s all I know so far.”

I think that over before responding.

“He’s feeling the high. There’s a certain feeling of invincibility when the killer finds it impossible to get caught. It probably turns him on more than the torture to see everyone quivering in fear. He’s also

approving of his media name, adopting the persona. Everyone fears the Boogeyman growing up. Now he's reigniting that fear in adults."

He blows out a breath of agreement, and I try to think of something to say.

"*You can't?* That's an odd message."

"Yeah. I'm sure it's a taunt. Maybe he got interrupted before he could finish."

Maybe…

When it grows quiet, I think of something else to say, just to make it look like I'm asking more questions than about the killer.

"Does it bother you that I didn't tell you I was rich?"

"No," he says immediately. "I like the fact you're humble. My stepdad always said that those who strive to be humble detest the ways of the arrogant."

I like that.

"And for the record, I can tell your past is a sore subject, so I don't want to press for any information there either. I enjoy just getting to know who you are now," he adds, causing me to smile and grimace at the same time.

He's bringing back parts of me that I thought were dead, resurrecting my soul from ashes. But all the shadows that lurk inside me, hiding the monster within… Those are parts he can never see.

He shuts off the shower and steps out just as quickly, grabbing a towel from the rack. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't distracted by the way the water seems to follow all the lines of his abs to the towel as he conceals my happy place with the fluffy fabric.

An audible sigh escapes me in dreamy fashion, and Logan smirks, arching an eyebrow at me. I'm not even ashamed that I'm ogling him.

It feels good to crave someone and *want* them. I won't take it for granted or be embarrassed.

He grabs a toothbrush from his bag—when did that get in here?—and sidles up next to me to start brushing his teeth.

We look like a Sunday morning special right now—instead of killer and hero.

As soon as he's finished brushing his teeth, he slides my legs apart and settles in between them. I don't protest at all when he

kisses me, tasting minty and ultra fresh.

My fingers tangle in his hair as I pull him closer, savoring this while I can. There's no telling when he'll be back.

He laughs when he tries to break the kiss, only to be pulled back down by me. Unfortunately, his phone rings again, and I'm forced to let go.

This time it's a text, and he reads whatever it says. He puts it away, his face expressionless as he looks up at me.

"I'll take you on another date soon. And another. And another. I'll make all this worth it. I'll also be back here tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. It's not much, but right now—"

"Stop acting like you're not enough," I tell him, kissing him again.

I want to tell him he's too good for me.

I want to beg him to save my soul from damnation.

I want to plead with some powers above to take away the pain that drives me…

To let karma step in and handle the rest.

But I'm the only reckoning there will be.

"Scream for me, little Victoria. Scream loud."

"Always knew you were a little whore."

"Hold her down!" Kyle says, laughing as I struggle in vain, holding back the sob on the tip of my tongue, refusing to let them see me break.

"Leave her alone!" Marcus cries from behind me, and my heart clenches as excruciating pain slices through my body.

"Open your eyes, sweetheart. You don't want to miss this."

"Do it, Marcus. Do it or we'll make it so you never do it again."

Hours and hours and hours of taunts. The night I should have died is forever seared into my memory. Their sins stained my soul with so much darkness that their deaths are needed to cleanse me.

To make me feel whole again.

I need to replace their taunts and evil laughter with the sounds of their screams.

I sleep better with each new scream I get to add. The screams override the scent of their breath, the strikes of their hands, and their dirty, disgusting fingers.

They'll never hurt anyone else. Even if they rise from the dead, they lost their tools of pain.

The rest will join them soon enough.

I can't stop now.

Not even for Logan.

Chapter 6

The superior man is modest in his speech, but exceeds in his actions.
—Confucius

LOGAN

“All is quiet since that last kill two days ago,” Craig says, stating the obvious.

I nod, my mind buzzing a thousand miles a minute.

I’ve kept my promise, going back to see Lana, even though I spend all the time sleeping. She stays cuddled against my side, strumming her fingers through my hair, as though she has nothing better to do.

“He’s smart. Police presence has increased,” I say numbly.

I’ve never felt so personal about a case.

“What does ‘you can’t’ supposed to mean?” he asks, pensive as he studies the close-up of the writing on the body.

“I don’t know. You can’t stop me? I think he got interrupted.”

“Then there could be a witness. I have that press conference coming up in three hours. I’ll see if I can get anyone to come forward.”

I nod absently, running my finger over my lips. The director has put all our other cases on hold. This is currently our only priority, and we’re to treat it as though it’s our only case.

“Forensics came back on those fibers we found on the last victim’s body,” Hadley says, dropping a file to my desk. “I looked into it, and you can only find that type of thing in an old factory that was closed down four years ago. Homeless people shack up in it fairly regularly. He could be there and blending in. It’s about two hours from here. I’ll send the address to your phone.”

I’m out of my chair and grabbing my gun in the next breath, and Donny races to catch up with me as I head out the door. Hadley stays behind, but Lisa and Elise join us as we burst through the doors, practically jogging.

Donny makes the calls for backup, and I pull up my phone to see the address Hadley has already sent. He'd need a vehicle to get from there to here, so I call Hadley.

"What's up?"

"You and Alan start sifting through any car thefts between here and there. He's got wheels. I doubt he's taking the bus after soaking in a blood bath."

"On it."

She ends the call, and I pocket my phone, rushing my steps. We better catch the son of a bitch.

Lisa and Elise take the lead in their SUVs, and I follow behind them with Donny at my side, both of us turning on our lights. "Fuck," I hiss, whipping into a gas station when my low fuel light pops on.

I call Elise as Donny hops out to hurriedly push some gas into the tank.

"You'll get there before us, but don't go in until we're on the scene. Got it?" I say the second Elise answers.

"Got it. We'll have to wait for local PD to back us up anyway."

I hang up, tapping my fingers impatiently on the steering wheel as I wait for Donny. Deciding I need to do something, I text Lana.

ME: You okay?

LANA: Bored to death, but fine. Playing cards with Duke and taking all his money. You okay?

Have I mentioned I really hate Duke being there alone inside the house with her? If she didn't need a protective detail, I'd be kicking his ass for seeing her more than I get to.

ME: I'll be fine once this guy is in cuffs.

I don't mention the shoot-to-kill order.

LANA: Stop worrying about me. I promise I'll be fine. You don't know this about me, but I'm a survivor. <3

I don't know a lot of things about her. But a past doesn't make a person, and that's all she's holding back. I trust that she'll share that

when she's ready.

Donny hops into the car, and I pocket my phone before cranking it back up and squealing out of the parking lot.

Donny handles organizing the swat team, telling them to pull back until we arrive on scene.

A loud truck passes us, blowing its horn, and Donny flips off the driver as I keep my tunnel vision, never slowing down.

We're about twenty miles from our destination, when I slam on my brakes, my stomach roiling as I stare at the SUV off the side of the otherwise deserted road. The backend is crushed, the glass busted out.

It's turned on its side, and Donny curses before leaping out of the passenger side, racing to Elise and Lisa who may or may not still be in there.

I dive out as well, juggling my phone free, and calling for an ambulance. Cursing my low battery, I quickly give them our location and tell them to hurry. Putting away my almost dead phone, I slide to the front, trying to see through the window.

From this angle, I can tell they were T-boned from the road connecting to this one. Elise and Lisa are both unconscious, and Elise is bleeding from her forehead. Her side took the brunt of the impact, but I can't tell how much damage she's sustained from here.

"Logan!" Donny yells.

I rush around, seeing Lisa's door jammed into the ground as Donny breaks the front glass, trying to peel it back now that he has something to pry open. Using the crowbar, he pries the top down, and I toss off my jacket, wrapping it around my hands to help him peel the windshield all the way back.

Lisa is breathing heavily, and her eyes are dazed as she blinks them open. She cries out, and lifts her right arm—the one closest to her door.

My eyes widen in disbelief when I see the blood flowing from the shallow cuts.

"It was him," she says, sucking in a pained breath. "It was him. It was him."

Her panicked breaths quicken, and Donny tries to calm her down as I look at Elise.

“Elise!” She doesn’t answer, but she finally groans.

Relief washes through me that she’s still alive.

“He did this,” Lisa is saying, still panicking as she points to her bloody arm. “He took our guns. He thought he got all of them. He… He had a gun. He hit us…then he pointed the gun at us. We…we were still upright when he came to my side, telling us to keep our hands where he could see them.”

She cries out, trying to undo the seatbelt.

“Then…then he broke my window, and he used the glass… He used the glass to write this,” she says, sobbing as she holds her arm up again.

“He was going to kill us, but I grabbed my spare gun when he dropped my arm to retrieve his gun. I shot at him. I shot twice. I grazed him. But…That bastard. He had someone with him. A girl. He had a girl. He knew we were coming. But he carved this.”

Her sentences are all over the place, barely making any sense.

All I can see on her arm are blood smears, but she wipes it off on her shirt and holds it up again. Donny’s breath leaves as he pales. Carved in her skin is the word “KEEP.”

“He knows us,” Donny whispers as Lisa breaks down into sobs again. “He chose Lisa instead of Elise. There’s a reason he targeted your ex.”

His tone is hushed, so as not to agitate Lisa, and my body tenses at the insight. Why “KEEP?” Why that word?

“He’s bleeding,” Lisa chokes out. “I shot him enough to make him bleed. He’ll need stitches at least.”

I look around, finding a light blood trail. It’s not enough for him to die from though. Fuck!

“The truck that fucking passed us,” I say through clenched teeth. “It was him. He even blew his motherfucking horn!”

I slam my fist down on the car, and Donny goes as stiff as I do.

“I hope that shoot-to-kill order remains,” Donny growls.

“Someone tipped him off. He knew we were coming.”

“Is the girl his accomplice?”

I shake my head, hating what’s going on inside it right now. “Nothing in the profile indicates a partner. Nothing in his profile indicates a relationship with police either. No. He’s smart.

Calculated, even. He had a fail-safe plan. If he was hiding in this town, there was a reason he felt safe. Look into their local PD. Find out if any of the officers who were aware of this raid has a daughter or a wife. Then go door to door. Find out if someone is missing. It wouldn't be reported."

His eyes widen. "You think he took a hostage?"

"Yeah. And now that his location has been burned, he no longer needs her alive."

And we let him drive right by us. That sick, narcissistic son of a bitch honked at us, taunted us, knowing we were on our way to him. And I never even looked up.

I'm supposed to be observant of my surroundings at all time. My personal involvement in this case is fucking with my head, making me have tunnel-vision, and knocking me off my game.

He's winning.

Chapter 7

Death and life have their determined appointments.
—Confucius

LOGAN

“Lisa is okay. She’s in a little shock, but otherwise okay,” Donny says as he hands me a cup of coffee. Our entire team is in a hospital waiting room right now.

The security detail makes me nervous, because someone from the police force sold us out.

“Only cops with no kids or family at Lana’s from now on,” I say to Donny, who nods. “We’ve only been out in public once. It’s possible he doesn’t even know she exists. It’s been her house mostly we’ve stayed at when I see her, and I’d know if I’d been followed.”

I take a sip of the coffee as he types out a text, probably relaying my request.

“Elise?” I ask him.

“She’s coming around. Her left shoulder was dislocated, and she has two breaks in her left leg where it got pinned on impact. She’s not in shock, but she is fucking pissed.”

He smirks, and I laugh under my breath. Elise will take this as personally as I am now. Then again, everyone has a personal investment now. He came after two of ours, and called me out by name. It’s our mission—our only focus—to bring him down.

Hadley is typing furiously on her laptop. She hasn’t been a techie for years, ever since she became the best in the field on forensics. But now she’s dusting off her old skills, trying to find any footage of which girl Plemmons might have had with him.

Donny and I described the truck—old Ford, beat up, jacked up, and big brush guard on the front. You couldn’t tell it’d been the tool to crash them, because it sure as hell didn’t look like it’d been in a wreck.

“Anything?” I ask Hadley.

Her eyes narrow to slits.

“Not yet. But I will find this son of a bitch.”

“He could be somewhere in the hospital. He’ll want to see this show. Or, if he has any computer skills, he may be hacked into the feed,” I tell her.

She nods. “On it. I already informed the cops of something like that when we got here,” she explains. “They’ve been canvassing the hallways and such.”

“Lisa shooting at him probably pissed him off. He hit them from the rear, sent them sliding around, and then slammed them again. It dazed them enough to give him an edge,” Leonard says as he sits down. “Then after Lisa shot him, he got in the truck, got a good run-and-go from that side road, and T-boned them, probably trying to kill them.”

“He’s a sexual sadist looking for an easy kill? Just to piss us off?” Donny asks, shaking his head.

“He wants us investing all our attention into him. He’s winding us up,” I say through clenched teeth.

“It’s working,” Leonard growls.

A woman pokes her head in. “Ms. Clifton is asking for you,” she says, looking at us all instead of being specific.

Donny, Leonard, and I stand up, and Craig comes jogging down the hall, joining us as we walk toward the room where they’re holding Elise.

Before we make it, my eyes land on a familiar brunette who is racing toward me with wide, terrified green eyes. Her entire body visibly relaxes when she sees me, and she launches herself into my arms.

I grab Lana, holding her to me, as she shakes and trembles. Detective Duke is right on her heels, panting heavily as he doubles over, resting his hands on his knees.

“Fucking marathon runner or something?” he asks between labored breaths.

Lana doesn’t speak. She just clings to me, her arms wrapped tightly around my neck.

“I was so worried,” she finally says.

“They said your team was hit,” Duke explains, running a hand through his hair. “She drove. I couldn’t talk her out of coming. They

wouldn't tell us who was hit."

I hold her for a second longer. Three of my team members are staring at us with raised eyebrows, before I finally snap back to reality.

Fuck!

I drop her to the ground and push her away, ignoring the way she blanches.

"You can't fucking be here!" I yell, then cut my eyes to Duke. "Why the fucking hell would you bring her?"

His eyes narrow to slits. "Did you miss the part where I said she was coming with our without me. I came to keep her safe."

I gesture to Lana, all 5'4 of her. "She weighs 120 at most. You're at least 200 with law enforcement training, yet you can't restrain her?"

Lana backs away, saying nothing, but my eyes are on Duke, furiously glaring at him. He glares back, just as furious.

"She's not a prisoner or a criminal. I can't legally confine her to her damn house, you arrogant asswipe."

Donny takes a step between us, as though he's preparing for things to go bad.

"He's possibly here or watching, and you bring her here? I'm not fucking stupid. You *want* him to find her. Especially now. You want a new promotion from a shiny little arrest for the highest profile killer in the nation right now."

He takes a threatening step toward me, and Donny wedges between us more when I take a step too.

"I couldn't give a shit about that. I came because I was trying to keep her safe. I don't have any authority to confine an innocent civilian to her home, and neither do you."

I open my mouth to yell at him some more, when Lana calmly inserts herself into the conversation, her haunted eyes icy and detached, something I haven't seen in a while.

"You told me to have a protective detail, and I agreed," she says quietly. I swallow down my words as she continues. "You told me to let a stranger stay in my house; I agreed, even though I didn't want to. I take someone with me when I leave. I've put my business deals on hold to appease you, not traveling and risking myself. I've sat in a

protective bubble, answering all your calls and texts promptly so you don’t worry about me.”

Her eyes glisten, but I can tell they’re nothing more than angry tears. And I realize I’ve seriously fucked up.

Chapter 8

When anger rises, think of the consequences.
—Confucius

LANA

Harsh. Oblivious. Arrogant.

Three words I never thought I'd use to describe the man before me.

Unfairly confining me to my house, while not giving me the same option of knowing he's safe… I can't even put into words how pissed off I am.

"You don't even take the time to fire off a text that you're okay," I go on, keeping my tone even, refusing to show too much emotion.

I don't bleed for the world anymore.

He saw more than anyone else, and he didn't bother to care when it mattered the most.

"Lana, I get that you're pissed, but you can't be here," he says, his voice softening.

"I see that," I retort tightly, taking a step back. "Sorry I cared. It won't happen again."

Tacky and juvenile as that sounds, it's a bitter girl's prerogative right now.

I turn and start walking away, but he follows, grabbing my arm. I rip it free from his grip.

"You don't understand," he whispers, looking over at a camera. "He could be watching. We don't know what he's capable of right now, and his past is mostly a mystery."

"You put me in a bubble, and I gave you peace of mind. You cared. I'd do anything to ease your mind so that you didn't worry." I swallow down the knot in my throat, refusing to get emotional, disallowing my weakness or vulnerability to shine. "I worry too, Logan. Duke got the call your team was hit, and you were all at the hospital. You wouldn't even answer your phone. Or send a text. Or respond to my hundreds of texts. I can handle a lot of things, but I won't let you walk all over me, then refuse to offer me the same

peace of mind. And then get pissed at me? Talk down to me? Who the hell do you think I am?"

I turn and walk away, and he lets me, because he can't follow. He can't make a scene.

The Boogeyman could be watching.

Let the sick bastard come.

I need something to stab.

"Stay with her. I'll be there as soon as I can get free," I hear Logan saying, probably to Duke as I keep walking. "And someone find me a fucking phone charger!"

The first tear falls as I step into the open elevator and stab the Lobby button fiercely. I ran up three flights of stairs, worried out of my mind that Logan was hurt when I couldn't get him to answer my million and one calls or texts.

Turns out, I'm just someone he didn't bother to think of when I was going out of my mind with all the worst case scenarios.

Dead phone is not a good excuse. Not when everyone on the team is here with their phones he could have used.

Duke slides into the elevators just before the doors close, and he leans against the wall.

He doesn't say a word, and I toss him the keys the second we hit the lobby. Silently, we make it to the car, and make the long drive home. I don't speak. The radio is silent. The only noise is the sound of my V8 Mustang vrooming down the street.

My phone lights up with a text from Logan—guess he got that charger—but I don't bother reading it. Just like he didn't bother with me.

When we finally reach my house, I take the keys from Duke, but I cross over to the driver's seat.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Giving you time to get out of my house. I don't want to be around people right now. All of you better be off my property before I return."

His eyes widen. "Look, Lana, I get that you're pissed right now. He's an overbearing douchebag who just acted like a thoughtless prick, but don't risk your own safety to punish him. Let us stay and protect you."

I hold the door open, one foot inside the car. Duke's a good guy, but it's hard not to take this out on him, since he's the only one around right now.

"You have no legal right to be here. Just as you said. I can't stop you from loitering on the street, but you're officially trespassing if you stay on my property. Be gone before I get back, or, ironically enough, I'll call the cops."

He groans and curses, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. "Where are you going?"

"Wherever the fuck I want to," I say, flipping him off as I get into the car. "If Logan has a problem with that, remind him it's a free country," I add before shutting the door.

Without giving him more time to argue, I crank the car and slam it into first gear, spinning on a dime in my driveway, feeling my rear swing around as I start barreling out. I don't glance back as I drive to the warehouse in town that Jake rented out. I also drive with my knees as I turn off my phone and pull the battery out.

When I get there, I leave my car in the warehouse before grabbing the keys to the Altima. We have several cars I use when I go to collect the debts. No cameras are out this way, meaning no one ever sees me do this.

The warehouse has the best security, and even if someone breaks in, they won't know who it belongs to. Well, unless my pretty little Mustang is in here when they hit.

Not likely enough to be concerned.

The cars are disposed of after they serve their purpose.

I leave the warehouse, turning on a burner phone in the car, and call Jake.

"Hello?"

"It's me. Find anything on the Boogeyman?"

"No. This guy is pissing me off," he grumbles. "How's Logan?"

"He's in one piece and untouched. He's also recently single."

He grows quiet, and I ignore the tear that rolls down my cheek.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, since I'd feel so much better if you weren't dating a federal agent or living with cops, but are you sure you're not overreacting?"

“He didn’t bother to care that I was going out of my mind with worry, even though I’ve jumped through hoops to keep him updated on my safe-and-sound state.”

“Sounds…petty. Sure you’re not just looking for an excuse to get out before you get too attached?”

I’m already too fucking attached. I don’t cry.

I haven’t cried since the day the tears stopped falling.

Yet tears are breaching my eyes with a renewed vigor as I drive toward Jake’s house.

“Petty is getting pissed that he doesn’t call when he says he will. Petty is not being livid that he didn’t bother to tell me he was alive. I can’t do this, Jake. I can’t live with cops in my house. Those badges…I want to rip them off and flush them down the toilet. They wear them with pride.”

“They’re not from Delaney Grove, babe. You can’t confuse the two.”

“I’m not. They’d be dead if there was any confusion. I just feel… dirty. I don’t want them there. I don’t want him there anymore—not because he makes me feel dirty. I’m giving up too much by playing by his rules. I haven’t even started Anthony’s house yet besides the two cameras.”

“I’ve jumped a leg on that one for you, since I knew it’d be hard to go put more cameras in a house if a cop was trailing you to keep you safe. Pretty sure aiding a murderer isn’t what they had in mind.”

He’s trying to be light and funny, but I don’t have the headspace for it right now.

“Good. I need something to focus on.”

“Feeling stabby?” he muses, still trying to lighten my mood.

“Very.”

“Where are you?”

“Heading toward your house. Plotting a murder at mine isn’t going to be easy for a while.”

“Why the burner phone? And why don’t I hear your Mustang?”

“I’m in the new Altima we picked up. I’ve had a cop in my house for however long it’s been—feels like years. I don’t trust him not to call friends and put a whatever out on my ride. Also, the FBI have

the ability to turn a phone on if the battery is in it, so I don't trust the GPS to not give them my location."

"Paranoid much? They can't do that unless you're a suspect."

"You're acting like they play by the rules. Don't forget Agent Hadley Grace hacked my hospital records. Well, Kennedy's hospital records."

He blows out a long breath. "I take it back. I'm very glad this relationship is over, even though I hate that you're losing the first thing that seemed to make you smile in over ten years."

Bitterness rises, but I swallow it down as I angrily bat away the fresh tears. I don't have time to cry and wallow over a breakup. It was stupid to think I could ever be in a relationship.

I survive to avenge the wrongs of the past.

Falling in love? It's the end of a girl like me.

"Speaking of Agent Hadley Grace," Jake says, breaking me out of my concentration. "I dug up that dirt you need."

"And?" I prompt, wondering if it even matters now.

"She was recruited by the FBI at sixteen after hacking a secure file in their network. It was jail time or FBI time. It's a pretty common thing, especially amongst juvenile hacking offenders. She apparently became some sort of forensics prodigy though, and moved up to Logan's team."

"That's not dirt," I point out.

"No, but she was a hacker at sixteen because she was a runaway. Her dad died in Iraq shortly after she was born. Her mother remarried Kenneth Ferguson when Hadley was about ten. Hadley was sent to therapy about two years after he came into the picture. Her mother was a major bank president, which means she was barely even at home. And the therapist diagnosed Hadley as a pathological liar within three weeks."

I slow down, processing the facts, waiting on him to go on.

"She claimed Kenneth was touching her. Said he came for her on the nights her mother worked. They found no evidence of sexual trauma, and no evidence in his past that suggested he was a pedophile."

"So was he?"

"She was wetting the bed nightly. I'd say there was some merit."

“Pathological liars believe their lies,” I remind him.

“Pathological liars don’t get recruited by the FBI. They also never really get better. She’s never had any demerits against her. Her file is pristine. And her stepdad is now a social worker with unlimited access to children, Lana. He took a job in that field after she ran away at thirteen. It makes it seem like he needed access to other little girls.”

“What about before her?”

“He was married to a woman in Texas. A woman who had a ten-year-old daughter. A daughter who frequently wet the bed and had nightmares, according to this sealed file I just opened. No accusations were ever made there.”

A knot buds in my throat. For all the bad shit that has happened to me, that’s one thing I never had to suffer.

“I know what you’re thinking, and the answer is hell no,” Jake says after a spell of silence.

“How far away is he?”

“Damn it, Lana! I just said no. We have a list—a specific one. We have a system. First we get all the sick sons of bitches who wronged you and Marcus. Then we take out the ones who wronged your dad. That’s it. We’re not some avenging angels who can go after every pervert out there.”

“He’s a social worker with unlimited access to children—dejected kids who are far more likely to keep their pain silent so as not to feel more dejected. You said it yourself. Can you sit there and tell me you’re okay with letting him continue on with what he’s doing? Can you say that you’re no different than that dirty town who knew what was happening to us and did nothing?”

He grows quiet for so long that I know I have him.

“He’s not too far away. I’ll text you the address. Don’t use your MO. This can’t be connected to the Scarlett Slayer.”

“The what?” I ask, amused.

“It’s the name I’m going to let the media give you.”

“You’re going to let the media give me a name?”

“Yes. Yes I am. Don’t get seen, and then ditch the car in the usual place. I’ll have that guy pick it up, and I’ll come pick you up—

same thing as always. No mistakes. Have you got any kill supplies with you?”

“A knife in my boot. It’ll do. I’ll stick to rocks and sidewalks so as not to leave any tracks. As much as I’d like to cut his dick off, I’ll refrain.”

“If he’s innocent, you can’t kill him.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell my overly concerned friend. “They always confess their sins to me.”

Chapter 9

The cautious seldom err.
—Confucius

LOGAN

Frustrated, I try to keep my head here and not on Lana, who hasn't answered my calls since she walked out of the hospital five hours ago. Duke isn't answering his phone either.

Which will have serious fucking consequences.

My eyes settle on the swat team commander who is inside the interrogation room. The glass between us is a one-way glass, not that he doesn't know that.

His hands are shaking. He keeps standing and sitting, acting as though he's jittery and ready to get out.

"His twenty-year-old daughter hasn't shown up for her college classes in four days," Donny says, watching him with me. "The roommate says she had to go home because of a family loss. We're tracking phone calls to see if Plemmons contacted her that way, maybe lied with the ruse of someone passing? The mother seemed genuinely oblivious, had no idea what we were asking so many questions about."

"Brunette?" I ask him, still studying Lee Norris as he paces the room, then sits down, then stands again.

He's definitely agitated.

He's our leak.

"Yes," Donny answers. "Plemmons taking her shows a level of organization that doesn't fit with his background, or what little we know of it. He felt like he was fooling us all this time, but when we found him out, he took it as a personal challenge to one-up us."

I nod, agreeing.

"I'll go in. See if you can get ahold of Detective Duke. What did the patrols say?"

He tightens his lips, and I study him.

"What?" I prompt.

“The guys said Lana kicked them off her property. I didn’t want to tell you with so much else going on. She drove off and basically told everyone to fuck themselves. You included.”

I slam my fist against the wall, the sheetrock crumbling around it.

“I’ve never seen you lose your cool like you’re losing it now, Logan. Maybe you should take—”

“*Don’t* finish that sentence,” I bite out, rubbing my bloody knuckles on my pants, ignoring the burn. “Everyone is emotionally invested in this. Not just me. Send Leonard in with us. Norris will want to attack me within the first few minutes.”

“You sure you got the head for this?”

“He’ll spill immediately. He’ll blame us for getting his daughter killed. But he may also be the lead to catching this sick son of a bitch. My head is working just fucking fine. Find Lana. Call me if you do.”

I turn and walk out of the room, and head straight into the interrogation room, where Norris jumps up from his seat, glaring at me the second I step inside.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing locking me in here?! Do you have any idea what kind of sub-committee reports I could—”

“Erica Norris is your daughter, and she’s been missing from her college classes for four days due to a death in your family. There’s been no death in your family,” I say, shutting him up.

He turns a scary shade of white, and his entire body goes lax as he falls into the chair, losing the ability to stand.

“You just got her killed,” he says in a rasp whisper. Then his eyes turn lethal as he slams his fist against the table, fury rushing in to renew his energy. “You son of a bitch! You got her killed!”

He lunges, but Leonard shows up just in time, grabbing him by the collar, as I continue to lean against the wall, keeping my expression blank.

“You leaked the raid to him,” I go on. “What phone did you use? Did he give you one?”

“You bastard!” he spits out, choking back a sob as Leonard restrains him. “You knew he had her and still brought me in?! You cold murderer!”

I push off from the wall, moving to the table separating us, and prop my hands on it, leaning over until his eyes connect with mine.

"We had him. You tipped him off. What did you think he'd do with her once she was no longer of any use to him?"

He sobs, breaking in front of me. "He swore he wouldn't hurt her if I alerted him to any threat. He swore I'd get her back. As long as I kept my mouth shut…he swore. Now you've pulled me in here and there's no chance of that!"

"You're the reason he's out there. You're the reason we don't have him in custody right now," I remind him, an icy edge to my tone as I shut off all emotions for what he's going through as a father.

"He wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for you and your fucking team! You set a killer loose in our state, and now he has my daughter!"

"He'd be in Boston," Leonard says calmly, "killing someone else's wife, daughter, sister… We didn't make the killer, Commander. We're trying to stop him. You took our best chance away. We finally had him."

Norris loses it, sobbing so hard he becomes incoherent. His head drops to his arms, and he cries into the crook of his elbow.

It's possible his daughter is still alive, but unlikely. I have to detach myself from the guilt that tries to wiggle its way in. Casualties are *never* easy to accept. But in this line of work, they're always there. If you don't desensitize yourself from it, you don't make it two months in this field.

What he doesn't know, is that the best chance of his daughter surviving would have been for us to raid that warehouse. He'd have run. He'd have tried to get away. Bringing her along would have been too risky then.

She'd most likely still be breathing, and we'd more than likely have him in custody.

I don't tell him that. It's better for him to blame us than bear the responsibility of his own daughter's death. I can at least offer him that much mercy.

Weakly, he tosses a phone out of his pocket, and Leonard picks it up. "He sent that," Norris whispers hoarsely. "Said he'd let me hear her voice twice a day."

“Did he?” Leonard asks.

Norris wipes his eyes, nodding grimly. “Five seconds at a time. Just long enough for her to beg me to save her.”

He breaks again, and Leonard walks out with the phone. By now, Erica Norris is either dead or wishing she was. She may have been wishing it for the past four days.

Sometimes, the homeless turn a blind eye to anything going on around them. It’s their survival mechanism kicking in, not their inhumanity. It’s street-survival. They’ve suffered for so long, that suffering more would be too much. But with enough incentive, they’ll spill every word you need.

Right now, the ones living in that warehouse are telling what they know in exchange for cash—unethical, but not illegal. But the info isn’t much.

Plemmons claimed a backroom and kept the girl chained there. He locked it with a padlock when he was gone. Took her with him at other times.

Blood was found in that room. He’s already had his way with her, possibly even sliced her a few times to get what he needed, but not enough to kill her. A couple of suture kits were found in there, meaning he most likely repaired the damage he did with crude methods, just to keep her from bleeding too much.

For four days, she’s endured him. For four days, she’s likely prayed for death.

For four days, her father kept his mouth shut and played a dangerous game he had no right playing.

He should have come to us immediately, and Plemmons would already be in custody. His daughter would be in her own bed instead of wherever she is right now.

I walk out as he continues to sob, leaving him to cry in peace.

“See if you can get more out of him when the first wave of emotion is over,” I tell Donny as he meets me in the hallway. “Anything on Lana?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No. I asked Hadley to see if she could get a beat on her, since Alan is covered up in searching footage for this guy.”

I head straight toward Hadley's cubicle and find her pounding away on the keyboard. But it's not Lana she's looking for. She's searching the same footage Alan is.

"What the hell? Donny said you're trying to get a beat on Lana."

"Lana isn't my priority right now, Logan. An innocent girl is in the hands of a serial killer, and I'm trying to help save her life."

I love how she makes it sound like I'm a controlling prick instead of trying to keep someone else from landing in his hands.

"We *know* she'll be a target, especially now. If she wasn't on his radar before, she is since the hospital incident."

Hadley ignores me, still typing.

"Damn it, Hadley!"

She spins, leveling me with a cold glower. "I'm looking for the girl we know is in trouble. You deal with your girlfriend—who you barely even know—on your own. He's more than likely not skilled enough to hack the hospital feed. It's even more unlikely that he'd be stupid enough to have been there, given how organized and smart he apparently is, given our new predicament. Leave. Me. Alone."

She spins back around, and I blow out a long breath. "Fine. Find Erica Norris. Find him."

"I plan to. Thank so much for your approval," she says snidely.

I hate to admit it, but she's right. I have no business asking her to stop looking for a girl we know is in trouble to find my girlfriend. She'd be safe and tucked into her house with police protection if I hadn't lost my temper in the hospital. I should have texted her. My phone was dead, and I had no idea someone would notify Duke of what happened.

I didn't want to worry her, so I was just going to tell her about it later. When she could put her hands on me and know I was okay, see it with her own eyes. Who the fuck is notifying Duke about anything?

"Why would anyone from our department let Detective Duke in on that attack?" I ask Craig as I join at the board, where he's staring endlessly at pictures.

Even he's trying to stop Plemmons before he strikes again.

"I wondered the same thing," he says absently. "His chief called him. The chief is being looped in on the case progression,

considering we're sharing this case with local law enforcement to join manpower. He called Duke as a courtesy to your girl, but said didn't have specifics to share." Craig turns to face me. "He had specifics. He just neglected to share, and our guys wouldn't give her any information or forward her calls to any of our phones. She's not on your call list."

A chill washes over me.

"He knew she'd go there," I say tightly.

"The chief is playing us because he wants this arrest," Craig agrees. "His department gets the least attention because we're their neighbors. All the high profile stuff from DC goes straight to us, along with all the outlying cities too. It's more common here than any other place that we usually wait for an invitation for."

"So he lets her in on it through Duke, knowing she'd rush to the hospital."

"After we'd already told him we had local law enforcement guarding the hospital, checking anyone and everyone who resembled Plemmons. We told him we thought he'd want to find a way to observe our pain and see the fear or panic he'd caused."

"And he wanted him to see Lana," I bite out.

"And possibly even follow her home," Craig says, his jaw ticking. "Fucking son of a bitch. I called patrol. They told me what happened. But I'm sending one of our guys to help watch too. We have some we can spare, even though they're wet behind the ears still."

At least one person understands that Lana is also a target, and where we know he'll eventually strike if he's even aware of her.

I don't feel as paranoid or crazy now.

"Thanks," I tell him.

He shrugs. "People will see me as rational on the matter, but find it an abuse of power if you do it. It made sense for me to step in. But I'm stepping in because I see what you're seeing. Everyone else just sees Erica Norris." His expression turns grim. "She's been dead since the day he took her, even if her heart is still beating right now."

I know this, but I don't want to say it aloud to everyone else. In the backs of their minds, they know it too.

"Our only chance of saving her was stripped away when her father played a sexual sadist's game," Craig adds on a long sigh. "I

don’t have to be a profiler to know that much. Our only advantage is knowing Lana is most likely on his list. We should be concentrating all our efforts there.”

“But we can’t,” I say, the frustration welling inside me.

“Because they want us looking for this girl,” Craig agrees. “And Lana is pissed at you. Her car’s GPS was disabled shortly after she bought it. Found that out, unfortunately. And either her phone is dead, or she removed the battery to keep us from locating her that way. Clever if it’s the latter. Any reason your girl would work so hard to cover her trail like that?”

Even I admit that’s weirdly suspicious. “Lana is extremely private. She’s also not as trusting of law enforcement as I originally thought.”

He nods slowly. “Makes sense. Most people don’t trust the government in general right now. If she’s big on privacy and civil rights, it’d make sense. Does she even have wifi? Because I can’t seem to find that either.”

“I don’t exactly take the time to sync up to wifi when I’m there, so I have no clue.”

“Well, anyway, I can’t find her. I had Sarah from white collar crimes helping me out. She said the girl knew how to keep from being found. She saw this a lot when she worked sex crimes. Women who were abused repeatedly dropped off grid and became isolated and private. I doubt that’s the case with your girl, since she seems comfortable in her own skin and unafraid, but I did find a lot of similarities in her privacy extremes to what Sarah was telling me. It’s always the first conclusion she draws.”

My stomach plummets. Nothing about her has labeled her as a victim, but I think back to when I first met her. She was more detached, readily defensive, but didn’t flinch away from my touch.

No. No. My head is too crowded right now, and I’m not thinking clearly. She’s not running from anyone. If anything, she’s too brave, not understanding the severity of her situation.

“Anyone who’d ever been physically assaulted in that way wouldn’t be turning away cops, when she knows she’s a potential victim for a sexual sadist. I want her in protective custody. The

protective detail is no longer good enough. They'll take it seriously if you back me."

"Already tried that," he says, grim again. "The director said you couldn't control your girlfriend using FBI resources. He doesn't see a threat to her that can't be handled with extra patrol. He doesn't see him going after her at all, since he wasn't even aware that you were involved with someone."

"As though he's the most observant person in the world," I growl.

"We focus on what we have for now," Craig says. "They're increasing patrol, but there's very little they can do if she's banned them from her property. But due to what just happened with the swat commander, we're strapped as far as extra hands go. No one with any living family members will be allowed to know what's happening before it actually happens. That's a lot of background checks, and then locating him on top of that—"

"I get it. The director wants all our attention focused on the now instead of the possible future. It's as smart as it is stupid. But I'm worried I'm biased."

He claps my shoulder. "I may be biased too, but only because you're one of the few who knows I'm prettier than you."

I huff out a small laugh, and he grins before heading off. I need to focus. Hopefully Lana left to find a very secure hotel, and removed her phone battery because I suggested he might be skilled with a computer.

"How did this guy know the swat commander's name or his daughter's?" I ask aloud to no one in particular.

"Because he does have computer skills," Craig says immediately, as though it just dawned on him too.

"We need to get our heads cleared and start thinking like we would with any other case," I tell the room as I turn around. "Right now, he's in our heads, rushing our thought processes, and turning our emotions against us, me especially."

"Turning us on each other too," Donny says as he steps out, eyeing me. "The commander officially hates the very thing he's always stood for. Plemmons may have a genius IQ that never got

detected. There's a reason he suddenly craved the attention. A man who's never had something may be content in going on without it."

"But a man who's had a taste of something he didn't know he wanted, will work harder to taste more," Elise says, shocking us all as she hobbles into the room on crutches, looking battered and beaten, one arm in a sling.

"Damn it," Craig hisses, going to grab the emergency wheelchair from the corner.

"You try to put me in that thing, and you'll be wearing it when I'm done with you," she snarls, stopping him cold.

Her eyes turn to me.

"I want to find this son of a bitch. He's messed up somewhere. He's too comfortable with this city. Too comfortable with this entire situation. He didn't show an ounce of panic until Lisa shot him. Even then he seemed more annoyed than panicked. And if we can't find anything on his past, it's because he found a way to erase himself."

"Let's get to work then," I tell her as she hobbles to her desk. "I get first dibbs on shooting the bastard when that time comes," she adds under her breath, causing my lips to twitch.

As much as I fucking hate it, I have to stop concentrating on Lana. There's a slim chance Erica Norris will survive this, but I owe it to her to give all my effort to that slim chance.

Chapter 10

Only the wisest and stupidest of men never change.
—Confucius

LANA

Kenneth Ferguson weighs more than I expected. These details are usually sorted way ahead of time. This guy is an obese beast, and rolling him to the water's edge proves difficult, especially since I've had to walk in the dirt and will now need to cover my tracks.

At least he lives near the water though—bright side.

Monsters can come in many forms.

A pretty girl who loves the color red, for example—the color her victims bleed when they are begging to be spared.

They can also look like balding, fat slobs who hang out in their briefs and wife-beater tanks. Yeah. Talk about stereotypes. I've seen more ass crack than I care to remember.

I wade out into the water, dragging the dead body with me under the cloak of darkness. I can remember a time that I was afraid of the dark. Now even the snakes fear me.

He confessed. His sins were wrung out, and he confessed it all.

Okay, I might have needed him to get to the nitty gritty that had me swallowing back my own vomit, so I tortured him. Just a little. He broke quickly.

He deserved so much more death. He deserved to die for days. But I can't do that right now. It's risky to be doing this at all.

I swim under the cold water, washing all the blood off me, ignoring the way my tired muscles protest the chill. Pushing that beast uphill was a struggle. Not to mention those effin' stairs.

When I emerge, I watch him waver on top of the water. It holds him up with too much ease, despite his size.

The more body fat, the easier they float.

As soon as the current grabs him, I head back, picking up the hoe near the water's edge, and start digging up my tracks with it. I take my route in reverse as I hold the small but bright flashlight in my mouth to see.

It’s two in the morning, but I had to wait until now to dump his body. The bastard has neighbors within earshot, so torturing him was a pain in the ass. Fortunately, he had a basement.

Hence the damn stairs I was referring to.

I also had to hose said basement down with bleach and water to get rid of the blood. Counter forensic measures were needed for once.

Killing is so much easier when it’s on my list. Less cleanup.

I want them found when they’re on the list.

Kenneth has too much trace evidence that has to be destroyed, so the large body of salt water will do the trick. Not to mention all the little critters in the sea will get a nibble before or *if* he’s found.

The pictures I found in his nightstand told the story before he could. Seventy small children were in those pictures, mostly naked. Polaroids are a terrible creation, and pedophiles love their pictures.

There was one picture out of all of those that I took. I’m not sure why I took it. But it was Hadley at age eleven. He labeled them. Marked their ages too.

For some reason I know she won’t enjoy her coworkers seeing her face on their board if his body is ever found and those pictures are discovered. She’s strong and prideful, and most likely felt like it really was in her head all this time.

They convinced her she was crazy. Her own mother convinced her she was making it up. Paid a professional to aide in this, simply because the woman couldn’t come to grip with the possibility she was married to a pervert who was molesting her daughter.

Hadley ran away.

She ran because she thought *she* was dirty and wrong.

So many good people in this world, and it took a monster to end the suffering of so many innocent children.

I have no reason to feel indebted to a girl who wants to take me down, but there’s something forcing me to feel as though we’re kindred. I’d have gone crazy or killed myself without Jake.

She never had a Jake.

Maybe Logan is the closest thing to Jake she has, which is why she came after someone she thought was playing him.

I’d kill a bitch for Jake.

Hadley doesn't deserve to be broken, so she'll never see that picture.

I change out of my clothes on the gravel driveway, carefully watching anything that falls off me. My hair is bound tightly to my head and covered with a plastic wrap under a beanie.

My clothes are nothing special—generic brand things bought at any local store. I'm careful to buy all things that are found everywhere, so as to have nothing special isolating me.

The nail falls from my pocket, and I lean over, picking it up. I'm not sure why I'm taking a nail from his house. He's not on the list. Maybe it's a habit. Or maybe I really have adopted the serial method of trophy collecting.

Where they die, a nail gets taken.

His nail will go beside the others, finding a home with other perverted sons of bitches.

Warm and toasty in my clean, dry clothes, I drive back to the drop spot, making one detour.

An old woodshed is twenty miles down the road, resting on private hunting ground. I open the door, and hear a scurrying of motion.

Scared eyes meet mine from the kid huddled in the corner. She's dirty, scared, and all alone.

"I'm here to save you from the monster," I say softly into the dark shed.

The shaking slowly stops as she peers at me, her eyes wide and hopeful.

"Are you an angel?" she asks, her throat raw and raspy, as though she's dehydrated.

"Compared to him, yes," I say honestly.

She slowly stands, warily looking at me. She can't be older than eight.

"Do you know if he has anyone else?" I ask her, knowing he swore it was just her, but it could be more.

She shakes her head. "The other girl didn't come back."

My heart clenches. "Come on. I'm going to take you somewhere you'll be safe."

She nods, and even though she's terrified, she comes to me, ready to face anything terrible I could do versus anything he could come back and do more of.

When she stumbles, I grab her, and she doesn't flinch away. Brave girl.

She lets me help her to my car, and she slides in on the passenger side, tears already leaking from her eyes. Her hope was gone until this moment.

I jog around to the driver's side, a risky plan forming. There's one place she can go to be safe.

"You don't have a family, do you?"

She shakes her head.

"I have a friend—a woman—I knew in another life. She'd be a good momma. She'd take care of you."

She pushes her dirty hair out of her eyes. "Really? She'll keep me safe from him?"

"I'll keep you safe from him. I can promise he'll never return. Okay?"

She studies me for a long time, more tears building in her eyes. I've scared the shit out of her now. Damn it.

"You really are an angel," she says at last, causing my heart to flip.

I don't say anything else as I drive toward Lindy May's house. She's one person who can see a ghost but not flinch.

"What's your name?" I ask the girl who is relaxing more by the minute.

"He called me Pup. But my name is Laurel," she says around a yawn, leaning against the window.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel, wishing I'd cut that dick off and sewn it into his mouth.

Lindy May's house comes into view, and I debate this for a few minutes. She's a good woman. Just like Diana. Both of whom tried to seek justice for me. Lindy suffered a terrible fate because of that. She was five years older than me the night they robbed me of everything.

"I'll call the FBI!" Lindy shouts.

“Go ahead, cunt. The FBI didn’t give a damn about their father, did they?” Kyle taunts, smirking.

Dev holds her back, his face grim as she struggles to get to me.

“I’ll teach that bitch a lesson later,” Kyle mutters under his breath.

Dev starts pushing Lindy away, practically carrying her as she screams for me. She screams for Marcus. She screams for help that doesn’t come.

Music grows louder, the sounds permeating the air with no concern for the screams they’re trying to drown out.

“Now, where were we?” Kyle drawls. “Whose turn is it?”

Kyle did silence her. He didn’t just silence her; he ruined her. Lindy suffered a loss trying to save me, but puts flowers on my grave every year. She talks to that grave, saying she’s sorry she failed me.

She goes back to that hell to speak to a dead girl who she thinks she let down.

She’s a true angel.

It’s fate that she’s so close by. Fate tells me Laurel would forever be loved and cared for by Lindy. And I’m sure no one would take a homeless child away from a loving home after what this kid has suffered.

Leaving Laurel here though? Knowing this will tie Kenneth to the killer I am? It’s a huge mistake. But I can’t leave this kid just anywhere.

I pull into the driveway, and I see a set of eyes immediately peer through a crack in the blinds. All these years later, she still feels jumpy. She likely has a gun in her hand right now.

I know the feeling.

She suffered one monster. I suffered a town full of them.

As I get out, the crack in the blinds disappears, and I gently open the door, stirring Laurel awake.

“Are we here?” she asks, her voice still scratchy.

Shit. I should have at least gotten her some water.

This is why I can’t take care of her myself. Well, that and I’m sure it’s not wise for a monster to raise a child.

Lindy will make her loving. I’ll turn her into a knife-throwing killer.

“Yes,” I tell her gently, reaching down and taking her frail, light body into my arms.

She wraps her arms around me without hesitation, adorning me with trust she shouldn’t give so freely after what she’s suffered.

She’ll survive.

She’ll overcome this.

I know that now more than ever, because only the strong could handle touch after what she’s suffered.

Lindy opens the door, peering out as I carry the child toward her.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“It’s me, Lindy. And I’m here to see if you’re still as good as I remember.”

Just the sound of my voice has her stumbling through the door, her eyes widening in shock. She clutches the doorframe, trying to keep from sinking to the ground as her body shakes.

“You’re—”

“I know. I know. I’m dead,” I say, tired of hearing that line.

“You really are an angel,” Laurel says weakly, her head against my chest.

Lindy’s eyes swing to the child as she flips a light on, and the color drains from her face as she sees the torn clothing, the dirty skin, and the matted hair.

“This little girl has suffered too much. I told her she’d be safe here,” I say to Lindy, watching as her eyes slowly come back up to mine. “Don’t make me a liar.”

She gestures us in, and I let her take Lindy from my arms. Lindy flinches ever so slightly, but she recovers just as fast. Lindy rushes her to the couch, putting her there and covering her with a blanket.

I watch as the maternal instincts I lacked kick in for my old friend. She runs to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water, and she rushes back. Laurel practically rips the bottle from her hand, so thirsty that she drinks it too fast.

“Slow down. It’ll make you sick to drink too much,” Lindy says with a soothing voice, running her hand down Laurel’s cheek.

Laurel leans into the affectionate touch, already growing trusting of Lindy. This girl is making me want to cry. I’m too emotional. This is

too risky. But she deserves a chance at being safe, loved, and happy.

"I bet you're hungry."

Laurel nods emphatically, and even though it's closing in on three in the morning, Lindy rushes to the kitchen, grabbing the bread and peanut butter.

"You like PB&J?" Lindy asks.

Laurel nods, still drinking the water.

I watch patiently, a little in awe, as Lindy makes a sandwich and grabs another bottle of water.

As she hands to small girl her food, Lindy looks up to me.

"What happened to her?"

Before I can answer, Laurel answers for me. "The angel saved me from the monster. He won't ever hurt me again. The angel will keep me safe."

I nod toward Lindy as she covers her own mouth. Tears spring to her eyes. That's all she needs to know.

Laurel digs into the sandwich, and I gesture for Lindy to join me in the kitchen.

As soon as we're in there, I check to make sure Laurel hasn't followed us.

With barely a whisper, I tell Lindy, "When this breaks the news, you come forward. Tell them a little girl showed up at your door, but you don't know who brought her to you. The man's name was Kenneth Ferguson. I'm sorry to ask this, but it's the only way they may find the bodies he has buried without me giving them the information myself."

I hand her a piece of paper, and she swallows thickly, as though she's going to be sick.

"Is he still alive?"

I shake my head slowly.

"Good," she says quietly, looking over at the little girl. She stares at her, and I remain silent, studying her, trying to figure out what's in her head.

"You're really here. Alive. Looking so different."

"It's really me."

She nods, her eyes still lost and not on me.

“You’re going after them, aren’t you?” she asks in a hushed tone, her eyes coming back to meet mine.

I nod once.

“I’ve heard whispers and rumors that some of them had died, but I haven’t found it on the news. I was hoping it was true. I was wishing it was me who had the strength to do it.”

My lips twitch. “You’re strength comes from somewhere different. Somewhere more pure. Mine? Mine is hollowed out and filled with darkness, Lindy. I’m taking a huge risk by coming here.”

“But you needed that little girl to be safe,” she says, filling in the blanks. “And you trusted me.”

“You lost a lot trying to get me and my brother justice.”

Her face changes, a coldness washing over her. “That’s not your fault. I tried to tell everyone, but no one wanted to listen. Kyle tried to shut me up. He…He…”

Her voice breaks, and my lips tighten. “I know. He’ll have his day, Lindy. He’ll suffer the worst.”

She nods, her strength renewing as she angrily bats her tears away.

“Antonio left me when he believed Kyle. Kyle said I had sex with him. I told my husband I was…raped. He believed my rapist over me. Just left me.”

I nod, already knowing this. Antonio is on my list, but not for death. He’s marked for penance. Should be fun.

Jake has already started the process of ruining him, starting with bankruptcy. With any luck, the bastard will kill himself within the year when he’s homeless, penniless, and pointless.

“No one cared. No one wanted to listen. No one wanted to be bothered with something so horribly, inconceivably evil. They wanted to pretend it just didn’t exist.”

A dark smile takes over my lips. “They’ll never keep their silence again. They’ll quake in fear every time the lights go off. They’ll be the ones scared for a change. The town will burn, Lindy. It’ll burn to the ground. Trust me. I have a plan. And no one innocent will get caught in the crosshairs.”

She blows out a shaky breath. “I can’t believe you’re alive.”

She bats away fresh tears, looking over at the little girl, who is eating gratefully, oblivious to our conversation. “I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

“Make Laurel understand she can’t tell the cops I’m a woman. Make her understand she can’t tell them anything, or else I can’t stop other monsters.”

“I won’t tell them a thing,” Laurel says from the living room, proving she’s not as oblivious as I thought. She swivels her head, steely determination in her eyes. “I want you to catch all the monsters.”

Maybe she’s more like me than I thought.

As she turns back around, returning her attention to the sandwich, Lindy whispers to me, “I want you to catch all the monsters too. Your secret is safe with me, Victoria.”

A chill runs up my spine. “It’s Lana now. They killed Victoria that night,” I tell her quietly.

She nods, understanding. “What about Diana? She tried to—”

“I know. They threatened her son,” I interrupt, waving off her concern. “She’s going to play a different part. My ducks are in a row. I’ve been patient. I’ve thought it all through. Now I just wait on the chips to fall in place, and while they play poker, I’ll be playing dominoes.”

She smirks, leaning back to grab me a bottle of water. As she hands it to me, I take one last look at Laurel.

“She’s strong. Make sure she turns out like you and not me,” I say to Lindy, whose eyes turn a little duller.

“I’m weak. I quit fighting and ran away.”

“You survived. You fought against a war alone. You’re stronger than you realize, and you’re exactly what she needs.” I sigh as I look into her teary eyes. I wish I could stay longer. “I have to go.”

I start to turn away, but suddenly she launches herself at me, and I wrap my arms around her, feeling a hug connect to so many dormant emotions. It’s the first time I’ve faced my past with a face I didn’t want to cut off.

It hurts as much as it heals.

She hugs me tightly, and I return the affection, though I’m not sure how long we stay that way.

As she pulls away, I hand her a piece of paper. She studies it, reading the directions, and nods at me, proving she's ready to play her new role.

Just as I'm about to leave, Laurel stands on shaky legs and makes her way to me. I kneel just as she tosses her arms around my neck, catching me off guard.

Slowly, carefully, I hug her back.

"Kill all the monsters," she whispers. "That way they don't hurt anyone else."

Lindy's breath catches, and I frown. I hope her influence outshines mine in the long run.

"I'll kill them all so you never have to," I whisper back, even though it's highly unlikely that it's the right thing to say.

"Good."

"You want a shower?" Lindy asks her.

She nods, tears coming to her eyes, as though she's never wanted anything more.

Lindy swallows again, trying not to cry in front of the heartbreaking little girl.

"I'll turn it on for you and give you privacy. I'll even let you lock the door so you feel safe."

She speaks from experience.

I used to lock my bathroom door too.

You feel vulnerable when naked and distracted by the shower. You feel like you're too easily a target.

"I know the angel won't let me be hurt. I don't like locked doors," Laurel says quietly.

My heart flutters, and Lindy swallows again. "I'll start the shower."

She moves down the hall, and I nod toward Laurel, letting her know she's right; I won't ever let anything happen to her.

She was locked up. Her scars are different from ours. She was held captive. She needs air like we need confined security.

Lindy's scars don't run as deep or painful as mine. One man ruined her.

So many more took a piece of me.

But the pain is just the same. Just as scary. Just as unrelenting.

She returns, and I see the bathroom door open. Apparently Laurel requested that.

“She has different scars,” I say quietly.

“I’ll learn to be what she needs. Thank you for trusting me with her. I’ve felt so pointless all these years, but if I can reconcile what happened to me by being what she needs…maybe it won’t all seem like it was pointless.”

I know the feeling.

“What do I say if they ask about Delaney Grove?” she asks quietly as the shower hums in the distance.

“Say nothing.”

Her brow furrows. “Why?”

A dark smile curves my lips. “Because there are so many more to kill. I’m not ready for everyone to know why.”

A cold look crosses her eyes.

“Then they won’t hear it from me. I’ll do whatever you need. Just make sure those sons of bitches never hurt anyone ever again.”

I hold up six fingers, and she cocks her head, confused.

“That many are already gone.”

Surprise flits across her eyes.

“Then you have a long list ahead of you.”

Chapter 11

Never contract friendship with a man who is not better than thyself.
—Confucius

LANA

When I reach the drop spot, I leave the car and keys in the parking lot, along with a couple thousand dollars under the seat. The drop spot changes all the time, and they only get a five minute warning before I'm gone.

I grab my bag of wet clothes, and the black bag from the trunk that has minimal supplies, just as all the warehouse cars have.

I toss the clothes into a trashcan, and start hiking down the road, ignoring the cars that pull over to ask if I need a ride. It isn't until a motorcycle rolls up that I smile and roll my eyes.

"Really? How'd you make it out of your house on a motorcycle?" I groan, hopping on the back as Jake gives me a helmet.

"I didn't," he says with a shrug. "I picked it up from the warehouse when I went to make sure your car didn't have any trackers or anything on it."

I put my arms around his waist, and he pats my hand.

"Did he confess?"

"More than you know. I don't want to talk about it right now. In fact, I never want to tell you the things he confessed to. I want to scrub it from my mind so that I'm not tempted to run down the list of every pedophile out there and repeat the same ending for them. However, there is something I need to tell you, but I'll wait until I have the energy to deal with your rant."

He sighs harshly while revving the bike, and he drives me all the way to the warehouse.

"I'll send the link to the new cameras to you so you can watch Anthony in your free time," he says as I head toward my car.

"I'll be waiting."

With that, I drive straight home, not even acknowledging the patrol cars at the end of my driveway.

I can't stop them from hanging out on the street, unfortunately.

My house is unnaturally quiet, something I find peaceful instead of eerie like most people. I hurry through the motions of stepping into the shower, feeling the warm spray of the water against my back.

The sounds of footsteps have me turning off the water and stepping out of the shower. With silent movements, I wrap up in a towel and open the shower door, watching with a wary eye.

Just as silently, I open the drawer, and pull out the gun I have hidden there. Why is there a gun hidden in my bathroom? Have you ever seen a horror film? The girl always gets stabbed in the shower. Or she runs into the bathroom and locks the door, but has no way to defend herself when the psycho killer breaks in.

I could defend myself and have no plans of hiding in the bathroom, but a backup plan never hurts.

Clutching my towel with one hand and holding the gun in the other, I carefully open the bathroom door. Movement has my hand jerking to the right, but a strong hand clamps around my wrist, and my eyes swing up to meet a devastatingly familiar pair of blues.

Logan arches an eyebrow at me, and my entire body relaxes when I realize it's not the Boogeyman in my room.

"You really do have a gun," he says as though he's surprised.

"Why are you in my house?" I ask, still holding the gun while he holds my wrist, keeping the barrel aimed away from him.

"Care if I take this?" He gestures to the gun, and I release my hold on it as he takes it away slowly, warily.

He gingerly places it on top of my nightstand, turning the safety on. Then he turns to face me again.

"I'm sorry. I really am, Lana. You have every right to be pissed."

I exhale heavily as he takes a seat on my bed, and I clutch the towel a little tighter with both hands now.

He looks down at his hands as he rubs them together, leaning forward on my bed with his elbows resting on his knees. "I didn't know you knew about the attack. But you're right; I should've called you right away. I didn't want to worry you, but I should've been prepared for somebody else tell you before I could. It won't happen again."

Most of my anger is gone now that I've stabbed a man to death, which allows me to slowly digest what he's saying without too many

emotions clogging up my logic.

But to be honest, I have no idea what to say.

Instead of speaking I continue to hold my towel, watching him as he lifts his eyes to meet my gaze.

“I’m not leaving here until this is resolved. I’m not leaving here until I know this is okay.”

I believe him.

Twice he’s shown up after I’ve returned fresh from a kill. What happens when he shows up too early? What happens when I have to explain the real reason there’s blood in my hair or on my clothes? What happens when he catches me?

Staring into his eyes, I remember why it’s so hard to walk away. Without the anger I had earlier driving me farther from his arms, I remember what it’s like to feel.

He looks tired, always tired. His tie has been loosened, hanging down below the top two buttons he’s undone. The firm, tan flesh is visible through those undone buttons.

His shirt is untucked, and his jacket is strewn across my bed, developing wrinkles as we speak.

“I mean it, Lana,” he says, drawing my attention back to his face. His blond hair is disheveled, and those firm, full lips are curved down. “I’m not leaving until we’re good, and you’re in my arms, and you let the police go back to protecting you when I’m not here.”

My lips thin as I think over my options. Leaving here without him seems to create a massive hole in my chest. I’ve been avoiding feeling the loss since I left the hospital.

The tears earlier overwhelmed me and caught me off guard. If there hadn’t been someone to take the brunt of my overflowing emotions, I’d be a sobbing mess in Jake’s house right now.

Over this man in my room.

A man who has the power to destroy me.

A man I can’t let go.

“Okay.” My mind is screaming at me how stupid this is, as the solitary word of damnation weakly leaves my mouth. Never has *okay* held so much power.

“Okay?” he asks, as the tears start to reform on my eyelids.

I nod, not trusting my voice not to crack if I try to say more. I thought I'd rid myself of the emotions earlier, but they're back with a renewed vigor now.

He springs to his feet, and my breath leaves in a rush as he grabs me at the waist with more speed than I was prepared for. He tugs me to him, pulling me flush against him before lifting me, clinging to me with a possessive, desperate hold.

His lips find mine as I wind my arms around his neck, turning off the part of my mind that is still begging me to see reason.

As my fingers thread through his hair, he drops me to the bed, jarring me as the kissing and touching ends abruptly. I look up, feeling flushed as my towel falls open, and he hungrily rakes his eyes over my body.

A breath hisses out of me when his hands cover my knees and force them apart.

"I've been doing everything wrong," he says on a reverent breath, his eyes trained between my legs as he licks his lips. "I've been skipping all the important stuff, giving you the middle instead of the beginning in every way."

Before I can ask what that means, his head dips, and his blond hair tickles against my legs seconds before his mouth fastens around my clit. My hips buck, but he holds me still, gripping my thighs to hold me in place, and to anchor his face right where he wants it.

He's sucking and flicking his tongue at the same time, ratcheting up the pleasure with each passing second. It's almost too intense. It's almost too much.

I've never let anyone touch me this way, and he wouldn't have had the chance either if he hadn't caught me off guard.

My fingers grip his hair, possibly tugging too hard, but he merely growls his approval, the vibrations of his voice driving me that much closer to that powerful edge. It feels perfect and incredible and awesome…and all the other damn good words too.

I cry out when something explosive crackles over me, the force of the orgasm taking me by surprise. I'm practically panting when he continues to suck, bite, and lick in perfect unison against the oversensitive flesh.

He finally shows me mercy by letting go, and my whole body shudders as he starts kissing his way up my damp skin, sliding the towel out from under me with a hard tug. He tosses it away as my body turns limp under his lips that are still kissing their way up my body.

“At least you’re good at apologies,” I tell him, albeit I’m still all breathy when the words come out.

A rumble of laughter slips between his lips and plays against my skin that he’s still teasing, now moving between the valley of my breasts on his ascent.

When his lips finally reach mine, the kiss is hungry, and I forget why we were ever fighting to begin with. His hips settle between my legs as he kisses me harder, holding me under him in a way I never thought I’d be able to stand.

But with Logan, it’s as though I’ve never been hurt. I trust him. It’s insane to trust someone so freely after being hurt so irrevocably in the past, but I do. I trust him completely, and there’s no doubt in my mind that he’d never intentionally hurt me.

I can feel it in the way he kisses me. I can see it in his eyes when he bares his soul. I can taste it in the way he breathes. And I sense his honesty like a predator can sense its prey’s fear.

“You’re only with me?” he asks, breaking the kiss as I start stripping his shirt over his head, tugging his tie off too. “It’s not something we’ve discussed, but I think I’ve made it clear where I stand, and you’ve made it clear you don’t want me with anyone else.”

I never even considered that being an option once we had sex.

“You know I don’t want you with anyone else,” I tell him, confused as to why he feels this is the best time to bring it up.

He grins as he nips at my lips and pulls back, reaching between us to undo his pants.

“How long since you were with anyone before me?”

“Seven months,” I say without needing to think about it.

His eyebrows go up. Yeah, I keep track of sex. Sort of happens as an accidental quirk after you’ve been through what I have and can finally enjoy intimacy again.

“Good,” he says, kissing his way across my cheek. “Birth control?”

My heart clenches in my chest, and I swallow down the knot in my throat.

“I can’t have children,” I whisper hoarsely.

His head rears back, and his forehead creases in confusion. I could have just lied. I could have glossed over it and promised I couldn’t get pregnant.

I’m just sick of lying when I don’t have to.

“Why?”

Instead of telling him another lie outright, I point the scars on my side. “I lost a lot that night,” I say quietly.

I push at his chest, and he lifts off me enough for me to roll over, giving him my back. I point the scars on my side, the ones closest to my right hip.

“And a kidney,” I add.

His fingers trace over the scar tissue, but for once I don’t tense away. Instead of it feeling like acid, it feels like a healing balm touching me for the first time ever.

His lips brush my shoulder.

“What else?” he whispers softly, running his hands along the curve of my ass where another long scar is.

I close my eyes. “My face. There’s more metal in there than bone right now. There were a lot of very complicated, somewhat experimental surgeries to restore a semblance of bone structure. The man who worked a miracle is quite frankly a genius. He lives in Russia, but came to the states just for my surgery. Money can change the outcome of someone’s life.”

Just a face. It’s just a face. But it could have been disfigured. I could have looked like a monster. Then I’d have been just as ugly on the outside as I am on the inside.

I turn my face around, looking over my shoulder at him running his hand along my hip, tracing the jagged scar there.

“What’s this from?”

I don’t have to completely lie. “Glass. It cut into me that night, dug so deep that they couldn’t remove it right away for fear of me

losing even more blood—too much blood. My blood painted the streets that night."

Telling him the truth without telling him the whole truth is oddly therapeutic. I'm sick of constantly lying. Even a little truth makes this feel more real.

I just don't mention that Kyle slammed a broken piece of a mirror there. The same mirror they broke after they used it to taunt my brother.

I have a mirror for Kyle too. Several mirrors. He'll get to watch everything I do.

"I'm sorry," he says softly, sounding so heartbreakingly genuine that tears threaten to return to my eyes again.

"It's not your fault. I didn't want to ruin the moment, but I didn't want to lie either."

"You don't have to lie," he says, the words making me bite back more truth than he could ever handle. "It's amazing you survived."

He has no idea.

"I flat-lined twice. Technically I died twice. Then I was reborn. At least that's how I like to think of it."

His eyes meet mine, and he slides his hand up my side as he leans forward. His lips capture mine, and his weight comes down from behind me. It's another position I never thought I'd be comfortable in, but it's so naturally effortless with him.

The kiss is reverent, soulful, and it actually means more than anything he could say right now. I don't stop kissing him, even though the angle is awkward.

His hand slides around the front of my body, lifting my hips just enough. I moan into his mouth when I feel him pushing inside me, skin-to-skin. He slides in so easily, despite how tight the fit is. His hips rock, slowly pushing in and out, taking me as though he could fuck me all day.

And I'd let him.

His phone rings and rings, but he doesn't stop. His lips never move from mine, and his hands grip my hips, moving a little faster. I'm the one to finally break the kiss so I can suck in a sharp breath as one of his hands slides around, finding my clit.

I rock against him as his pace quickens. He slides his knees under my hips, giving himself better leverage to push in harder, faster.

The phone doesn't shut up, but we're too lost in each other to stop. His hips stagger, losing the rhythm, and I know he's close. Just as I think I'm not going to follow him over the edge, the orgasm comes out of nowhere, and I'm crying out his name before I can stop myself.

He jerks against me, squeezing my hip tightly with one hand, while his other hand continues to rule me, driving my orgasm on and on.

I collapse, and his hand finally stills, pinned between my body and the bed. He comes down on top of me, his body shuddering in the aftermath as he drags his lips over my shoulder.

"Your phone," I say, panting once again.

I can run up five flights of stairs without my breathing changing at all, yet sex with Logan turns me into a sweaty, breathless mess.

"Let it ring. I have three hours before I'm back on duty."

He kisses my shoulder again, and I grin against the pillow, feeling my eyes grow heavy.

"You're perfect," he says against my cheek as his lips brush a kiss there too.

"I wish," I say softly, lifting his phone from the nightstand where it is. "Answer. It could be important, and I know you're only not answering because of me. I won't get mad."

He groans, still inside me as he takes his phone. "That's not the only reason I'm not answering. I'll never answer my phone if I'm inside you. Not even I'm that much of a company man."

I snort indignantly, then laugh into the pillow, feeling him smile against my cheek as he kisses it again.

He pulls out of me, and I clench my thighs together, already feeling the loss. And the mess. The mess I haven't felt since…

I wait for the wave of nausea to wash over me.

I wait for the panic to seize me.

I wait for the buried memories to resurface and steal this moment away.

But it doesn't happen.

Another grin curls my lips. He's just healed another small piece of me.

If only he could make me think like a normal girl again, I might could be the perfect person he wants me to be.

But for now, I'll take the illusion he's offering. I'll savor it like there's no tomorrow.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I hear him saying as he comes out of the bathroom, picking up his boxers from the floor.

When did he get fully naked? I swear I lose all thought process when he's pressed against me.

I head into the bathroom, giving him privacy since he's sitting down—still naked—on the edge of my bed. But even as I shut the door and start cleaning up, I can hear him.

"Hadley has been with the team and has been sleeping in the office. They can check the security footage if they need it."

Oh shit.

"Then get clearance for them to see the time stamps of the window he was killed. She's been with us. There's no way she drove all the way out there and killed her stepfather."

That fat bastard has already been found? Damn him. I should have stabbed him even more for ruining this moment.

"No. No. No. They can't haul one of ours in for questioning. If they want to talk to her, they can do it on our turf with our rules. They don't get to fuck with her reputation for any reason. Understood?"

A harsh breath escapes him, and I lean against the door, listening.

"What kind of pictures?" I hear him ask quietly, but there's a dark edge to his tone.

"I'll be right in."

Definitely should have stabbed that motherfucker more. And weighed him down with stones. And chummed the water for sharks or something. Are there sharks here?

There would have needed to be a lot of sharks for that douchebag.

But sheesh. I'm only so strong. Not even I'm able to break the laws of science, and it was all I could do to push him out to the water.

“No,” I hear him saying. “We won’t help them find whoever did this. They want to question her—fine. But fuck him and fuck them for trying to get our help on it after trying to haul Hadley in. Keep an eye on her. Don’t let them near her until I get there. Understood?”

I open the door, seeing him stab his legs into his pants, keeping the phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear. The sun has been high in the sky for a while now, though I’ve barely noticed it through my dark curtains.

Logan never asked where I was all night. Or maybe he didn’t know I was gone.

No. No. The cops at my driveway saw me come in. Yet Logan never questioned where I’ve been.

“Yeah, I’m at her house now. And I’m going to kick someone’s ass for interrupting it. Then I’m coming back and getting a solid five hours of sleep. None of us are going to catch him if we’re all running on empty. As for this Kenneth guy, I’m glad he’s fucking dead.”

A small grin spreads on my lips. I don’t know why it sounds like he’s condoning what I just did. Or why I feel a sense of pride.

I banish the smile, removing the crazy thoughts before I say something stupid aloud. Normal people aren’t proud of removing a life from the earth and sending them to hell and all that.

“You’re not kidding. I may bring her in with me, if she’ll come.”

His eyes dart up, meeting mine as I stand in the doorway.

“Yeah,” he says, still talking into the phone. “I won’t be staying long. I just want to make sure they aren’t trying to pin this on Hadley. Then I’m coming back.”

He stands, coming to me, fully dressed now. He’s probably a pro at talking on the phone and getting dressed.

“I’m still working on that part, but hopefully,” he goes on, smirking at me. “Be there as soon as I can.”

He looks down the length of my naked body, leisurely raking his eyes over me as I lean against the wall. “As much as I want to keep you naked, I need to go in. I want you to come with me, because we’ll be coming right back. I’m not ready to leave you alone just yet.”

I roll my eyes. “The cops can sit outside again. Duke can have his room back.”

It’s a horribly stupid concession.

“Duke got called away on this homicide they just called me about. Hadley’s stepfather was killed. He’s requesting to interrogate her.”

He meets my gaze again, and I try to remain a stone wall as I think over the real reason Duke is probably there. I doubt it’s to question Hadley about the monster I killed. If anything, he wants to know the rest of the monster’s secrets…the darkest ones he confessed to me. The ones I wasn’t expecting. The ones Lindy will have to share.

Then I realize an expression would be a good idea.

“Were they close?” I blurt out, trying to recover from my cold-as-ice routine slip.

“No,” he tells me, grabbing a dress from my closet and handing it to me.

I arch an eyebrow and move past the proffered dress to grab some yoga pants and a T-shirt. As I pull on some underwear and a bra, he drops the dress to the bed, blushing a little. I’ll wear a dress on a night when I have on makeup and can do more than pull my hair in a ponytail.

“Is she okay?” I ask, imitating normal questions.

All of my normalcies are usually an imitation.

“She’s…I don’t know. He’s a sick bastard, apparently. Hadley just told me she was a confused kid back when she ran away. Now I wonder if—” He cuts his words off and runs a frustrated hand through his hair.

“Let’s go,” I say, pulling my hair up as soon as I finish putting on my clothes.

As if my life wasn’t complicated enough, I’m about to head into FBI headquarters. Lovely.

Chapter 12

Virtue is not left to stand alone. He who practices it will have neighbors.
—Confucius

LOGAN

"Just stay here," I tell Lana, gesturing to a large breakroom. "I'd let you into my office to wait, but it's restricted access."

She squeezes my hand, giving me a small, reassuring smile. "I'm fine. Go do your thing."

I head out of the breakroom, leaving the door open, and walk straight toward Craig's office where he's waiting with Hadley and Duke. Hadley's red-rimmed eyes meet mine the second I step through the door, and she jerks her gaze away.

My eyes shift to Duke, who glares at me.

"Why is it necessary to have you guys in here for me to ask her a few simple questions?" Duke asks, annoyed.

"Call it an observation, but your chief put my girl in danger just to have a better chance of catching a serial killer. Then you show up, targeting one of my people for a crime she couldn't have possibly committed."

His eyebrows go up, and a lazy smile curves his lips. "Really? Agent Grace has so many alibies that it'd be a fool's quest to try and pin Kenneth Ferguson's death on her.

"Then why are you here?" I ask, suspicious.

His smile dies, and he tosses out several bagged pictures. Hadley's breath catches in her throat when she sees them, and she clutches the chair.

"These aren't all the pictures he had, but these children? They're missing. Some of them have been missing for years."

Hadley doubles over, vomiting into the trashcan. Duke actually looks sympathetic as he watches her.

"I need air," Hadley says, wiping the back of her mouth as she stands.

I nod toward Craig, who takes her out, leaving me alone with Duke in the office.

"You wanted to see her reaction," I tell him as I sit down too.

"She ran away from home for a reason," Duke answers. "She accused him of molesting her as a child."

"So you are trying to—"

"I'm trying to get answers about what 'special' places he took her, as terrible as that sounds. We need to find these kids, even if we're just recovering bodies. Someone killed this guy, but I'm looking for the dozens of kids who are missing more than I'm looking for his killer."

He pulls out his phone, and I glance at the pictures that are on the desk. Most are naked little girls, spread wide on a bed. My stomach roils and I look away. Hadley never told me this part of her past.

"Ferguson left Hadley's mother shortly after Hadley ran away. That means the mother was no longer valuable after the child was gone. How can a mother ignore something like that?" he asks.

"It's often easier for someone to believe evil can't exist inside someone they love, than to admit they've failed someone who should be more important. We see it too often. The blind eye effect is what we call it," I say absently.

Just as I'm about to ask questions, he thrusts his phone at me, and my eyes widen in disbelief. "Someone knew what this guy was doing," he goes on, gesturing to the picture.

Kenneth Ferguson has been tortured. There's no doubt about that. His skin has been flayed off in numerous areas. There are black spots on the flayed portions, as though someone burned him.

"They used a knife. They used a blowtorch—possibly even the one he had downstairs for welding. And they hammered nails into his feet and testicles—seventy nails, to be exact… We found sixty-nine pictures and seventy nails. They did all this before dumping his dead body into the water."

I grimace, wondering why so many killers have to focus on the genitals.

The water has bloated the body, turning the flesh a paler color and showing the blue veins. The eyes are white and glossed over.

“Was he dead before he hit the water?”

He nods.

“So the water was a countermeasure. We’re dealing with an organized killer who has the stomach for torture. Could have been a hitman. Where were these kids’ parents? One of them could know where these other kids are buried or kept if they’re still alive.”

“All of them were in the system, homeless, and hadn’t been placed with a foster family. They were labeled as runaways. Ferguson was a social worker with unlimited access to files and folders with countless children he could take at his own leisure. The ages range from eight to fifteen.”

“Pedophiles have a selective age range from two to three years that they prey on. Never a gap as big as that. Unless…”

“Unless what?” he prompts.

“Unless he’s a groomer. It’s rare, but some pedophiles select children they can groom and have long-term relationships with, that way, when their bodies are old enough, he can take more than just some touching from them.”

He chokes back a sound, possibly swallowing bile. “Sick fucker. Why kill them?”

“If he killed them, it’s because they didn’t play their part in the fantasy anymore. Possibly became too distant or detached. Maybe even cried too much. He wants their tears as children. As women, he wants their submission. Most groomed children either break psychologically, or kill themselves. Some of these could be suicides.”

“I want to find them. I want to at least give them a damn voice,” Duke says angrily. “No one cared. No one looked for them. And no one stopped this demon from carrying on all these years.”

“Someone did,” I remind him, curious. “Maybe one escaped somewhere along the line and came back for vengeance.”

“I released the information to the media, asking any prior victims to come forth. Is it wrong that I don’t want to catch his killer? I just want to find the missing children—dead or alive.”

He looks truly torn.

“I can’t answer questions of moral dilemma. When did you alert the media?”

“His body was found three hours ago. So far no one has called in or stepped forward. He was killed in his basement, but the scene was compromised with bleach. The unknown suspect doused the room in bleach and then hosed it down. Seems like this isn’t the first time he’s killed.”

“You said *he,*” I tell him, frowning.

“The guy weighed a ton. There’s no way a girl carried him to the water alone. There was signs of him being rolled to the water, but even still, that’s a lot of strength. It was uphill for a piece. Then they used a hoe to dig up all the dirt where the footprints were. The tire treads we found weren’t enough to get a make or model of a car. They were careful to stay out of the dirt or sand.”

Definitely organized. Too organized to have had just one kill under their belt.

“No hesitation marks,” I say quietly, gesturing to the picture. “We may be dealing with a serial.”

He tenses, his eyes narrowing. “I’m not trying to take your case away, detective,” I add, watching as he relaxes. “I’m just saying you may have some avenger seeking justice where the cops haven’t. You may want to look into—”

The door opens, and Craig steps in. “We have a little girl here. She’s bruised and malnourished, and the woman who brought her in claims that she was left on her doorstep during the night. The little girl is a victim of Ferguson’s.”

My eyes dart to Duke’s as his widen, and we both launch ourselves toward the door, moving briskly.

The little girl is whispering something in Hadley’s ear as we walk into the room where they’re seated, and Hadley frowns, studying the little girl.

“What?” Duke asks.

The little girl shudders when she hears his voice, harsh and demanding. Duke tenses, realizing his error.

“Sorry,” he says softly as the woman puts her arm around the little girl.

She was just found last night? Yet the traumatized kid is clinging to this woman?

“Sorry,” Duke says again, his voice barely above a whisper as he takes a seat.

“I’m going to head home,” Hadley says as she nears me, clutching my arm on her way toward the door. “Let that girl stay with Lindy. Do *not* let them take her away. I need…I need a moment.”

I follow her out, letting Duke speak with who I assume is Lindy. Craig joins him, sitting down with his iPad as he listens intently.

“I don’t know. The doorbell rang, and Laurel was there when I answered it. I brought her in, fed her, gave her water, and then let her shower for as long as she wanted. That’s when I saw the news, and Laurel gave me her story, along with information you need. I’ll tell you everything she told me, but only if you promise she can stay with me. No taking her away.”

“Yes,” Laurel agrees adamantly.

A bond that deep can’t be forged so quickly unless Laurel and Lindy know more than I think they do.

I’m distracted by Hadley as I shut the door on the room, focusing my attention on my friend.

“Are you okay?”

Hadley turns to me with tears in her eyes. No one is around right now, everywhere scrambling around to find Plemmons.

“No, I’m not okay. I let them convince me it was all in my head. I thought I was sick and crazy, Logan. Now…that little girl is in there. Those kids...all of this is my fault.”

She swallows harshly as she sobs, wiping her eyes.

“This isn’t your fault, Hadley.”

“I should have tried harder. I should have looked into it better when I started working here. No other reports were ever filed…I had it set to ping me. I honestly believed it was all in my head. Now…I just need to go home. I’ll call you later.”

She walks away, never turning back around, and I blow out a long breath. She needs space, and I get that. I just hope this doesn’t break her.

I see her pause, eyeing the breakroom where Lana is. I tilt my head, confused as the emotion flees her eyes, turning into something more concentrated, but I can’t see Lana.

Finally, Hadley walks away, and I make a mental note to question that more later.

Just as I start to step back into the room, Craig steps out, his face flushed and his eyes wide.

“Your office. Now,” he says, heading straight by me.

Confused, I follow, and I see him gesture for Donny and Leonard to follow. Elise and Lisa are taking a sleep break, like I was supposed to be doing.

As soon as we’re all in my office, Craig shuts the door and he lays out his iPad.

“Lindy May Wheeler is the woman Ferguson’s killer decided to leave the child with.”

Her name doesn’t ring any bells.

“And?” Donny prompts.

“Lindy May Wheeler is from Delaney Grove.”

The blood chills in my veins, turning to ice as goosebumps pebble my skin. Slowly, I make my way to the chair, dropping to it as the weight of the revelation settles on to me.

“She left nine and a half years ago, started a new life, even dropped her last name,” he goes on. “She just goes by Lindy May now.”

“What the fuck is going on in that town?” Donny asks in a hushed whisper.

“I was there. It was like the Andy Griffith show. Everyone was smiling and happy, waving at us as we passed. No signs of something wrong. If anything, they live like it’s the nineties, refusing to move forward with the rest of the world.”

“Someone gets tortured and killed, and an innocent child ends up with a Delaney Grove resident. That’s not a coincidence,” Donny says.

“No castration,” Craig says. “That’s his one constant. Why would he deviate if it was him? If anything, this guy deserved castration more than any of the prior victims.”

“As far as we know,” I say under my breath, looking up as all eyes swing to me. “He didn’t want this tied to him. This was an impulsive kill. He wasn’t prepared. The footsteps were dug up, meaning he may not have been wearing his boots. He may even be

tricking us with his weight. He poured bleach all over the scene of the crime, washing away evidence. That's not in his MO, which means he's normally more prepared. What triggered this?"

"We need to adjust the profile," Donny says.

"Why?" Craig asks him.

"Because a sadist would never take the time to deviate from his list and go kill a pedophile. This was motivated. There was something that triggered the unsub's need to kill this man," I explain. "A sadist wouldn't take the time to find a child and see them off into the hands of someone they felt would care for the child. He wouldn't give a damn."

"There was no rage," Donny says, knowing where I'm going with this. "The kills were brutal, but each slice of the knife was controlled and calculated. No rage means no revenge."

"What if this unsub has been preparing for this for a lot longer than we expected? What if he's numbed himself to his emotions? Rage wouldn't be found in a kill. This would all be about inflicting as much pain as possible, hence the days and days of torture." As the words leave my mouth, and audible breath escapes them all.

"We need to dig deeper into that town. Something seriously fucked up has gone on there."

"What about Plemmons? We're supposed to be working solely on that case right now," Leonard reminds me.

"I'm technically just supposed to be the middle man for the media. I can look into this without getting us in trouble," Craig volunteers. "Maybe Lindy May can shed some light on that town."

"I'll go see what I can find out," Donny says, standing and leaving us behind.

"I'm going to go listen in," I say to them. "Stay on Plemmons. Keep working that. This changes nothing as far as the priority goes," I tell Leonard.

"Revenge would have this guy contacting the media," Leonard says, lost in thought. "He's killed six. He'd want his story known. He'd want the world to know why he was doing this. It doesn't make sense."

"And targeting Hadley's stepfather? That can't be a coincidence," I point out. "He's watching us. Studying us, possibly.

He doesn’t want the media knowing yet, because he doesn’t want the world to know his motives until he’s ready for his endgame. We have no idea how long that list is, which is why we need to know what happened that was so bad that a seemingly normal person who cares enough about a child to deliver them to a safe doorstep, would become a brutal torturer and killer.”

“Definitely not a sadist,” Leonard sighs. “That’s for damn sure.”

He stands, running his hand over his stomach as it growls.

“That town was too shiny for something this dark to be in its recent past. I’ll see how far back I can go. I won’t stop until I find something.”

“Work on Plemmons for now. After we catch that bastard, we’ll dig into Delaney Grove.”

He nods, though it seems like reluctant compliance.

Craig gets up, bringing his iPad with him. “I’ll go see if I can dig anything up. You deal with this.” He pauses, studying me for a moment. “What does it mean if a serial killer goes after someone who hurt a member of our team?”

I purse my lips as Leonard stands. “When he goes after a pedophile, it means he suffered something similarly traumatic…may even feel a kinship with Hadley. I don’t feel like he’s targeting us. I feel like he wants us to understand him.”

“But he didn’t want this linked to him,” I counter. “That was forced because he wanted the little girl safe. He’s cut himself off from all new relationships, forced to return to the ones from his past that aren’t tainted with whatever happened.”

I look over at Craig. “You said Lindy May moved nine and a half years ago?”

He nods. “Look around that time frame. See what you come up with.”

He immediately starts pulling something up on his iPad, and I glance over at Leonard.

“Call Hadley. Tell her what we’ve learned. It’s better to err on the side of caution.”

“The cautious seldom err,” he quips, quoting Confucius as he exits the room.

“We’ll revisit the entire profile, examine the evidence from a whole new perspective after we deal with Plemmons,” I tell him, following him out.

“This changes everything,” he agrees.

I walk into the small conference room where Duke is still speaking to Lindy. Donny shakes his head, letting me know he hasn’t asked anything yet.

“She already told you she never saw the person who took her there,” Lindy says, glaring at Duke as Laurel rests against her, not seeming the least bit timid.

She knows something. She knows Ferguson is dead, but not even that would put a scared child so at ease. She’s already bonded with Lindy May. Something like that has a reason, and more to it than simply feeling safe. And why does she feel so safe?

“She was too exhausted to even open her eyes,” Lindy goes on.

She has a protective arm around the child, showing instant maternal instincts. She’s bonded with Laurel as fiercely as Laurel has bonded with her. In less than twenty-four hours.

“So she has no idea how she ended up on your porch? And you never saw anything?”

Her eyes narrow to slits. “I came in freely, willing to give you information. You still haven’t agreed to my terms, yet I’ve told you all I could except for what you really want to know. Yet you’re interrogating me. I should have stayed home.”

Duke opens his mouth to speak, but I put a hand on his shoulder, drawing his attention.

“You said you wanted to know where the other kids were, so why are you grilling her about who brought the kid?”

His lips clap shut, and I cock my head to the side. Finally, he blows out a long breath.

“It doesn’t add up. Even you know this sounds wrong.”

“What information do you have?” I ask Lindy.

She glares at me now. “I’m not telling you anything until you promise me that Laurel can remain in my house with me. You have to promise no one will take her away.”

Laurel clutches Lindy’s hand, still leaning on her.

“Donny, make some calls,” I say, titling my head. “Make sure Laurel doesn’t get removed from Ms. Wheeler’s home.”

“May,” Lindy immediately corrects. “My last name is now May. I don’t use Wheeler anymore.”

“Why is that, Ms. May?” I ask, acting as though this is news to me.

“Sometimes you just need a fresh start. Same as I’m trying to offer Laurel. Why are we being treated like criminals when we just came to help?”

Duke slumps in his seat, a look of regret crossing his face. He’s trained to ask about the suspicious answers. She’s definitely hiding something, but I’m not sure what.

Donny walks out, his phone to his ear, making the calls we need.

“Why’d you leave Delaney Grove?” I ask her.

No surprise flickers in her eyes, but her back stiffens. Laurel’s hand clutches hers tighter.

She definitely knows something, and I’ll bet Laurel knows a piece of the puzzle too.

“I got a divorce, decided to change my world for the better. Delaney Grove isn’t as grand as it seems.”

Craig gave me all the info on her, and I’m looking at it on my phone now.

“You were married to Antonio Gonzalez, correct?”

She nods curtly, a coldness washing over her eyes.

“He still lives in Delaney Grove,” I go on.

Duke is watching me, a confused expression on his face.

“Why’d you come here instead of the police station?” I ask her. “The local PD is who broadcasted that they needed the information on Ferguson.”

“You should call him the monster,” Laurel interjects, surprising me as her eyes darken.

There’s a fury there. A dark, deeply laced fury. There’s not an ounce of fear in her eyes, just determined hatred so out of character for an abused child. The bruises on her arms and face and neck suggest he wasn’t gentle about his ways with her.

Has she even been examined yet?

Lindy ignores my question, but I already know the answer. He sent her here.

“Has she seen a doctor?” I ask Lindy, changing my line of questioning.

“We’re going to see one today.”

She doesn’t say more.

“How severe was she injured?”

“Bad enough to leave scars on her soul, but not to the extent it could have been. If you know what I mean, Agent.”

He hasn’t raped her. She’s too young. But he’s forced her to do other things, and that’s bad enough.

Lindy speaks like a victim herself, as though she understand the trauma on a different level. The unsub knew this, because that couldn’t be a coincidence.

She knows him. And she’s apparently for whatever crusade he’s on. I won’t get an ounce of information out of her that tells me who he is. Whatever happened affected more than just the unsub.

But why not tell me what happened?

What the fucking hell is going on in Delaney Grove?

“Ms. May, I know this is difficult, but can you at least tell me what led to you leaving Delaney Grove? Maybe something that affected more than just you?”

Her eyes shift, and a calmness comes over her.

“I left to start anew, Agent. If you want to know about Delaney Grove, maybe you should visit it.”

So he asked her not to tell. She spoke with him. There’s no doubt about that.

He saved the child. The child feels safe because he’s the dark knight that slayed the monster who has haunted her for months, ever since her disappearance. Our unsub handed her over to this woman, who he swore would keep her safe. She trusted him. She was cared for by Lindy, and the bond formed instantly.

That much makes sense.

They both owe him their silence for a reason. They’ll never talk. And I’m not in the business of bullying victims who’ve suffered enough. I’ll find out another way.

Donny walks back in, and I look over at him as he nods.

“Laurel is yours,” I say to Lindy.

“Paperwork. I want it in writing.”

He coached her on this. Told her to make sure she got custody by leveraging information.

Unreal.

We had him all wrong.

There won’t be animal cruelty in his past. He’ll have been someone gentle, possibly naïve and trusting—too trusting. Trusting enough to have been someone’s victim.

Instead of it shattering him; he came back for cold vengeance. But why target so many? What did they fucking do?

Donny walks out again, going to get something in writing. Duke taps his pen impatiently, his knee bouncing under the table. Across from him, Laurel whispers something into Lindy’s ear. Lindy presses a kiss to the child’s forehead.

I watch, fascinated by the fact Laurel doesn’t seem appalled by the affection. An instant maternal bond has been brought forth by two victims bonding with a killer. A killer they feel slays the monsters of their nightmares.

A killer who won’t stop.

They don’t realize how dangerous this guy will become. Revenge killers have no limitations on who dies. The smallest of infractions is a death sentence. They take justice into their hands, become judge, jury, and executioner, becoming too immortal in their own minds.

Donny returns, a paper in his hand. He hands it to Lindy, and she reads it carefully, searching for any sort of a trick.

I take the paper and sign it. “This is me calling this the truth,” I explain, watching her gauge me.

She must trust whatever she sees in my eyes, because she pulls a piece of paper from her purse and hands it to me. Duke stands and comes to read it over my shoulder.

It’s a map to the burial ground, written in blood with a calligraphy penmanship, with most likely a calligraphy pen to disguise the unsub’s handwriting. He knows calligraphy?

So organized it’s eerie.

How long has he been preparing for every possible outcome?

Signed in blood is one name—Kenneth Ferguson. Only it's not in calligraphy. It's still signed in blood, written with most likely his finger. The strokes are shaky, as though he was trembling when the unsub made him sign this with his own blood.

That's a level of cold that had us profiling him as a sadist.

There's an *x* marking so many graves, the names of each child written in calligraphy. The only structure on the map appears to be a shed of some sort. The graves are all around it. The map goes from his home, the road names marking each turn to take. He went and visited them. The sick fuck knew exactly where he'd buried each and every child.

Sixty-nine photos. Seventy nails.

Those words come back to me, reminding me they were spoken.

I dart out of the room, leaving Duke behind to deal with the murders that have him sagging to a chair in disbelief.

I grab the page Duke left in the office, one listing all the children's names. Our people must have run facial recognition against all the kids in the system. After being runaways, their names and photos are reported.

There's a list of names for each photo. Sixty-nine names.

The same names and ages are written on the photos themselves.

Only one is not listed.

Hadley's.

He spared her the indignity of our team seeing her photos next to these. He sent Lindy here instead of to the police. He knew we'd take it more personally, knew there was a stronger chance of Lindy getting custody of Laurel.

He definitely feels a kinship with Hadley, and could possibly want to see her reaction. Hadley doesn't answer, so I tell all that to her voicemail, hoping she hears it soon.

Then I head into the breakroom where Lana is drinking a coke, kicked back with her feet crossed at the ankles as she stares at the TV. I lean against the doorjamb, studying her easy grin.

She has no idea at how sick the world is. I hate that I can't take her home right now. Hate that this got more complicated and now I

need to stay. She’s the only thing keeping me sane right now.

So much for spending some time in bed apologizing even more.

Chapter 13

Be not ashamed of mistakes and thus make them crimes.
—Confucius

LANA

Logan is gone for a little while when I suddenly see Lindy walk in front of the breakroom with Laurel. I guess she was watching the news closely, ready to follow through with what I told her to do.

Lindy's eyes widen in shock when she sees me, and I wink, holding my finger over my lips as the universal *shhhh* sign, while using my other hand to gesture to my visitor's badge.

She masks her surprise immediately, and Laurel grins at me, giving me a small wave. I get a little worried when I see Hadley suddenly approach them, looking in at me.

Laurel diverts her attention to Hadley, as Hadley narrows her eyes at me. "Can I help you?" she asks.

A guy walks up, and he gestures to Laurel and Lindy. "They have information on the Ferguson case. I escorted them up, but I can't find SSA Bennett."

My stomach flips just hearing his name. I hope he doesn't let me down. My instructions were for Lindy to seek out his team, but not by name. He'll get her custody of Laurel if he's the man I think he is, without treating her like a criminal for being linked to me—the monster I hide from him.

"I'll take them to conference three," Hadley tells him, eyeing me suspiciously again. Laurel glances at me one last time, but Lindy remains a face of stone, carrying out her part perfectly.

Laurel thinks I'm an angel. She probably thinks no one else can see me. In her eyes, I'm keeping a close watch on her, making sure she stays safe, just as I promised.

She's clean now. She's also wearing new clothes that Lindy must have picked up for her on the way here.

"Hey, what's going on?" I hear a familiar voice ask. Craig? Is his name Craig?

I think so.

I don’t hear anything after that, because they get too far away. Instead, I feign interest in the TV, drinking the soda I bought from the vending machine in here.

Lindy probably thinks I’m ballsy as fuck for being here right now. She has no clue how tangled up I’ve gotten myself.

But they’re looking for a monster.

Not a girl who loves red.

Not a girl who is falling in love.

Not a girl who died ten years ago.

More time passes before I feel eyes on me, and I dart a glance to the doorway to see Hadley just staring at me. Her eyes are definitely suspicious as she appraises me without any discretion.

Surely Laurel didn’t tell her. And certainly not Lindy.

Then again, I’d be in an interrogation room if they had. She’s been suspicious of me from the start, so she’s obviously still beating that dead horse.

To be certain, I arch an eyebrow at her, as though I’m daring her to say something. She doesn’t speak.

Her eyes are rimmed red, as though she’s been crying. Surely she didn’t care about Ferguson. So why cry?

Finally, she breaks the stare down and walks away, never saying a word. I return my attention to the ‘roast’ that’s going on. It’s actually pretty damn funny.

Besides, no one expects a laughing girl in the breakroom to have recently tortured a guy and dug up dark secrets no one even knew existed.

After some more time passes, I feel eyes on me again, and I jerk my head to the doorway to see Logan watching me with a small smile on his lips.

“What?” I ask, relieved he’s smiling.

“You. You’re just so…I guess you’re sick of hearing perfect. But it’s true.”

I slowly stand, smiling at him. I’m damn glad I’m not a suspect. I worried Lindy wouldn’t have the backbone she needed for this, but she must have proven herself.

Laurel has a home.

I’m sure of it.

“You okay? You’ve been gone a while.”

His smile slips. “Sorry about that. Had a lot to do. The only good thing besides seeing you right now, is that a traumatized homeless kid has a safe place to live.”

I breathe out silently, feeling a calm wash over me. He didn’t fail me. I knew he was perfect for this.

“Are you ready to go now?” I ask, moving toward him.

He grabs me at the waist, pulling me flush against his body, and he bends as I get up on my toes, meeting him as far as I can as his lips find mine.

“No,” he says, a sigh following as his lips stay on mine. “I have to stay.”

He pulls back reluctantly, regret shading his eyes. “I’ll give you my keys. You go home. This could take a while.”

Shit. They’ve definitely linked this kill to me—well, the me they can’t name, rather. I knew they would.

Now I have to let him do his job, trying to find me.

“Okay.”

I see Lindy and Laurel walk by, Craig escorting them out. Laurel waves at me again, and I wink at her, while Logan is distracted with running his lips over my forehead.

Craig fortunately doesn’t notice the wave goodbye either.

“I had to run a background check on a woman tonight just to make sure a killer chose wisely,” the guy who was at my house says as he walks into the breakroom, not noticing me on his way by. “This day is so fucked up.”

They know I chose her. But apparently she never talked.

Good girl, Lindy. Thank you.

“Donny, you remember my girlfriend, right?” Logan asks, and my heart does little cartwheels for reasons unbeknownst to me.

I’m his girlfriend.

I have a boyfriend.

This isn’t news, but it’s still making me gush like a thirteen-year-old who is hovering over the phone.

I don’t even think about the fact he’s the guy trying to catch the killer I moonlight as.

Donny whirls around, surprised to see me.

“Sorry,” he says, then nods in acknowledgment as he pours a cup of coffee. “I didn’t even see you.”

I just smile, looking all sweet and shit. *No ruthless killer here, boys. Just a harmless woman falling in love. That’s all.*

“Here are the keys,” Logan tells me, placing said keys into my palm. “I’d walk you down, but I have a shitload to do. I’m so sorry.”

I shrug, and some random guy walks over, apparently ready to escort me out.

“I’ll see you later?”

Logan’s lips find mine, answering that question without words. A throat-clearing comes from behind me—Donny. But Logan doesn’t stop putting on a show, his tongue toying with mine as he pulls me as close as possible.

I melt against him, uncaring if the world sees how head-over-heels I am. When he finally breaks the kiss, I’m dizzy, and maybe a little high.

He cups my cheek, staring at me for a long moment. “Later,” he says, then turns and leaves me behind as Craig meets him halfway.

I don’t look back at Donny as I let the other guy lead me out. He never says a word, and I don’t speak to him. He’s blushing fiercely, as though a little PDA shocked him and embarrassed the hell out of him.

Awww. Such a sweet little guy.

He escorts me all the way to Logan’s SUV, and I drive away, heading home to get some much-needed sleep. I’m glad I no longer have to hide my exhaustion.

The patrol cars at the end of my driveway are gone, apparently called away to deal with the latest homicide case that involves several missing children.

It’s a terrible pun, but I nailed that bastard’s balls to the wall.

Well, I actually nailed them to a chair while he cried for hours on end. Thank fuck for gloves. No way was I touching them ugly, wrinkly, hairy things with my hands otherwise.

My phone rings, and I see Jake’s name on it. I told him not to call me on this phone anymore.

“What’s wrong?”

“That girl, Erica Norris? The Boogeyman let her go.”

“What? When?”

“Don’t know. She’s demanding to speak with your boy. Says she won’t talk to anyone but Logan Bennett. She’s about an hour and a half away from you.”

“How do you know this?”

“Hacked the FBI cameras. Don’t worry. They won’t know it was me. They’ll think it was a Russian guy who has been dead for two years.”

“Why would he let her go?”

“Beats the hell out of me. I’ll let you know when I know. This badass is still on the case.”

I grin, rolling my eyes. Only Jake.

Hanging up, I walk up the steps to my house.

Weirdly, I hear music playing when I walk in. I must have left it on.

I shut the door, locking it.

Just as I turn the corner, something collides with my face like a hammer, and I’m thrown against the wall as a cry of pain escapes me. My keys and phone are knocked out of my hands and crash to the ground, but the sound is nothing more than a distant echo.

Before my eyes can adjust to the darkness, an arm bears down on my throat, strangling me, while my dazed head tries to catch up, still reeling from the explosive pain.

My hand shoots up, trying to connect with something, but a strong, vice-grip encases my wrist, twisting it painfully.

“Feisty. I like that. And so pretty. Agent Bennett picks them well,” a deep, sinister voice says from the darkness, chilling my blood to the core. Just a glimmer of light highlights malicious eyes too close to mine. “He left you all alone finally. Tell me, princess, are you afraid of the Boogeyman?”

End of Book 2

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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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