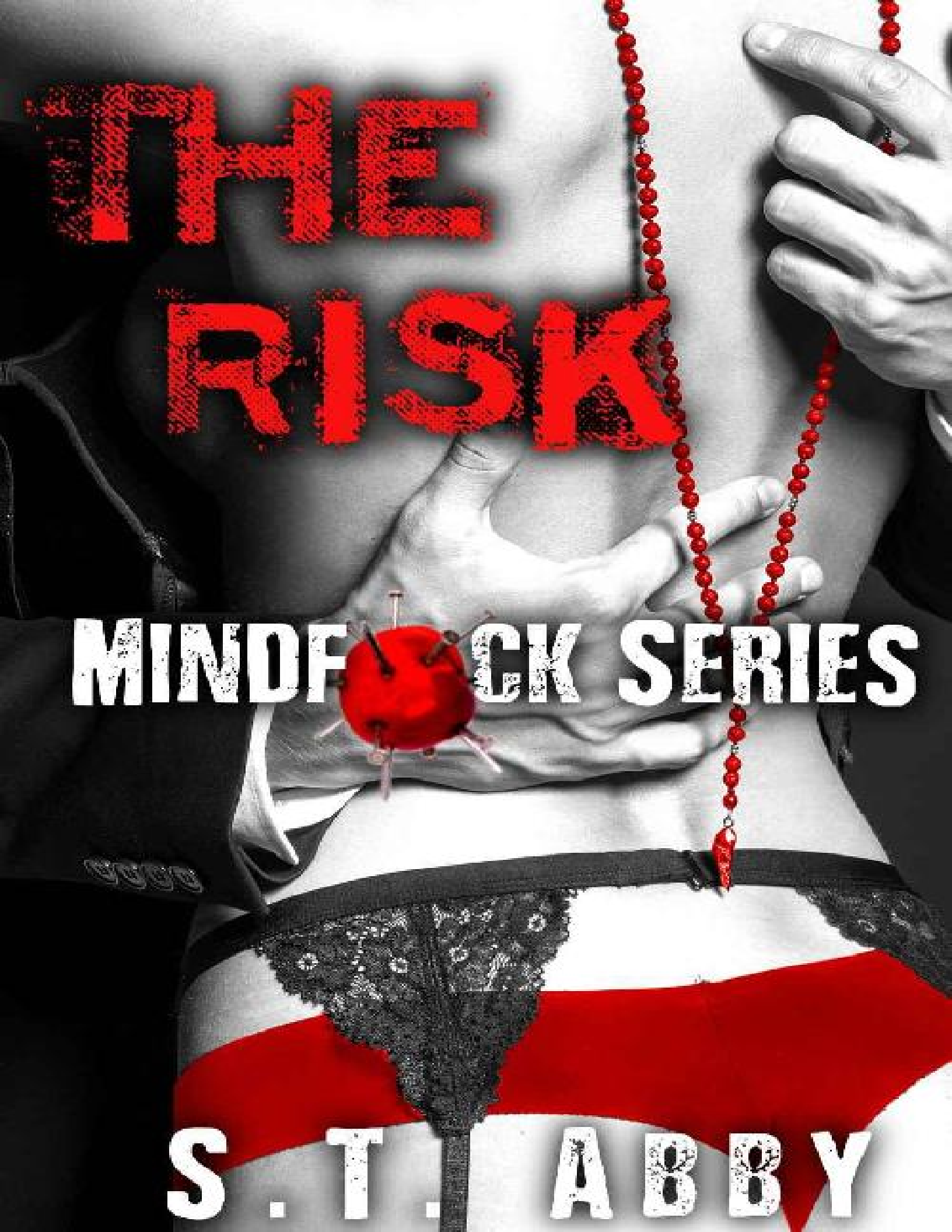

THE RISK
MINDF CK SERIES
S.T. ABBY

The Risk

Book 1 of the
Mindfuck Series

S.T. Abby

The Risk

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

So many names left to go…

Einstein said, "*The weak revenge. The strong forgive. The intelligent ignore."*

Fuck that. Einstein wasn't always right.

Revenge is a dish best served cold… Now that I agree with. It means they forget you're coming for them, and their screams sound so much prettier when the time finally comes.

Chapter 1

I love humanity but I hate humans.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

“You look like you’ve been stood up,” a guy says as I peer up from my phone, discreetly clicking the lock screen into place so he can’t see what I’m watching.

I arch an eyebrow as I study him. Good looking, mid-twenties, arrogant smile, dominant posture… He’s definitely barking up the wrong tree though.

“Actually, I enjoy eating alone,” I tell him with a fuck-off, sweet smile.

He doesn’t take the hint, because his eyes narrow with determination. Alphas prefer a challenge. I should have known better.

“I’m Craig. You’re…” He lets his words trail off as he rakes his eyes over me, but I say nothing before sipping my coffee. “If you don’t give me your name, I’ll just call you Beauty.”

How original.

His attempt at flattery is overtly untrained and certainly underdeveloped. He’s obviously used to getting his way without much of a fuss, which means he never puts forth any effort after catching his prize either. Considering his expensive suit and visible appeal, I’m not surprised.

Plenty of women will overlook his arrogance, confusing it for cockiness, possibly even find it charming.

But I’m the wrong girl.

“How about calling me Not Interested? Because that’s the most apt depiction of me at the moment,” I tell him, leaning back in my chair, relaxed and fully in control.

“Apparently you haven’t gotten a good look,” he proceeds, leaning back and pretty much posing in a stance that gives me nothing more to look at than an arrogant ass.

“I’ve seen more than enough. Still not interested.”

His look darkens as he takes a step back.

“Fine. Fuck it. I don’t need frostbite on my dick anyway,” he says before turning and walking toward a table where another guy is sitting.

The sun is not bright today, considering the overcast. We’re just a few of the people who opted for the patio instead of the inside of the coffee house, because it looks like it’s going to rain. Even though they’re several tables away, I can still see his friend laughing and shaking his head as Mr. Arrogant plops down to his seat, surly and dejected.

I resume watching the footage on my phone, until I feel eyes on me. Mr. Arrogant’s friend doesn’t look away when I look up and catch him studying me. He’s not leering or even acting interested. I’d say he’s trying to read me, just the way I do people.

He’s also nice looking, but his suit is not as expensive as the other guy’s. My observation would lead me to believe they’re work mates, but why is one dressed better than the other if they do the same job? He doesn’t seem submissive or weighted, the way he would if he was working for Mr. Arrogant. Which means they’re equals, but not paid the same? Or maybe Mr. Arrogant comes from money, and this guy doesn’t?

Unconcerned, I return my eyes to my phone, pretending I don’t notice his intense scrutiny. After finishing my coffee and my D-day screening, I ask the waitress for the bill.

“It’s already been paid,” she says with a soft smile and bright eyes. “And you’ve already left a tip as well,” she adds, winking. “A nice one.”

My eyebrows go up, and she motions back with her head as Mr. Arrogant’s friend walks off the patio. Mr. Arrogant is nowhere to be found.

“He said to thank you for the entertainment,” she proceeds to tell me while fanning herself and watching him walk toward a dark SUV.

“Thanks,” I tell her, standing up and heading toward the exit as well.

No flirting, no leering looks of longing, and no waiting around to see if I would come to him after he paid for my food. I don’t like it

when people are nice for no reason. Saying I was his entertainment isn't enough.

My eyes trail after the silent guy, watching him as he lingers by the SUV, speaking over the phone too quietly for me to hear his words from this distance. I also spot Mr. Arrogant, who is chatting up a pretty girl near the store down the sidewalk. She seems far more interested than I was.

Deciding to appease my curiosity, I head over to the silent guy just as he ends his call. His eyes snap up to mine as I approach, and his eyebrows raise as I pull out a twenty.

"I don't let strange men pay for my food. My mother taught me better," I tell him, waving the twenty in front of him to take.

A slow grin crawls across his full lips, completely transforming his face. His dark blonde hair is tousled just enough to be sexy without being bedhead messy. His strong, chiseled jaw is a stark contrast to his soft, blue eyes. He looks fierce and gentle in the same breath, confusing me all the more. I really can't get a read on him.

"I couldn't get a more entertaining show for so cheap. Trust me, it was worth the small bill," he says with a shrug, pocketing his hands and phone, making a stance that he won't take my money, without using the actual words.

But I'm persistent, and I wave the twenty again. "I still have my rules. Thanks, but no thanks."

His grin only grows. "You always so defensive?" he muses. "Are you constantly worried about the intentions of others? Or is it an extreme feminist position that keeps you on edge about a man doing something as mediocre as paying for your coffee and muffin?"

He *is* reading me. I knew it.

The cheap suit suddenly makes sense, along with the dark SUV. "You're FBI," I note, taking in the fact Quantico isn't too far away.

His grin broadens. "What makes you think that?"

"You're profiling me, for one, which would likely put you to be somewhere in that field, given the ride and attire. Your friend has an expensive suit that he wears to impress, but yours is less flashy. Your posture around him and good-natured ribbing towards him leads me to believe you're equals, despite the financial difference. So I'm assuming he comes from money, and you've earned your

own way. The SUV isn't a standardized version. The blacked out windows are too dark to be legally tinted, but I know the FBI are given certain leniencies due to security risks. So am I right?"

I really hate the way he continues to smile, as though he's only more intrigued instead of freaked out. I wanted to freak him out.

"You're not a paid profiler, not FBI, and not affiliated with any military unit," he says, confusing me. "Your outfit is bohemian chic, meaning you're less worried about your outward appearance and more concerned with comfort. You sit alone by choice, and dismiss any attention sent your way. At first glance, you're too feminist for your own good. At second glance, you're someone who is hard to get close to because trust isn't something you share too often. It keeps you from being hurt by people, but it also keeps you from having anyone in your life. At night, when you close your eyes and allow yourself to be vulnerable…that's the only time you dare to wonder what it'd be like to be with someone."

I swallow down the knot in my throat. He's too dead-on. I shouldn't be so easily readable. I've trained against it for years.

"No pets, given the fact there's not any pet hair on you, unless you have those who won't shed. However, I don't see you allowing yourself to become attached to an animal, when you know you'll most likely outlive it and have to deal with the heartbreak of losing said animal. You're detached by necessity, most likely a painful past that pushed you into this direction. A loss, perhaps. Maybe more than one loss. Maybe pushed into solitude by life and staying there by choice?"

When my heart thumps in my chest and I take a shaky step back, his eyes soften even more.

"Sorry. I went too far. I apologize," he tells me just as Mr. Arrogant returns.

"Haven't lost my edge. That chick was just—"

His words die when he sees me in an eye-lock with Mr. Profiler. I feel exposed, vulnerable, and out of my element. I'm not used to that. I've worked so freaking hard to be a fortress of impossible reads.

He just unraveled my confidence with one pull on the right thread.

“Grab a few bottles of water. Long ride,” he tells Mr. Arrogant without looking away from me.

I don’t know if he leaves or not, because I’m too busy staring right into those gentle blue eyes that really do seem remorseful.

“Life sucks,” he says randomly. “Then you die. Might as well live while you’re still alive,” he adds, sounding completely less insightful than earlier.

It’s enough to break the tension, and an unexpected smile slips free from me. He winks as he leans over. “If you ever want help feeling alive, call me. I could use some life as well.”

When he draws back, I feel something in my hand, though I never felt him placing anything there. He walks around to the other side of the SUV, and I watch with rapt attention as he gets in.

My eyes finally fall down to the card in my hand as Mr. Arrogant returns to take the passenger side.

Logan Bennett…

His number is attached to his name, and sure enough, he’s FBI. When my gaze comes up again, he’s leaning on the steering wheel, watching me. Mr. Arrogant’s window is down, and he looks annoyed.

“Call me,” Logan says, grinning before pulling away from the curb.

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a persistent one. Albert Einstein said that. My father always quoted Einstein as a way of explaining life when we struggled to understand it. I remember him quoting me that when our lives fell apart. He was hurting the worst, and trying his best to soothe me.

Einstein isn’t helping me understand how easily I was just read. Or how vulnerable and exposed I feel in this moment.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and I look down, seeing the alert I set.

I have to be cold. I *need* to be cold. Anything less could fracture the shell in place that I need to execute the plan I’ve worked too hard on for too long.

Shaking off the residual weakness, I blow out a harsh breath and walk to my car. I drive fifteen miles, find the house I’m looking for, and drive on by. I wait until I’m parked in an abandoned barn before I put on my gloves, suit, and heavy men’s boots. I also strap

on the backpacks weighted down with rocks… One on my back and one on my front.

Stealthily, I walk toward the house, slip open the door, and silently remove the backpacks, putting them down with careful ease to a chair.

My purse has everything I need in it, so I keep it on me. The heavy shoes come off next, and I silently place them on top of my backpack.

Movement upstairs draws my attention, and I slowly make my way to the staircase, careful to keep my steps light and silent. I've examined the floors for a month, finding every spot that creaks or groans.

I know his routine better than my own. Just like I know in five seconds, the water will come on.

Sure enough, the old pipes in the house clank as water shoots through them, and that's when I make my way up the stairs, ignoring the way they creak, because he can't hear a thing with that loud shower.

When I reach his room, my eyes dart to the bed. I know he's single, but I always worry about stumbling across an unplanned woman. I watched the cameras from my phone, and they showed no woman here, but it's still a thought that always plagues the back of my mind.

I breathe out in relief when I see no signs of an overnight guest. Just Ben and his usual messy home.

The shower cuts off, and I'm already in position, ready and waiting. Life would be simpler if I could use a Taser or sedatives. It really would.

Just as he walks through with a towel around his waist, my knife comes down, slicing hard against the Achilles heel. Screams pierce my ears, and I realize that moment of weakness with Mr. Profiler earlier doesn't affect how pretty the screams sound.

I've worked too long, too hard, and too endlessly for this. I should have known one man couldn't take away my edge.

Ben falls to the floor, crying out in agony, while clutching his foot. The towel flops off, exposing every naked inch of him to my eyes.

It makes my stomach roil.

But the terror in his eyes? That gets me high.

“What the fuck? Take whatever you want!” he shouts, sobbing as I approach, watching me with those wide, terrified eyes.

I get off on the terror. I want him to cry for much, much longer.

“What I want is for you to know my name,” I say quietly, eerily.

His eyes grow even wider, and he pales when I hold the bloody knife up and run my finger along the backside of it.

“Please don’t,” he begs, trying and failing to stand up.

He’ll hit me if he gets the chance. I’m not stupid enough to get that close just yet.

I pull the wire from my back pocket, and I watch him as he watches me.

“Don’t recognize me, Ben?” I ask mockingly, cocking my head. Ten surgeries ago, he might have recognized me immediately.

“No. No,” he cries. “I don’t know you. You have the wrong person!”

I squat down, noticing the way his gaze shifts. He’s preparing to attack me now that I’m in this position. He finds it a vulnerable mistake on my part.

If he only knew…

“I was a sixteen-year-old little girl the last time you saw me,” I say with a dark smile. “I’m all grown up now. *Want to play*?”

The last three words are what triggers recognition. I see it in the way his pupils dilate, his nostrils flare, and a sense of understanding washes over his features.

“You,” he whispers. “No. No. You look nothing like her. She died,” he adds in the same hushed tone.

“I survived,” I say back, watching as his fear slowly starts to fade, just as I knew it would.

Right now, he’s remembering just how weak I was as that horrified, terrified, sobbing little girl. He’s remembering how easily he overpowered me. His mind is playing tricks on him that he’s still the one in control, despite the precariously deadly situation.

“You took three turns,” I go on, staying poised and ready, but outwardly displaying a weakness I don’t truly have, allowing his mind to continue to revert back to that night ten years ago.

“That means three pounds of flesh over the next three days,” I go on.

I see it happening before he launches himself at me, screaming in pain as he tries to tackle me to the floor. My knife slams into his shoulder, and another bloodcurdling scream erupts through the air as I spin on my knees, sliding in behind him as his face plants into the floor.

My hand is still holding the knife, and I rip it away in less than a blink, almost simultaneously tossing the wire around his neck, winding it tightly. Then I choke him, reveling in the pained sounds, until he grows limp and unconscious, riding the line of life and death. With the blood loss, he’s too weak to fight back. It’d be so easy to kill him right now.

But death won’t come too soon.

I don’t believe in mercy.

Three pounds of flesh will be extracted while he’s awake.

He’ll beg and plead.

He’ll pray to pass out.

But he will feel it all.

Just like we did.

Chapter 2

As a human being, one has been endowed with just enough intelligence to be able to see clearly how utterly inadequate that intelligence is when confronted with what exists.
—Albert Einstein.

LOGAN

I finish off my croissant while staring at the gory crime scene photos.

Blood is smeared across the walls with a paintbrush, just like the other four cases we've managed to link together. It's one of the few things that remains consistent. The unsub always paints a wall red with the victim's blood.

"How can you eat while seeing that?" Elise asks while wrinkling her nose and sitting down on the edge of my desk.

Ignoring her question, I ask, "What did they find out about Ben Harris?"

"The M.E. estimated that he was tortured for at least three days. He has parts of him that have been cut off, just like the others. Including the penis," she sighs.

That has me cringing, just like any man would. One of these images is supposed to be a dismembered penis?

"His fingers were all cut off," she goes on, pointing at one picture that was snapped of ten severed fingers lying on the ground. "His chest was slowly pulled off piece by piece. The unsub stopped the bleeding each time by using a barbaric method of cauterization. He wanted the victim alive for those three days specifically. His penis seems to be the last thing to have gone. Ligature marks were found again, and chains were hanging from his basement rafters. We think the unsub stayed true to his profile, leaving the victim strung up in their own home. So far, all the men have had isolated homes too far away for any neighbors to overhear or see anything."

And he's not devolving either. His strikes are controlled, well planned out, and meticulous in detail, even if we don't understand the details.

“The unsub should be a female, considering the groin mutilation in all the kills,” Craig says, shuddering as he walks up on our conversation. “Only a woman could handle cutting off a man’s junk.”

“Women serial killers statistically don’t torture. They’re actually far more efficient and harder to track down because of that,” Elise says dismissively.

“Well, he has to be impotent. Most serial killers are,” Alan chimes in, joining us.

There’s a reason he and Craig are not profilers.

“I think he’s more of a sexual sadist,” Elise explains. “Impotence likely plays a part, but just calling them impotent isn’t a profile.”

“So an impotent sexual sadist?” Craig asks, confused.

“Sexual sadists are often impotent, and they seek out their sexual release through the torture. No signs of rape were found, but it’s likely the unsub hasn’t evolved and grown the confidence to rape the men yet.”

“So a gay sexual sadist?” Craig goes on, still lost.

“Yes,” Elise says, nodding.

“All of the male victims were straight, according to witnesses. If they were gay, that theory would make more sense,” I add. “All five men were from the same town, yet no one can think of any man who might want to kill all five. However, I know we’re missing something.”

“Footprints are a size twelve man’s shoe made in the dirt on the way to the house. The footprint is solid from heel to toe. Our field expert says that the unsub weighs between two-ten and two-fifteen,” Elise announces.

“He’d have to be physically fit to be able to overpower these men the way the unsub has. And very built, most likely. The unsub is overpowering them with sheer brute force. Originally he was only killing alphas, which led to the profile being an alpha serial. But Ben, although physically fit and strong, was very submissive in his line of work. It was why he was so successful, because he liked being in the background instead of in charge.”

“Sexual sadism is far more likely, since the last kill. There may be a sexually frustrated trigger, which should narrow down our search. We should also adjust the profile. What else do we know about the victims?”

“These guys were tops of their classes in college, but they were all different ages—from twenty-three to twenty-eight. Victimology only links them through the town and through their isolated homes. They haven’t kept in contact, even though they were all friendly when they still lived in town. It’s possible the unsub hates the whole town, but why? Is it part vengeance?”

“Possibly,” I say more to myself than to Elise.

One kill in Boston. One kill in Denver. One kill in Long Island. One kill in Maine. And now one kill in our own backyard in Virginia. This guy is all over the map, shitting all over a normal hunting ground pattern.

It would seem random if we hadn’t made the connection to the same home town. But not the same school. Three of them went to a private school two towns over. So obviously this isn’t an old grudge dated back to school ages, especially given the age gap in the victims that would put them in different grades too.

“No kills have been reported in town,” I groan. “If it was just two, I’d call it a coincidence. But it’s five from that town, yet no deaths within the town limits. What do we know about the town?”

“Small. Very small. Five hundred is the population. In the past three years, nothing of any real interest has made the news, other than a wolf that attacked a man in his cow pasture. Very religious town.”

“Small, religious towns are notorious for making it hard on gay males. Especially small farm towns. You and Leonard head out there and see what you can find out. Ask about a physically fit male over six feet tall, age twenty to thirty-five, who might have been gay or showed interest in men. Given the religious aspect, it’s doubtful he came out. Ask if anyone seemed to struggle or demonstrate a nervous tic frequently after having any sort of contact with an attractive male. All the males killed so far have been physically fit, single, attractive, and very promiscuous with women. It’s possible the unsub had feelings for them at some point in time, and retaliated for them not returning the same affections.”

I purse my lips, wondering what we’re missing. The profile appears solid, and the evidence lines up to support it, but something just feels off. We should have made the connection sooner, but with

all the kills so spread out over state lines, we just got wind of this two weeks ago, which was two weeks after the fourth victim.

“Anything else I need to note to the profile before we deliver it to the town’s PD?”

“Yeah,” I say, sitting up as I study the photos. “The unsub managed to enter each home without it looking broken into. Either the victims know the unsub and trust him enough to let him in, or they didn’t lock their doors. Tell them this unsub would have had to be social with them in order to establish that rapport. Also, have we found out what trophy is being taken? The unsub has a personal attachment to these men, and has a sadistic fantasy he’s playing out with each kill, though rape doesn’t seem to be a part of the fantasy just yet. Obviously he’s getting off on the torture alone for now, but given the long gap between kills, he’d need something to hold him over. He’d definitely be taking a trophy.”

One month between each kill. The time frame hasn’t been changed, and it doesn’t look like the unsub is falling apart any time soon, if ever. I was hoping for a rapid devolution that would cause him to start slipping up by now.

“We’ve checked the bodies over. All the flesh is left behind, and the hair is intact. Also, none of the males were missing jewelry or other personal items, but we can’t know for sure, since they all lived alone and had no one to account for their belongings.”

We’re missing something, damn it. And it’s driving me crazy.

“Go home and get some rest. You’ve been here all night,” Elise goes on, placing her hand on my shoulder. “A mind works better after some rest.”

“Dig deeper into the town’s past. Something has happened there that we don’t know about, and—”

“Rest,” she interrupts. “I know how to do my job. You’re useless if you don’t sleep.”

Cursing, I stand up and close the file, packing it up as Elise leaves with Leonard to head up north to Delaney Grove. It’s an odd town name, and I know I’ll have to see it for myself to get any real answers.

Just as I reach the door, Craig catches up to me.

“Did frostbite girl ever give you a call?” he asks, sounding bored. But I know it still pisses him off that she blew him off and chased me down. Even though he viewed the facts out of context and refused to take in the real process of those events.

Again, that’s why he sucks at profiling, but he’s good at public relations—his place on our team.

I open my mouth to tell him *no*, knowing it will make him feel vindicated and delighted, but my phone rings. My brow furrows when I see the unknown number, and I answer.

“Bennett here,” I answer.

“You use your last name when answering a phone, as though the person on the other line might not know whom they’ve just dialed. It’s a very impersonal greeting, which makes me wonder if you also struggle with detachment issues, Agent Bennett,” a familiar, feminine voice drawls.

My smile immediately forms, and I wink at Craig as he watches me, waiting for me to put him out of his nosy misery.

“So you really waited the standard three days to give me a call back?”

“Technically, I waited a nonconventional four days.”

Right. I haven’t been to sleep since we found the latest victim yesterday morning. I’m running on caffeine and sugar.

“Sorry. I’ve been up all night. It’s not another day until I’ve slept, so I’m still on day three. Will I have to wait four days in between all your calls? Or am I allowed to use this number when I want to?” I ask her, watching as Craig groans and huffs, pouting as he moves out of my way.

“Why have you been up all night?” she asks, diverting the question I asked her.

It’s a typical reaction from someone with detachment issues.

“My job. I miss a lot of sleep, and spend a lot of time on the road. I guess I need to say that now before asking you out on a date I may or may not have to cancel because of said job.”

I decide to toss everything out there right away, knowing she’s already skittish and leery of trusting. The second I read her, she went from cold to haunted in a blink, and those haunted green eyes have been seared into my memory.

With her defenses down, she was lost, almost worried about being hurt just from speaking to me. Call it a hero complex, but I found myself drawn to her right then.

“Good to know. I miss a lot of things too, and I keep weird hours.”

My smile only grows, since she’s opening up.

“What do you do?” I ask her.

She laughs lightly, and it’s a damn good laugh to hear. It doesn’t fit her. And it’s an easy, free laugh, as though she’s not even the same girl I spoke to a few days ago.

“I have an online buy, sell, and trade store. I take a cut from each sell or trade made, and I have to vet some of them if the deal looks too good to be true. For instance, I might have to take a spontaneous trip in the middle of the night if someone in Florida is trying to trade a million dollar yacht for ten thousand dollar car. I can’t approve a trade like that until I physically inspect the merchandise and see the proper paperwork. For sales, I can just hold the money paid until the property gets transferred. Trades, however, have to be done by the customers. I’m just a third party arranger who occasionally inspects.”

Listening to her talk with such ease is a little confusing to the way I had her depicted… I profiled her as detached and defensive, not easy-natured. Maybe I’m off my game because I’m tired and hearing ease when it’s really strain.

“Sounds like fun though,” I say lamely. Again, I blame sleep deprivation.

“Not always. Once I had to go inspect one of those ‘real’ dolls. You know? The sex dolls that are realistically made, unlike the blowup dolls. They’re worth like five grand and the guy was trading it for a small pony… Don’t even get me started with the concern there.”

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

“Is that the weirdest thing you’ve ever inspected?”

“While examining the vagina of a synthetic woman made complete with suction in *all* holes wasn’t the highlight of my career, it surprisingly wasn’t the weirdest.”

Again, I laugh, wondering why her switch has flipped from defensive to charming over the course of four days.

“So what was the weirdest?” I ask her.

“Tit for tat. What’s the weirdest case you’ve ever worked?”

I think about that as I get in my car. Most of the cases I work are serious, violent, and sadistic. But when I first started…

“I got recruited while I was in college after taking a test I didn’t realize was for the FBI. They decided I needed to come work for them, and I didn’t see any reason to argue. Anyway, my first case was a small one in Indiana. It was a perv who was collecting panties. At first glance, the guy was a sexual deviant who would eventually escalate to harder crimes than panty thieving. It’s why they called us in, because all these women were terrified of a stalker breaking into their homes and stealing their underwear. But the deeper I delved, the more I realized it was actually a juvenile kid. I still thought he was having sexual fantasies. It wasn’t until later we discovered he wasn’t stealing the panties for him. He was stealing them for his mother, because she always griped about her ‘cheap underwear riding up into the crack of her ass.’ You don’t even want to know how horrified the mother was when we finally found the kid. He hadn’t given her the underwear yet. He was putting them all in a box to give her for Christmas.”

She gasps then laughs, and I relax in my seat while driving out of Quantico, heading toward my house.

“Sounds awkward. But at least the kid wasn’t a sexual deviant.” There’s a tense note to her tone, but then she clears her throat while I yawn. “You really do sound tired. I’ll let you go.”

“I’m driving home. I have thirty minutes of free time. Keep me company.”

“Hmm, I guess you still want me to be your entertainment.”

My smile spreads. “I’d ask for more than just an amusing phone conversation, but I have to head back in as soon as I get some sleep. We had something new turn up in one of our cases, which means the workload is fresh again.”

“Hmmm, what would you ask for if you were able to ask for it?” she asks, sounding like she’s flirting now, which negates the defensive stance she held just days ago.

“I’d ask for dinner. Maybe even a movie if dinner went well and you didn’t have any deal-breaking faults.”

She snickers softly. “What faults would those be? Inquiring minds and all that.”

“The usual. Eating boogers. Drinking urine… Strap-on fetish where you’d be the one fucking me. I’m not into any of that.”

She starts laughing harder this time, and I listen, soaking it in. I don’t know why it feels like I’ve accomplished something by making her laugh. Then again, something tells me she probably doesn’t do it too often.

“Well, I never adopted a booger-eating habit. Drinking urine doesn’t appeal to me. I’ll just have a beer if I’m in the mood to drink something akin to piss. And I’ll hide my strap-on until you’re a little more comfortable with your sexuality to give it a go.”

“Taking a jab at my sexuality. Nice,” I state dryly, listening to her laugh some more as I continue to smile.

“So how do you profile people?” I muse when her laughter tapers off.

“How do I do it? Or why do I do it?” she counters.

“Both.”

“Well, I do it mostly based on body language in person, and micro-expressions, of course. I pay attention to the wording when it’s in writing. I listen to tone and wording over the phone. I do it because I run that online site, and you have to know the bull-shitters from the legitimate users.”

“You run the store alone?” I ask, hedging for more personal info.

“I have a business partner. He handles all the tech work, and developed a program to flag potential fake accounts. It cuts out a lot of hands-on work, even though we still sift through the accounts personally.”

“And this male partner is just a friend?” I ask, prying farther.

She hesitates, but then she sounds amused. “If you’re asking if I’m single, the answer is yes. Have been for a while. I wouldn’t have called you and flirted if I was with someone else.”

“Well, it sucks that I can’t take you out tonight before you get tired of waiting on me to have a free second. I’ll be working overtime in search of new leads. But if you’re up for coffee, I can meet you in the same place we met on my way back into the office in a few hours. Say five or so?”

“I prefer coffee in the mornings, but you can buy me a muffin. They have excellent muffins.”

“Coffee in the mornings,” I echo, my grin growing. “Duly noted.”

“Are you flirting with me, Agent Bennett?”

“Maybe a little. Are you ever going to tell me your name?”

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t know my name. It’s dangerous to talk to strangers, you know.”

“I’m aware. I profile serials for a living.”

She’s a somewhat tiny thing with haunted eyes, yet joking I should be wary of her. I’m sure the fact she knows I have a badge puts her at ease; she assumes all law officials are good souls with clean intentions. That tells me she’s never been in trouble with the law or had any issues with them at all.

“Serials?” she asks, her voice hitching a little, reminding me what I’ve said.

“Serial offenders. I graduated from serial panty robbers to serial killers. Hope that’s not an issue. I’ve had problems in the past keeping a relationship because of that.”

She clears her throat. “Um, no problem. But shouldn’t you keep things like that quiet from strangers?”

“It’s not classified. I’ve been on the news a time or two speaking. And besides, I’d rather we weren’t strangers. So what’s your name?”

She pauses for longer than I’d like. I’ve gotten her wrong and right, but I’m not sure to what degrees on either front. So I don’t even bother guessing why she’s quiet.

“It’s Lana. Lana Myers. Feel free to investigate me, Mr. Profiler.”

The light tone is back, and I cut down the final road to lead me home.

“I’d rather you surprise me, Lana Myers. I only run a non-invasive background check to make sure you’re not a felon or fugitive. That could be an issue, given my job,” I say, laughing lightly.

She laughs as well, then sighs. “Coffee later?” I ask her.

“Muffin, remember?”

“Right. Sorry. Sleep deprived.”

“I’ll see you later, Agent Bennett.”

“Definitely,” I tell her around a yawn as I pull into my house.

She hangs up, and I immediately type in her name in a text to Hadley.

HADLEY: What am I looking for?
ME: A criminal record only.
HADLEY: Done and done. She's clean.
ME: That was fast.
HADLEY: That's what she said.

Chuckling, I put my phone away, and I walk inside. My mind is tired, but I'm still running facts of the case over in my head, thinking of anything we might be missing.

The unsub tortures his victims for days, but not for the same amount of days. Three days this last time. Two days apiece on the first two victims. Four days on the third and fourth victims. The lack of consistency doesn't make sense, neither does the targeted skin that is removed. It's always different, except for the damn dick removal. Sometimes all the fingers are cut off. Sometimes they're not.

My house is empty, quiet, and somewhat eerie, considering the case I'm working on. All the victims are a reflection of myself. Single. Alone. Physically fit. Living in a secluded area. Workaholics.

My closest neighbor is a mile down the road.

No one notices the victims missing for days on end. They all call into work. It's a taped recording of a man's voice, from what we can surmise, considering the words are exactly the same. None of the businesses record those calls, obviously, so we're having to trust the person who received the call.

The last body was only found because one of his work colleagues came to find out why he didn't come to work on the fourth day and never called in for that day.

It's depressing to know that no one outside of work notices them missing. The same would hold true for myself.

My eyes scan my house out of habit, looking for anything out of place. Once I feel confident nothing has been disturbed, I take off my gun, set my alarm, and then I drop to the bed.

My eyes close, and I expect to see the images of dead bodies like I always do.

Instead, I’m lost in a set of haunted green eyes I’ll be seeing later.

Chapter 3

When you are courting a nice girl, an hour seems like a second.
When you sit on a red-hot cinder, a second seems like an hour.
That's relativity.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

It's after five when I start looking at my watch, wondering if I really am being stood up this time. I'm not sure what compelled me to call him, flirt with him, then agree to a date. Maybe it's because I need to feel less like a cold monster and more like a woman.

I lived. Others died.

I lived, yet I feel dead.

Maybe I want to feel alive, considering my time may be limited. I should treasure every moment…when I'm not collecting on an overdue debt. It's not exactly romantic to think of a guy while you're slicing another one to pieces, but Logan was definitely on my mind during the three days I spent reaping the debt from Ben.

Not in the dark recesses of my mind that are reserved for revenge either. No. Logan was in the good parts that I thought no longer existed. He awakened a long-gone light as though not all the good inside me had been destroyed.

Just as I'm about to text him and find out if he's okay, there's suddenly a body sliding into the seat in front of me, and my eyes pop up to meet a set of soft blues. I could stare at those eyes all day. The rest of him measures up to those perfect eyes too.

He's sin and pleasure wrapped in a package I'm tempted to peek at.

"So sorry," he groans, motioning a waitress over. "There was a traffic jam. I actually had to abuse my power and hit the lights just to get through."

My smile surprises me every time he makes me use it. "It's fine. I was just worried," I lie, well, sort of. I was worried about him, and I was worried I'd been stood up.

His grin is genuine and instant when he sees I'm not pissed, and the waitress shows up, ending the moment of two idiots grinning at each other.

I honestly can't remember a time when my stomach was fluttering around. I was just a teenager when my life was shattered and the illusion of normality forever stayed out of my grasp.

This is the most human I've felt in so long. And it's just a coffee drive-by on his way to work.

We both order, and the waitress walks away after giving him a quick once over and winking at me as though she approves. Not that I need her approval.

"So, what made you agree to meet me?" he asks, apparently skipping small talk. I guess that's wise, since our time will be limited. Not to mention he interrogates for a living, so it's only natural to start a date out that way with him.

I decide against telling him that he makes me feel like a woman instead of the monster I've had to become, since he'd sort of lock me up and throw away the key.

"What made you want to ask me out?" I ask him instead.

His grin spreads wider. "You're deflecting, but I'll bite. You've been in my head. Your turn," he says, leaning up on the table with his elbows.

"You've been in my head too."

"Ah, see, that's cheating. You can't just parrot my words to keep from disclosing too much. That's a commonly used tool in a detached personality."

"Stop profiling me," I say with a teasing smile, but secretly hoping he really does stop.

What if he sees too much? What the hell am I thinking? This is the stupidest date I could possibly go on.

I finally meet a guy I want to see, perhaps even date, and it has to be the one guy who could see right through me?

He's studying me too intensely, but I keep my smile in place, hoping it doesn't seem strained.

"Occupational hazard. I can't turn it off. I wish I could, but I can't."

Great.

He continues to await my reaction, and I try to think of how to properly react. How do normal women react? Do they gush and goo over his badge and skills? Do they get offended by his admission of constant profiling, feeling like he won't let them have that privacy? I have no idea.

"How much has that affected your dating life?" I ask, deciding not to react at all and keep my expressions masked.

He groans while shaking his head and leaning back. "More than I care to admit. Women prefer to tell me how they feel, as opposed to me pointing it out. I've tried to stop, but can't. Consider it a weird personality quirk. I was hopeful with you; you seem to do the same thing."

His eyes find mine, and he really does seem hopeful. He's right. I do the same thing. But for completely different reasons.

He serves justice the best he can.

I serve revenge in the way it needs to be.

"What's your dating life like?" he asks, probing once again.

Like a cobweb with a bunch of dead bugs in it… Again, not the most appropriate answer.

As the waitress comes and drops off our small order, I try to think of the best answer, waiting until she leaves to respond.

"A little dry at the moment."

"Ouch," he says, but he grins.

"Well, not at this exact moment," I say, feeling that stupid, uncontrollable smile spread again.

"So tell me about you." He gestures toward me with one hand while using his other to bring the coffee to his lips.

"Twenty-six. New to the area. Constantly moving. And I have an odd fixation with socks. You?"

He frowns, as though something doesn't sit well with him.

"You move a lot?" he asks, not answering my question.

We do that to each other, I guess. Avoid answering questions to ask our own.

"Yeah. I've lived in almost thirty states. Growing up was sort of boring. We lived in one town. It was small, and everyone knew everything about everyone. After my parents died, it just got worse. Anyway, I've moved all over, trying to find what feels like home."

“Any luck here?” he asks, clearing his throat.

“Maybe,” I say with a shrug.

I barely know him, so telling him he’s the first thing that’s piqued my interest this much would definitely be coming on too strong.

“So your parents…” He lets the words trail off, seeming reluctant to fully ask what he wants to know.

“Car accident,” I partially lie, forcing a tight smile.

“Sorry,” he says, blowing out a breath.

“It was years ago. Now, about you?” I muse, desperately ready for a subject shift.

He flashes me a smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Twenty-nine. I own a house on a quiet piece of land. It was my stepdad’s, but he left it to me before he died. My mother is living with her newest husband in Miami. So it’s just me.”

“What about your birth dad?” I realize too late that I shouldn’t be prying that deep, when I don’t want him prying too.

Neither of us gets the chance to pry.

His phone chirps, drawing his attention to it, and he sighs in a way that probably means our short and sweet talk is over.

“Fuck,” he says under his breath, causing my lips to twitch.

It’s just a word, but I was starting to worry that he was a total choir boy.

His eyes pop back up to meet mine. “I hate to leave this early, but—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt, ignoring the small pang of disappointment.

He tosses down a twenty, which is more than enough to cover the possible ten dollar bill.

“I really am sorry,” he says, cursing under his breath as he stands.

I stand and make things awkward, because I don’t know if I should hug him, touch him at all, or wave like an idiot.

I wave like an idiot.

Sheesh.

He smirks, arching an eyebrow at me. “I’ll call you later?” he asks, his smirk turning into a smile.

I’m busy feeling like an ass, so I just nod. I really don’t trust my mouth to be any less stupid than this incredibly awkward wave that

I’m still doing. It’s like my hand has lost touch with my brain, and the damn thing is still waving.

His phone rings this time, and he turns and walks away before answering. I drop back down to my seat, wondering how planning out a brutal murder is easier than dating.

The world is entirely too fucked up.

Chapter 4

Force always attracts men of low morality.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

LOGAN: Steak. I'll be taking you out for steak. Maybe even lobster too. You like red meat and shellfish?

I grin when I see the random text from Logan. Yesterday I was awkward, but then he called and made me forget how unversed I am with all this, because he didn't seem to mind. If anything, he seemed more intrigued.

ME: Yes and yes. I like wine too. Just FYI.

LOGAN: Wine, got it. What are you doing today? Any chance you'll be in town for more coffee? Or a muffin, rather?

I finish concealing the final camera over the entry of the doorway. Getting inside wasn't easy, considering Tyler or his wife locks the doors immediately when they get home or leave. But I finally managed to slip in and leave a window unlocked for later.

No security system. There's only one of my targets planned who has a security system. That'll be on Jake to handle. Jake is a true best friend. How many people do you walk up to, tell them you want revenge, tell them your plan, and then they start helping you keep from getting caught?

I grab my phone and text Logan back, finding it oddly calming to have a normal conversation while plotting.

Maybe I really am psychotic.

ME: Not today. I'm on a trade review. I won't be back in until tomorrow.

That's not entirely a lie. I did do a trade review… It just happened to be in the same town.

Tyler's wife is out of town on a conference for work, which gives me plenty of time to check out his home.

The flooring is new, just like the rest of the home. No creaks is a damn good thing. My phone buzzes in my pocket as I make my way through the hallways, checking for anything and everything that might pose a problem.

LOGAN: Tomorrow I'll be a few towns over. Juggling a few cases right now. People just can't seem to stop killing other people.

Gotta love irony.

We're so terribly mismatched that it's not even funny.

If he'd seen the evil I've seen, he'd understand why some people deserve to die.

ME: Have you ever had to kill someone?

Pretty sure that's not the best question to ask a guy you've only had one coffee house date with—if you can call that a date.

LOGAN: Many times. Not all cases end with the perp in jail, unfortunately.

Well, he's killed numerous people the same way with the same methodology and reasoning…so technically he's a serial killer too. It's logically truthful. Other than wearing a badge to find it legally justifiable, we're the same. Well, I torture my victims first, but that's just nitpicking at facts.

LOGAN: Does that bother you?

I'm laughing before I can stop myself, and I groan while shaking my head, happy that there's no one here to hear me. Morbid humor is probably not going to get me far in this relationship.

ME: Not at all. I'm sure you had to do it, or you wouldn't have done it at all.

Sometimes people don't find justice. Sometimes they have to take it.

“Want to play, Victoria? You know you do.” Ben’s breath feels like acid against my forehead, and I manage to slam a knee up, connecting with his side.

He curses and turns his head.

“Hold her down!” he yells at Tyler. “Or I’ll make sure she nails you a few times too.”

A scream pierces the night, but it’s not mine. I refuse to let them hear me scream.

“You scream pretty,” I hear Kyle saying, laughing from somewhere behind us, but I can’t see him or what he’s doing.

And I don’t want to see.

I don’t even want to see what they’re doing to me.

The memories used to leave me curled in a ball and crying for hours. Now they fuel me. Feed my mission. Drive me forward.

Make me a little murderous.

Shaking my head, I move through the house quicker, hiding the last camera in the stuffed bear on Tyler’s bed. Apparently his wife likes stuffed animals. Or at least I hope it’s his wife who likes stuffed animals. I’d hate to know I’ve trembled in fear over a guy who carries around a stuffed bear.

As I enter the last bedroom, I notice it’s soundproofed with large amounts of studio padding meant for musicians. This will be the perfect room, since he doesn’t have a basement. No windows are in here.

No cameras will be added in this room.

There are a few guitars lined up, all of them nice and shiny.

His whole life is nice and shiny. Just like all of them.

I can’t wait to paint it red.

Chapter 5

The only real valuable thing is intuition.
—Albert Einstein

LOGAN

“Who’s the girl?” Elise asks, clearing her throat as she sits down on the edge of my desk.

I’m grinning when I put my phone down, but I mask my expression.

“No clue what you’re talking about,” I lie, controlling all my micro-expressions.

“You can lie all you want to, but you give yourself away when you look at your phone. There are two reasons a guy smiles at his phone like that. Porn or a girl.”

Chuckling, I look away, studying some new evidence on the “Boogeyman” case. I hate it when the media gives the unsubs a name. It only feeds into their delusions and gives them the attention they crave. Fortunately they haven’t gotten wind of our mutilated, tortured victims’ case yet. I’d hate to know the name they’d conjure up for that one.

“We’re sending a team to Boston to follow up the new leads for the kills there. We’ve isolated the comfort zone and have narrowed down the suspect pool. You good with going? I’m staying current on the mutilate and kill case,” I say instead of responding to her other comment.

She blows out a long breath. “Sure. I’ll go to Boston. Stop staring at all those pictures though. They’re going to give you nightmares,” she says, motioning to the shots scattered across my desk. I always have board copies made for my desk. Seeing things from various angles helps you catch what you might otherwise overlook.

“I need to find the true motive behind these kills.” I motion to the latest dead and castrated victim.

“Sometimes there is no motive. We profiled the unsub to be sexually frustrated, most likely because he’s gay and can’t accept

that. As a result, he's on his way to becoming a sexual sadist once he does accept it. More than likely he was mocked, taunted, or rejected by these men. The local PD are being slow with getting back to us. I don't think they're taking this guy as seriously as they should. I talked to several townies, but they acted like no one there would ever be gay. As though it's blasphemy to even consider. I wanted to flash pictures of my brother and his husband to them just for shock value at one point."

My lips twitch.

"The smaller the town, the more resistant to outsiders they are. They don't like us meddling in their town, and they sure as hell won't want us there uncovering any dirt that might tarnish their reputation. But eventually we'll have to set up there. The unsub *will* return for his endgame," I say on a heavy breath.

She nods as she stands, and she grabs her keys off my desk before staring down at me as I stay seated.

"Just a friendly reminder…we're all workaholics. It's how we made this team. There're always three or more cases going on at once, despite the lovely way TV depicts us as having just one case at a time and free time in between. Dating… Well, it's not so easy. There's a reason we're all single, divorced, or both. Unless you're sneaking around with someone who works here, you never get to see the person waiting at home for you."

She turns and walks away, casting a look over her shoulder. I shrug it off. We do have some free time. It's not much, but it's enough. I hope. I'd hate to know my life was only spent chasing the psychotic until I die alone.

ME: We really need to see each other again. Texting sucks.

LANA: I agree. My fingers are getting cramps.

ME: Anything going on in two days? I have no breakfast plans.

LANA: Two days from now I'll be in West Virginia. What about tomorrow?

ME: Can't. I have to fly up to Boston for a quick briefing. I'll be back tomorrow night, but I have too much work to finish up with. It'll be well after midnight before I leave. IF I leave.

LANA: So, texting is fun, huh?

I laugh and groan, relaxing in my seat as Craig walks into my office.

“So the County Sherriff from that one-horse town finally called back. Just got off the phone with him. He actually lives there, and apparently thinks he runs all the police departments in the county. Anyway, he said there’re ‘no gays’ living in his towns. ‘Those are for city folk who forgot how to be men and women.’” Craig rolls his eyes, and I curse.

“Repression is a breeding ground for serial killers. Him denying anyone could be something other than who he wants them to be isn’t going to help us find this unsub before he strikes again.”

“I said almost the exact same thing. But he didn’t budge from his stance. He thinks it’s a coincidence those ‘poor boys’ got killed. He blames it on moving away from home, because the rest of the world is full of evil. Pretty sure he’s working with a cult mentality, and I wouldn’t be surprised if all the small towns he’s sheriff over drink that water.”

“We’re going to have to profile the whole town if someone doesn’t talk,” I grumble.

“You think the unsub is still a resident there?” he asks as he takes a seat in front of my desk.

“I think it’s unlikely but possible. We don’t have enough information to use for a more specific profile.”

He steeples his hands in front of his mouth, his eyes vacantly staring at the top of my desk.

“The media will spin all sorts of theories if they get ahold of this story before we’re ready to deliver a concrete profile,” he says absently.

“Well aware. At least we know the sheriff isn’t going to be spreading the story before we’re ready.”

He nods, still staring at nothing in particular.

“I don’t get how you do it,” he says, moving his eyes away from one of the photographs. “How do you get inside someone’s head that is this sick and sadistic?”

“How do you handle a thousand and one questions from the media?” I ask with a shrug. “We all have our strengths. I don’t get inside their heads. I crawl into their psyche. It’s the only way to understand their delusional mentality, because you can’t think like a rational person would. A convoluted mind is one that forms its own reality. That’s why I need to know more about these kills. He’s not leaving behind enough clues to piece together the puzzle.”

Chapter 6

I admit that thoughts influence the body.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

My life has started revolving around the chime of a phone. Well, for the past five months, it's been like that, but a different phone. Usually it's the cloned phone that has me leaping and rushing around to grab it. Not my actual phone. Not until Agent Logan Bennett a couple of weeks ago.

LOGAN: Craig just asked if you were gay.
ME: Who's Craig?
LOGAN: You have no idea how much I enjoy that answer. In fact, I just drew a few curious looks about why I'm laughing.

I have no clue why he finds that so funny.

ME: Seriously, who's Craig?
LOGAN: I really want to see you again.
ME: Well, let's just both quit our jobs so we can finally have a date.
LOGAN: With the dead ends I'm finding on all my cases, I'm starting to wonder if it isn't time for a career change.
ME: If it makes you feel any better, I contemplated a career change too. Met a guy yesterday who was trading all his wife's dildos for a pressure washer. -.- The wife was furious when I showed up to inspect the quality of her "toys."

At least that's true. I hate the times I have to lie to him.

LOGAN: I just spat coffee all over my desk.
ME: How coincidental. She was apparently a spitter too. The husband informed me of that as if I wanted to know. #overshare
LOGAN: Stop. Please stop. Everyone here thinks I'm insane for laughing this hard.

ME: It wasn't the most awkward encounter I've had, but it certainly won't make any of my highlight reels either.

LOGAN: So the dildos didn't get traded for the pressure washer?

ME: Nope. And I learned that she'll need them more than ever, since he won't be touching her for a while, according to her. He wasn't happy when I left. Apparently it was my fault for showing up an hour early, because she would have been gone otherwise.

LOGAN: Okay. You win. I can't compete with that.

ME: #LifeGoals

LOGAN: Do you always go to the coffee shop where I met you?

ME: Umm…that's an abrupt shift in convo, but yes, I do. I moved here a little over a month ago, and that was the first decent cup I found.

LOGAN: Then I wish I had stopped there sooner than that day. I had some downtime two weeks earlier. We could have been doing this in person then.

ME: You don't always go there?

LOGAN: That was my first time. Craig and I went to address some of the higher-ups about some security measures. We only stopped in that day because our regular spot was closed for renovations.

ME: Oh THAT's Craig!

LOGAN: You seriously didn't remember his name?

ME: I only retain the names of people I like or want to kill.

I cringe when I read that back, realizing that's not a good joke—even though it's true—to make to a FBI agent.

LOGAN: Hope I'm on the right list.

I blow out a breath, then smile at the morbid joke, now that I know he's not taking it seriously.

ME: You are. Currently, you're at the top of the right list. It's been a while since I smiled like I do when we talk.

LOGAN: I should have kissed you.

My heart thumps in my chest as I read that back. Then I read it again. And again. And again.

Each time it causes my stomach to flutter, and I try to process all the weird reactions I have to him. He makes me feel and act like the person I never thought I could be again, and I barely know him. I've only seen him twice.

Yet, we don't miss a day speaking. And it's the highlight of my day.

Every day.

Every time.

Every single word.

ME: Yes. You should have. Then I could have been spared the awkward wave I gave.

LOGAN: But the REALLY awkward wave was cute.

ME: Ha. Funny guy. I see how it is. It's been a while since I tried the dating scene.

Actually, it's only been about seven months, but as always, the interest level died after about a month, because all the feelings I wanted to feel never emerged. There'd be a fraction of the spark I feel with Logan, and I'd try to force it, desperate to feel anything other than anger, hatred, rage…brokenness.

I thought I'd lost that ability. I thought they'd taken it somehow.

Then along came exactly what I had been searching for since before I started the kill list. The problem is the fact he's sort of my opposite in the not so good way. Meaning, I kill people and he catches killers. And I can't stop. I wish I hadn't met him so early on in my list.

There are still many more names on my list. I still have to right so many wrongs. My phone chimes, and I look down, smiling before I can help myself.

LOGAN: Then I definitely should have kissed you.

Chapter 7

Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.
—Albert Einstein

LOGAN

"We know from the previous five killings and the mutilations that sexual frustration and possible rejection were the main motives." Even though I feel like there's a shit-ton more to it. "Maybe the unsub feels inadequate, possibly from rejection or something even larger that has happened in the past. We need to find a link, and it starts in that town. Leonard and Elise have returned to Delaney Grove, searching for anyone who might speak. For now, the rest of us will remain here where the last killing happened. It's the freshest crime scene," I tell the group.

They grab their folders and files, and I head to my office, feeling too tired to think straight. For the past two weeks, I've either crashed in my office or driven home for a few hours of sleep.

Unlike most serial killers, this one isn't escalating in time scale or risk factor. He's not getting bolder, which means he's staying smarter. Which sucks for us, because he's not making any mistakes.

The trail is going to go cold. One more week, and there could be another body at our feet.

My phone dings, and I look down at the text, smiling when I see who it is. I have no idea why she bothers speaking to me, since all we've done is text or talk over the phone since the day I had to bail on her at the coffee shop.

LANA: You know, I always mocked the Netflix and Chill notion, but now I see the appeal.

ME: I don't even own a TV.

LANA: What???? How????

ME: I keep meaning to buy one…

LANA: Agent Bennett, I'm sorry. This has to end now.

ME: At least call me by my first name if you're ending things.

LANA: Agent Bennett sounds sexier.

That has me smirking.

ME: Oh? Handcuffs turn you on?
LANA: Restraint is a hell no. Not my thing. But I wouldn't be opposed to using them on you… If we ever make it to that level, that is.

My cock stirs in my pants, and I mentally count the months since the last time I even had time to think about sex. By month five, I stop counting, because it's just depressing. I'll need a few dates with my hand before I try taking on Lana and embarrassing myself.

ME: Dinner tomorrow?
LANA: You can do dinner?
ME: No leads right now on my case, so I have some free time. It won't be much free time, but it has to be better than texting all the time.
LANA: I'm not sure about the protocol in this situation.

My brow furrows as I read her last text.

ME: What protocol?
LANA: Am I allowed to say yes to a last minute dinner invite? Or is it frowned upon to seem readily available on such short notice? ;)

That has me smiling and laughing to myself as I sit back and look at the clock. It's after nine, but I really want to see her right now.

ME: It'll be a lot of short notices from me, so I hope you're the kind of girl who can be readily available… Hopefully that sounds better aloud.
LANA: It sounds… Yeah, no. It doesn't sound good, but I get what you mean. Yes to dinner. :) I hope to leave with more than an awkward wave this time.

I fist pump the air, then look up to see a few curious eyes on me through my open office door. Feeling like a fourteen-year-old jackass, I message her again.

ME: I won't walk away with just a wave this time. Who knows when I'll see you again, or if you'll continue to deal with my shitty schedule.

LANA: My schedule is pretty shitty too.

ME: Is it wrong that I'm tempted to ask where you live so I can subtly swing by tonight with the excuse I was in the neighborhood and thought I saw someone too close to your house?

LANA: Is it wrong that I hope you'll break some rules, find my address, and do just that?

Groaning, I glance at the time, then at my computer screen. Deciding to totally abuse my privileges, I do look up her address. But that's all I research. Grabbing my phone, I pull up my GPS, grab my 'go bag' from the office, and jog down to my car.

Since it's wishful thinking and incredibly presumptuous to bring a bag, I toss it in the back, hoping she doesn't notice it and realize I'm expecting a lot more than I should be. Obviously I'll leave as soon as I get there if she wants me to, but I'm really hoping she doesn't want me to leave.

Because Lana Myers has been in my head since the day I met her, and it'd be nice if someone noticed I was missing.

Chapter 8

To know the secrets of life, we must first become aware of their existence.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

I stare at my last text and the empty space below it, because he never messages back. Seriously, I suck at flirting.

Groaning, I get up, flicking a gaze over at the monitor on the wall. Tyler walks around in front of the camera in just his boxers, smirking as he texts someone. My secondary phone dings right on cue, and I look down and read the messages he's sending to a girl named Denise.

TYLER: What're you wearing? I'm thinking of you.

I roll my eyes, hoping Denise tells him to fuck himself. But she doesn't.

It's hard to watch them live their lives for a month. I have to watch them loving the freedom they stole from me. The freedom they stole from *us.*

Tyler is the first one who is married, and apparently having an affair. I've been saving him for closer to last, but right now, I can't afford to go *home* and sprint through so many. And sprint is an accurate depiction of how that time will go, considering it'll be too easy to get caught if I try to space it out as I do now.

Jake assured me the feds are investigating our hometown. It was only a matter of time before they linked the kills and made the connection. I'd hoped to have more time before they got on my trail, hence the reason I started the kills outside of town.

It's not like they'll link any of it to me, of course. Lana Myers doesn't exist in that town. Never has.

Victoria Evans died ten years ago. I look nothing like her anymore. They made sure of that. My eyes flick to the small mirror on the wall beside me. Without any makeup, you can see a few faint scars.

I spent a lot of money to help make sure there were as few scars as possible. Victoria Evans was a poor girl from Delaney Grove, but Kennedy Carlyle was an heiress who died in a car accident the same night my death certificate was signed. She was so mangled and unrecognizable that Jake had no problem shifting the info around in the computers.

Kennedy might have died that night, but the stranger I never met saved my life.

I went in as Victoria, left as Kennedy, took on her rich, orphan life, and ‘legally’ changed her name to Lana Myers to avoid anyone from her past finding me out.

It was the easiest way to build a fund to support us and to change my identity. Jake didn’t get good at more inventive forms of identity changes until the past couple of years.

It took a while to see my scars on my face as marks of survival instead of brutal reminders of that night. The scars on other parts of my body didn’t heal as cleanly. But the scars on my soul took the longest to deal with.

They say everyone has their own healing process.

The first year of mine was spent mourning for my family and suffering from all the trauma. I cried until there was nothing but sand left to fall from my eyes. I curled into a ball and showered three times a day, never feeling clean.

The second year was spent being angry and seeking outlets. I took on kickboxing first. By the third year, I’d moved on to various other forms of mixed martial arts. Several black belts are mine now.

I never want to be anyone else’s victim.

The fourth year was spent getting stronger, dealing with all my fears, and learning to stand on my own without all the sleepless nights.

The fifth year was the first time I could withstand any physical contact. I learned to grow. I learned not to flinch away when someone barely touched me. I learned to be as normal as I could be.

The sixth year was when I could finally handle intimacy without wanting to kill the person touching me. It was the year I decided I was no longer their victim. It was the year I took back control over my life and embraced my future before it was destroyed completely.

The seventh year was when I decided to get revenge. The planning began.

The eighth year was when I started locating them all. I learned all there was to know about them.

The ninth year was spent hacking the case files from my father's trial, learning all the police had, searching for the truth instead of the lies.

The tenth year… The tenth year is when I decided to start killing one a month.

Jake convinced me to be cautious. I'd hate to be caught before I can finish.

My life will happen in between kills. I can have both. Because I doubt I'll make it out of this alive.

Denise decides to text Tyler back, breaking me out of my reverie, and it's a picture of her in a lace nightie. Unreal. If this is how you're supposed to date, then I really am out of my depth. I'm not spending thirty minutes slipping into something like that just for a picture.

My phone buzzes as Tyler and Denise send dirty texts to each other. Those dirty texts will find their way to his wife if needed. She sure as hell can't be home when I collect his debt.

My actual phone rings, and I reach over and grab it absently, still reading the latest sick text from Tyler. How does Denise find this sexy?

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me," Jake says, clicking away in the background. He's always at the computer, lining everything up for me. Best partner ever.

"What're you doing?" I ask, curious.

"Just finished writing Olivia her check, and now I'm working on our website."

"Are you reading this?" I ask him, wrinkling my nose when Denise describes a blowjob in detail for him.

"Unfortunately. What are you doing tonight? I was thinking we'd grab a bite and watch surveillance together. I've already gotten his entry code. You're getting better angles with the cameras with each install."

Idly, I lift my gaze to the monitor, watching as Tyler starts lowering his boxers. Yeah, no. I don't need to see that.

Cutting my eyes away, I answer, "I learn more with each one. His wife is gone a lot on business. There's a conference two days before the planned kill day. She'll be gone all weekend. I can strike then. He's a two and done deal."

"Don't get cocky and strike too soon. When you lose your caution, mistakes happen, and you'll get arrested."

"True. There's a conference the weekend after. I can always prolong the date as well."

"That's better than moving it up, but it's best to stick to a consistent schedule if possible. That way you don't lose focus."

Snorting derisively, I roll my eyes. "No worries on that. My focus can't be derailed."

Their taunts no longer haunt me at night. Now I dream peacefully to the sounds of their screams.

Which I realize is probably psychotic, but I wasn't born this way. They turned me into this. Karma wasn't finding them. Neither was justice. Destiny seemed content with leaving them on their perfect little paths of love, peace, and blissfulness.

Only one person wanted them to suffer. Well, two. Jake wanted them to hurt as much as they hurt me. As much as they hurt—

"You say that, but you seem to lose more of your anger with each kill. You almost seem…a little too peppy these days. For the past few weeks, you've giggled and acted high every time I've talked to you. You getting tired of this? It's not too late to back out."

That has nothing to do with the kills. It has everything to do with Agent Bennett. Not that I'll tell Jake that. He'd flip his lid if he knew I was… Well, I'm not really sure what I'm doing with Logan to be honest, besides smiling like a loon every time my phone goes off with a new message from him.

If I told Jake I'm interested in an FBI agent who happens to investigate serial killers, and is possibly investigating my case, he'd probably flip the hell out.

Because it's stupid.

And I should end it.

But I can't.

When you go so long feeling cold and detached, then a complete stranger ignites the dormant feelings you thought were forever gone…you can't help but be addicted to it. You can't help but revel in the smiles you forgot how to use, or the laughter that sounds unnatural coming from the lips that haven't laughed in years.

Whoa. I need to slow down. I'm one fantasy away from tattooing his name on my ass.

I can't help but wonder how things might have been if my past hadn't been derailed and cluster-fucked to hell and back. I think he would have really liked the old me. I was clever, funny, quick-witted, and slightly dramatic. I also cried if I accidentally killed a bug.

Now… Now I'm a 5'4 package of vengeance that no one sees coming.

"I'm peppy because it feels good. Maybe it's a high from the adrenaline or something," I lie.

"Really?" he asks, sounding confused.

I know Jake supports what I'm doing. He was there. He helped me pick up all the pieces and glue them back together the best he could, even though I could barely stand to be around anyone.

But he doesn't want the grim details, and I doubt he feels comfortable with me telling him it makes me feel like a goofy grinner—even though it isn't the kills making me a goofy grinner. But I can't give him the true facts. Because…World War III and all that. I don't want him to talk me out of Logan, when I've almost done it to myself too many times.

"Really," I lie again.

I really hope I flirted right with Logan. I thought I was following his lead. He often gets called away during the middle of our texting sessions, which means it could be hours before he texts back, so I try not to overthink it.

My eyes flick back to where Tyler is already cleaning up. He's just as quick as I remember.

One more week until kill day.

"I still think you have should nixed the castration. If they dig too deep into the town's history, they could eventually unravel it all too soon," Jake says, reminding me he's still on the phone.

“You remember what they did, right? I want them to feel the worst pain imaginable. I want to remove that last ounce of power… That last shred of dignity.”

Blowing out a long breath, I listen to him grow silent on the other end.

When he continues to hold his tongue, I try to put his mind at ease.

“Even if they did figure out a ghost rose from the dead, I take plenty of forensic counter measures. The feds suspect some big, strong guy. I strangle them to render them unconscious, instead of using anything to aide in incapacitating them, the way a woman would normally do. And I do it while they’re on the ground so as not to betray my height. I’ve trained for this for years. Stop worrying.”

He sighs harshly. “I hate you leaving the bodies there for them to find. I’d prefer it if you took them to an isolated, controlled location, then dumped the bodies somewhere they’d never be found.”

“I wanted them found. I wanted them linked together. I just didn’t want it to happen this soon. I want them scared when I start dropping lower on the list. By the time I reach Kyle, I want him to be crying in fear. That’s why I’m saving him for last.”

“And what happens if he goes to the cops when he figures out the pattern? Eventually this will hit the media, you know?”

I’m surprised it hasn’t already.

“I knew the risks going in, and Kyle speaking to the feds about a ghost girl killing people who brutalized her ten years ago isn’t one of them. He’d have to explain *why* someone was picking these guys off. You know none of them will ever do that.”

A secret like they’ve kept would eat anyone alive…if they had a conscience. Only they feel they were justified in hurting innocent people.

They strived, succeeded, and went on with life like it never happened. Like they didn’t leave us there to die.

One person did die because of that night.

They think it was two.

Jake continues to yak in my ear about all the ‘what ifs’ in the universe. I continue to shift my thoughts away from it all, because Logan keeps creeping to the forefront of my mind.

I'll finally get to see him tomorrow.

Tyler lies down for the night, and I flip the monitor over to regular television. Bedtime seems to be ten consistently so far. In fact, everything he does seems to be scheduled, including his shit breaks.

"I'm getting off here, Jake."

"Fine. Fine. Call me back later."

Hanging up, I start taking inventory. My knives are in a row, lined up inside my homemade multi-sheath. They're clean and wiped free of fingerprints, as always.

I move to the fridge and pour myself a glass of straight vodka. Smiling, I turn on the music, an old vinyl my father used to love. He and my mother danced to this song a lot at night, back before life was derailed in a metaphorical train crash.

As I sway with the music, dancing like they used to, I almost miss the sound of heavy pounding against my door.

My body jolts when I register the sound, and my heart slams into my throat. No one comes here. Ever. It's a creepy driveway with gargoyles at the end just to make it a little creepier. Then there are several signs warning against trespassing.

Not even my mailman dares to venture the half mile driveway to my house. My packages get left at the end of the driveway.

My eyes dart out the window, but I don't see a vehicle in plain view. After flicking off the record player, I push the knives into the drawer closest to me as the knocking persists. I pick up my gun, carrying it as I silently cross the floor to the door.

When I peek through the peephole, my eyes widen and my breath rushes out in disbelief.

"Shit!" I hiss, scrambling to toss the gun into the drawer attached the table beside the door.

"Come on, pretty girl. Don't tell me you're not home after I broke rules and privacy laws to find you," Logan drawls from the other side of the door.

My stomach flutters as that goofy grin starts to spread, and I swing open the door to a smiling FBI agent. His grin broadens as his eyes rake over me, and he looks back up as an eyebrow arches.

"Best. Greeting. Ever."

I'm confused for a second, so I glance down my body to see that, yep; I'm not wearing pants. I rarely do when I'm at home.

I look back up and shrug, ignoring the way a twinge of heat spreads up my neck. I'm embarrassed? Really? I didn't know I could be embarrassed until this moment.

"Can I come in before anyone sees you? I'd hate to have to show my jealous side so early on," he deadpans, but he winks as I slowly step back, trying not to say or do anything stupid.

Should I run and put on pants? Or will I look like an idiot who forgot to put on pants? Confident girls walk around in a T-shirt and panties all the time, right?

Fucking eh.

"My driveway is sort of creepy, and with all the vegetation growth, no one can see me here," I ramble, then zip my lips.

As soon as he gets the door shut, he turns and his gaze shifts. Something subtle changes, and the amused glint there melts away for something far more enticing.

I start to speak, to explain why I stupidly answered the door without pants, when he's suddenly on me. His hands go to my hair, tilting my head back roughly, and his mouth crashes against mine.

I go from surprised to melting within seconds, opening my lips so his tongue can sweep in and steal what small fraction of sanity I have left.

I moan into his mouth as one of his hands slides down my body, gripping my waist just enough to pull me to him. Both my hands come up and grab onto his shoulders so that I don't sag to the ground.

It feels good. Not awkward or wrong or uncomfortable. It feels so *good.*

The kiss is hungry, almost as though we've both been starved for too long. I realize we're moving too quickly, but I don't give a damn. I give less of a damn when he lifts me and places me on top of the table beside the door, pushing himself between my legs as he devours me.

His hands move up and down my sides, back into my hair, then back down again. It's like he can't touch me everywhere at once,

even though he wants to. But he's also sticking to safe zones instead of groping me, despite my state of undress.

It makes me want him even more.

I tug at the front of his shirt and wind his tie around my other hand, pulling him as close as possible. He makes some strained sound before grinding into the vee of my thighs, driving me that much crazier.

"We should slow down," he says against my lips.

"We really should," I agree, still kissing him and pulling him impossibly closer.

"Where's your room?" he asks, trying and failing to break the kiss.

"Down the hall and to the right."

He lifts me and starts walking, bypassing the stairs to the part of the house he definitely can't see. My legs stay wrapped around him as I try not to think of how dangerous this could be.

I never expected him to just show up without warning, and there's an entire murder room upstairs just waiting to be discovered.

Mentally, I do a quick worry list over the things he might find in the bedroom, and realize most everything has already been put away. As long as he doesn't accidentally turn on the monitoring system in my living room, we should be good.

My back crashes against the wall when he stumbles, and my thoughts flee as the kiss grows more aggressive. Too many times I've tried to feel this passion and never felt an ounce of the fire as what's burning between us.

My fingers skate down the front of his shirt until I rip it open, fully opening it and pushing it out of the way as a few buttons skitter across the floor, running with their newfound freedom. Firm skin finds my fingertips, and I moan against his lips when he shudders against me like he feels all the flames I do.

We'll burn good together.

His tongue demands more attention from mine, and I kiss with abandon like I never have before. My hands slide up and tangle in his hair, angling his head so I can devour him properly.

He grunts and pushes away from the wall, walking quickly again.

“Your other right,” I say when he starts walking into my guest room on the left where Jake stays when he comes to visit.

He changes course and continues to move quickly. I hear the fan humming in my room as we walk in, and anticipation buds in my core, ready to be released.

He drops me to the bed in a flurry of motion that surprises me, and I prop up on my elbows, taking in the sight of him as he finishes stripping his ruined shirt off. All tan, lean muscle and smooth skin.

A twinge of dread unfurls within me. The scars on my body aren’t all hidden. My face was easier to fix than the rest of me.

“Too fast?” he asks, apparently misreading the reason for my hesitation to join him in the getting-naked routine.

“No,” I say, forcing my thoughts to blank.

The past can’t continue to rule me, and I’m supposed to be beyond the worry of what people will think when they see the scars.

He looks hesitant now.

“Lana, I shouldn’t have barged in and came at you like a savage. But…” His eyes dip to where my thighs are spread wide, nothing but the thin panties hiding the goods from him. He swallows audibly before meeting my gaze again. “We can slow down. I promise this isn’t why I showed up.”

A slow smile curves my lips. He’s pretty amazing when he’s trying to be a good guy.

Climbing up to my knees, I crawl toward him, and his pupils dilate. He’s turned on, which doesn’t take profiling skills to figure out.

Slowly, I move toward him, and he remains completely still. When I reach him, I lean forward and flick my tongue against the firm flesh on his abs. A quiet sound escapes him, and that seems to snap that small thread of control.

His hand goes to my hair, and with a hard tug, he forces my head back as he lowers his face and finds my lips again. It’s rough and hungry, and completely different from anything I thought I’d ever want.

I’ve been controlling sex since I found it in me to be intimate again. This is the first time I’ve ever felt comfortable letting a guy lead.

“Where the hell have you been?” he says against my lips, causing me to grin against him as he pushes me down, coming down on top of me.

I’m not sure what that means, but I love the awe in his tone.

My smile dies as I wait for the inevitable panic attack of being pinned down, but it doesn’t come. More emotions bud inside of me, and I put all the confusing questions into the back of my mind, deciding to analyze this all later.

For now, I just want to *feel.*

And I do.

I feel his movements against me as he pushes his pants away.

I feel him shift as he slides his hand up my leg, eliciting small shivers from me because of how overloaded my sensory nerves are.

I feel when he touches parts of me that shouldn’t be so erotic—the bend of my knee, the back of my calf, the top of my foot.

I feel *everything,* and it all feels perfect.

He starts pushing my shirt up, and I force myself to allow it. He sucks in a breath when he realizes I’m also not wearing a bra. It’s escaped his attention since he’s avoided any groping.

“Damn,” he says under his breath, though it sounds like praise.

He leans back as though he’s going to take it all in. Which gives me a second to fully appreciate him, since he’s down to his black boxers that are straining to keep certain parts of his body restrained.

I’m confident, until his gaze shifts and zeroes in on what I was worried about.

“What happened?” he asks, not sounding overly concerned or nosy, just curious.

He runs his fingers over two of the scars, and I catch his wrist, stopping him. I can’t stand them being touched.

He meets my eyes again, and the concern that was lacking begins to form. He’s too perceptive, so it’d be stupid to give too much away with my expressions.

“Car accident,” I tell him weakly.

It’s a lie, but I’m damn good at lying.

“The same as your parents?” he asks.

If he ever looked into it and found the name I stole, then he’d know that girl was not in the same accident as her parents.

“No. Can we not talk about this right now though?” I ask, my voice teasing now as I slide his hand up to cover my breast.

The heat in his eyes is instantly back, the concern washing away when he sees I’m okay. With slow prowess, he slides down on top of me, and his lips claim mine again.

Nothing else matters in this moment.

We kiss until we’re both grinding against each other, desperate for more. I need zero help getting ready, because I’ve never been so turned on in all my life.

He groans against me before finally lifting away from me again.

“Tell me to stop and I will,” he says softly, brushing his lips against mine again.

Just that bit of comfort means more than he knows, because I believe it coming from his lips.

When you read people like I do, you learn who’s honest and who isn’t. You learn to smell intentions.

“I don’t want to stop,” I say quietly, refusing to break the spell.

He leans over, grabbing his discarded jeans, and I grin when I hear the familiar rattling sound of a wrapper.

“Just so you know, I’ve had this thing in my wallet for a while. I really didn’t come with expectations—with *hopes*, yes, but not expectations,” he says, grinning when he sees my smile.

I arch an eyebrow playfully, and he kisses me again, getting readjusted on top of me. His hands move between us as he lifts his hips, and I resist the urge to look down and watch.

It’s sad to say that seeing him roll on a condom would probably send me spiraling into a premature orgasm. It’s surreal. I love this feeling. I want to bottle it and save it for rainy days.

When he leans up, I’m forced to watch, and I squirm as that ache grows more pronounced, more insistent. Fairly sure that ache is named desire.

He’s definitely not a small guy, but he’s also not freakishly endowed. Perfect.

I’m licking my lips before I can stop myself as he starts tugging my panties down. His eyes fall on the bare skin when he removes them completely and he leans down.

The second I feel his breath hit me, my hips jerk up, and I tug his hair, forcing him up my body.

“If you do that, I’ll be ruined. I need more,” I say just as my lips find his again.

I could seriously kiss him all day, as long as we’re also doing more.

Without any further begging, he pushes inside me in one swift thrust that has me breaking my lips away to gasp for air. He rocks his hips, and I realize there’s more there than I initially thought, because he goes deeper, filling me fuller.

He stares down at me, lust and longing oozing from his eyes as he keeps eye contact. No words are exchanged as he rocks his hips again, finding a spot inside me that I thought had died.

Sensory overload is a legit thing.

Everything on me is strung tight, just waiting to break. The more he moves over me, the tighter the strings get. My nails dig into his shoulders as he continues to watch the myriad of expressions I must be giving him as he unravels me thrust by thrust.

Then it hits. It hits hard.

Those strings break, and euphoria crackles across my body like a bomb that detonates in my core and explodes outward. It rolls across me, curling my toes, flashing behind my eyelids that shut at some point, and licks across my skin like hot, incredible flames.

When I cry out and thrash beneath him wildly, his rhythm changes, becoming more urgent. I hold on as he drags out my orgasm in a way I didn’t know was possible, and then he grunts, his hips jerking against me as he finds his own little version of heaven. At least I hope he feels this good.

Boneless and spent, my arms fall away from him as he drops to my body and kisses a trail down my neck. Definitely moving too fast, but I don’t care. We’re doomed anyway.

The monster never gets the prince. It’s always the sweet and innocent princess who wins.

My hands come up, and my fingers twist in his hair, enjoying this feeling while it lasts.

“I plan on a round two, but I’m not Superman. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll make sure you want to do this a lot more,” he

says against my neck, still nipping and kissing the flesh.

A smile curves my lips, and I sigh happily under him.

“I want to do this all the time.”

He chuckles against me, and I find myself hugging him, even though I don’t know when it started. He holds me to him, hugging me back.

“Good,” he says against me. “Because that was fucking perfect.”

It is perfect. Which is why I need to kill the monitoring channel in the living room so that it doesn’t work, lock my murder room, and make sure all my weapons stay in there from now on.

Chapter 9

I never came upon any of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking.
—Albert Einstein

LOGAN

“You got laid,” Craig says as I walk in, holding my coffee that I barely managed to get in time this morning.

I forgot what it was like to lose myself in a girl. And I know I’ve never lost myself in someone so much as I did last night and this morning. Lana is the most unexpected surprise of my life.

I keep waiting to find a flaw, but can’t seem to find one. No one can be that perfect. Not that I want to jinx it. I also don’t want to find out she’s married or something. So I’m close to doing the unthinkable, because she has my head all kinds of fucked up.

“Maybe,” I tell him, smirking when he groans.

“The Ice Princess took you but not me?” he asks as I drop to my desk chair and pull up the databases I need.

“It drives you that crazy she didn’t eat up your *charm*,” I drawl.

“There’s a reason I’m the face of this department, and it isn’t because I’m the best looking—though we both know I am. The point is, girls eat me up. Women, mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters, nieces… We fuck up, and I explain it away with a charming smile and an ‘aww shucks’ sort of attitude while throwing in a deep sense of remorse. Anything and everything will be forgiven if you have the right face. It’s the truth. Humans are shallow—all of us. Pardon me for finding it a little suspect that she literally had zero interest in me, yet turns around and fucks you.”

“I think Logan is way hotter than you,” Hadley chimes in, coming to prop up beside me as Craig scowls at her. “And despite what you think, not all women are that shallow. Most of us find someone attractive if they have the right qualities.”

“Bullshit,” Craig scoffs. “I’ve done plenty of research on the matter. I’m not just talking out my ass.”

I roll my eyes as they continue to bicker, and I start my search. No marriage certificate. No divorce. No children—not that I'd mind, but I'd still like to know. No…living relatives… Shit.

No one? She has no one at all? I already know she doesn't have any personal social media. Just her business profiles, even though there's no mention of her partner on any of them.

I don't dig any deeper than that. I feel like I've invaded her privacy enough. Everything else needs to be things she tells me when she's ready—like the car accident that scarred her.

It must have been a bad wreck, considering one scar travels from her left hip to her right breast. Another one is on her right side, jagged and large. They're old. I could tell from looking at them.

I should have shown her my scars, but I was too busy exploring her body the rest of the night to give her time to explore mine. Every time she tried, I lost control, feeling her hands on me seemed to turn me into a horny teenager all over again.

"You have serious trust issues," Hadley says, drawing me out of my own head.

I notice Craig is gone, but Hadley is reading the latest search over my shoulder. I close out of it and shrug.

"You had me research her background for priors, and now you're checking her facts?"

She cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Ever met someone too good to be true? I was almost late for work this morning because I couldn't seem to pry myself away from her. She literally has no flaws. She's beautiful, smart, sassy, whimsical, and onboard with my hectic schedule, even though most girls immediately have an issue with it. She hasn't once gotten annoyed with me having to cancel things. I showed up at her place unannounced, and she was twice as perfect as I thought possible. So yeah…I can't help but be worried, because a guy can fall fast for a girl like that."

She rolls her eyes and mocks a gag, so I flip her off and start pulling up the latest case files.

"Everyone has flaws. You're just in the honeymoon phase. Eventually she will get annoyed with cancellations and unavailability. Just like you'll eventually start noticing things she does that irritate

you. Right now is the shiny happy part that everyone *loves*. It's why so many people get married after barely knowing each other. It's also why they get divorced when they do know each other."

She laughs, and I lean back, mulling that over. I don't remember the 'honeymoon' phase being this damn good in the past.

"I'm overanalyzing this," I say on a sigh.

"It's your nature. It's what makes you good at this job. But I'm telling you, right now the girl could fart out toxic waste that had you pulling on a mask, and you'd think it was cute. It's part of the phase."

She claps me on the shoulder as she laughs and walks away, and I look down as I get a text.

LANA: Your boxers are comfortable.

ME: You're wearing them? Didn't know I left them behind.

LANA: I figured you did it on purpose. So you'd have a reason to come back.

ME: Already got a reason to come back.

LANA: Now you have two…

There's a picture attached to the last message of her from the waist down, definitely wearing my boxers. I run a hand through my hair, hating the fact I don't want to be at work for the first time ever. I've always loved the job, yet a girl I barely know has me tempted to take my first ever sick day.

ME: Keep them on. I'll be back tonight, and I want to see them in person.

LANA: Lucky for you I have no plans. And I'll just be wearing these when you get here.

Groaning in frustration, I put my phone away, and I hurry through some of the slim new leads. The hotline tips get more ridiculous every day. The Boogeyman case is getting about as cold as my murder/mutilation case.

Several other cases are on the backburner, since no new murders have popped out. The ones that kill once or twice a year are twice as hard to find. Our only hot case is a murder/robbery serial.

I work, looking through some of the leads, examining the same photos as always. After two hours, I'm at the murder board, still trying to piece together what makes these women the targets.

None of them are overtly rich. They all have different family backgrounds. Different ethnicities. Different hair colors.

Though they were all attractive, there was no rape as incentive. Impotence is a possible in our profile, but...there's something else that is driving him. There's a reason why he selects and stalks these particular women.

My eyes look to their eyes, then their noses, then their mouths… Something clicks, and my heartbeat picks up.

Just as Hadley walks by, I grab her wrist, stopping her as my eyes narrow on one piece of evidence we haven't been able to figure out.

"The lab analyzed that clay you found in the apartment, right?" I ask, lost in thought.

She nods. "Yeah. Nothing special about it. You could buy it at any arts and crafts store. And no one knows why it was there. It wasn't found on the victim or anywhere else in the apartment. They think the unsub brought it in on his shoes or clothes."

"And the faces had all been thoroughly cleaned then bleached. The hair had also been shaven off and the head was cleaned then bleached," I state, still doing the math.

"Yes… Why?"

I look past her to where Donny is.

"Donny, look up art galleries in the area of the robberies/murders."

He looks perplexed, but starts typing.

"Hadley, I need you to get on all the art sites you can find and see if anyone is selling bronze sculptures of faces. Narrow them down to the ones who started in the past four months, when the killings started," I go on, walking toward Donny's desk.

I turn to see her still standing there, confused.

"Now!" I urge her, and she scrambles to her desk.

Donny is typing furiously when I come up behind him. "Four in the area. None are selling bronze sculptures of faces," he says,

frowning. “Or was I supposed to be looking for something different than Hadley?”

“Call each one and ask if anyone tried to sell them the bronze sculptures. It’ll be faces only.”

He picks up his phone to do as I ask, and I go back to my computer, pulling up the program I need. I place all the victims’ pictures in the spots, and after a few keystrokes, my suspicions are confirmed.

“Symmetry,” I say on a long breath.

“What?” Craig asks, coming to look over my shoulder.

“He’s choosing them because of the symmetry of their faces. Perfect symmetry, which is supposed to be very rare, if not impossible. He’s choosing them because they have it, and he’s using their faces to mold art. He’s probably trying to sell it, and he’s fixated on anyone who has a symmetrical face. Women in particular. He may have a da Vinci fixation as well.”

My eyes scan the room, and I spot Lisa clipping her fingernails.

“Lisa, look at anyone in the comfort zone who might have ordered a lot of Leonardo da Vinci prints, or books on da Vinci. Focus primarily on anything revolving around the Vitruvian Man. The unsub would most likely be obsessed with that work.”

“And you think this because?” Craig asks, confused.

“Call it a gut feeling. We’ve solved a lot of cases with my gut.”

“Yeah, that’s why you keep getting promoted. But how the hell do you fit da Vinci in with clay, robberies, and shaved heads with bleach poured on them?”

“The bleach is a forensic countermeasure, just as shaving and removing all the hair then bleaching the head. He’s removing all traces of the clay from the body. The hair is probably being saved for the sculpture too. Not all artists can paint or draw.”

“I’m lost,” Craig goes on.

“Da Vinci wasn’t just famous for his intellect or paintings. There were large sculptures he created that have historians buzzing too. He drew it first, then he molded it from clay or beeswax—depends on which version of the story you hear. From there, he cast it in bronze to create another masterpiece. A man who is fixated on him

and symmetry, but can't draw or create art from nothing? That's who we're looking for."

"Nothing," Hadley says, looking frustrated. "Several molds are made from numerous things, but no bronze. Does it have to be bronze?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, convinced this is the right lead to chase. "It explains the robberies. He'd sell the valuables he stole to buy the amount of bronze he needs. It's not cheap."

"We've scoured pawn shops and internet sites looking for anyone selling that stuff though," Donny interjects.

"The right shady pawn dealer wouldn't give a damn if we were asking about it, and would lie to keep from turning it over and losing that profit. If this guy is using forensic counter measures, then he's done his homework on where to sell."

Donny resumes his phone calls, and I do something that probably won't help. I pull up the buy, sell, and trade site that Lana runs. She mentioned last night that she leaves things up for a month after they sell with a SOLD sign on it to keep people from asking what happened to it.

I scroll through the jewelry section, since that's what was mostly stolen. But nothing is on there. Maybe I was just looking for an excuse to speak to her. Because I've got it bad and it's pathetic.

"Got something!" Donny says, drawing all of our attention as he returns to the conversation he's having on the phone. "Yes. Did he leave a number or an address to reach him?"

He scribbles something down as we all stand. I put my jacket on and holster my gun. Looks like I'm going to need my go-bag again. Fortunately it has several pairs of clothes.

He hangs up and holds up the paper.

"They've got a guy who has come into two of the four places trying to sell them a 'growing' set of bronze heads."

"Looks like we're flying to New York," Craig says, eyeing me like I'm a weird fucking unicorn. "And I guess we're getting the damn chopper since the department jet is already out on call. Why can't we get our own private jet like they have in the movies and stuff?"

Hadely snorts, and they all talk amongst themselves as I pull out my phone and make a call that actually sucks.

“Yes, I’m still wearing the boxers. And eating ice cream,” Lana says, sounding bright and fucking giddy.

I hate my timing now. Usually I’m a hell of a lot more excited about a break in a case than this.

“I wish I could be there to see it,” I say on a long breath as I grab my vest and other necessities, shoving them into my bag.

“You have to cancel,” she says simply, her voice devoid of any emotion for me to read.

“I’m sorry.” I have a feeling I’ll get used to saying those two words if she sticks around long enough to hear them time after time. “We got a break in the case today. At least I hope so. I’m on my way out of town right now.”

“Don’t be sorry, Logan. You have a job—an important one. I admire you and what you do. You put monsters away, and I believe you’re actually looking for the right man instead of just another merit on your resume.”

That’s a weird thing to say.

“I definitely look for the right man. What do you mean by that?”

“It’s just that…I studied a lot of old cases when I went to college. I took criminology classes. It seemed like a lot of arrests were rushed just to close a case and add another gold star to a stellar reputation. If the killings would stop, people would assume the killers were locked up. If the killings reoccurred, they’d call it a copycat instead of owning the possibility they closed the case with the wrong suspect behind bars.”

I’m not sure what cases she studied. They don’t tarnish the reputation of the FBI in those classes. If anything, they sing praises to our guys.

“So you took criminology? But you didn’t join law enforcement?”

“Decided I didn’t have the stomach for it,” she says dryly. “Blood and guts churn it.”

I definitely don’t picture her as someone who could handle the shit I’ve seen if she has a weak stomach.

“Will you be able to text or call when you’re gone?” she asks hopefully.

“Definitely. I’ll probably text you from the chopper to apologize again.”

“Seriously, don’t apologize. Ever. You make a difference. I’d have to be a selfish bitch to expect you to be at my side when someone needs saving. Go be awesome and text when you can.”

I stop and lean against the wall of the stairwell, smiling at nothing.

“Have I told you lately that you’re perfect?”

She laughs then coughs to smother the laugh. “Trust me when I say I’m on the opposite end of the spectrum from perfection.”

“Oh? Will I see these flaws of yours one day?”

She grows quiet for so long that I check to make sure the line hasn’t gone dead. Finally, she answers.

“I pray that day never comes,” she says quietly. “Now go catch a bad guy. Is it safe to tell me the town so I can watch the news for you? I know you said you were sometimes on the news. If it’s against the rules, then don’t tell me, because I’d never ask you—”

“I’ll be in New York. I’m sure it’ll be on all the major channels if this pans out. It’s rare to get a break this big, but it could all be wrong. I’m going on a profile that I built myself just a few moments ago. For the record, I’m not supposed to tell anyone.”

“Then why did you tell me?” she scolds.

“Because I want you to be *someone* one day.”

I don’t tell her that I’ve thoroughly checked her out to make sure she wasn’t any type of lawbreaking heathen or anything. Best if this trust thing starts now.

“Well, someday, I hope I am someone. Until then, don’t tell me things you’re not supposed to.”

“Why?” I ask, amused that she’s so angry about this.

“Because I respect you. And I never want you to think I expect more than I should. This is about us. Not your job. Please. Promise me you won’t ever tell me things you’re not supposed to.”

Yeah… Told you she’s fucking perfect.

“Deal, pretty girl. Keep my boxers warm. I’ll text you or call you later.”

“Logan?”

“Yeah?”

“Come back in one piece no matter what you have to do in order to make that happen. That’s the only thing I’ll ever expect. Survive.”

A slow smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “That I can promise.”

Chapter 10

Truth is what stands the test of experience.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

"You're dating a fucking FBI agent?" Jake blares over the phone, and I groan, pulling it away from my ear as I park at the restaurant across the street from where Tyler is.

I'm starving, and we can't get a visual inside this office, so I'll stalk from here, since this is where he has reservations.

Right now, this blonde wig is itching the crap out of me, and this red lipstick is definitely causing me to stick out. Add both in with the dark sunglasses and skin tight dress that I'm wearing, and I look nothing like Lana Myers, just in case.

"I already explained how it happened," I tell Jake, wishing I had just kept the confession out of it.

"And you're in New York, where *he* also happens to be."

"Tyler is here, which is why I'm here. He took an unscheduled trip up here, so I got worried he was coming to see one of the others, since Lawrence is the next target and he's also here. He has lunch reservations for two, Jake."

He blows out a heavy breath. "New York is a long way from West Virginia. What's he doing there?"

"I don't know. He went into the same office where Lawrence works."

"The media hasn't gotten ahold of the story."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they haven't heard several of their friends died recently."

He grows quiet, and I stare out at the restaurant. Tyler has reservations for two here at lunch. That much I found out from the cloned phone. But he hasn't been texting Lawrence. I'm not sure who he's texting.

"Jake? You still there?"

"No," he says, sounding muffled. "I'm right beside you."

I look out my window to find a guy with a goatee, dark glasses, and a stick… I'm not sure what it's called, but it looks suspiciously like the stick the seeing impaired would use to feel their way around. His hair has also been bleached blonde.

I guess we're both incognito.

I climb out of the car, arching an eyebrow at him. "Cowabunga?"

He snorts, but then his lips thin.

"So you decided to come to New York City without telling me?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

He shrugs carelessly. "Same thing you essentially did. I have the same phone you do, remember? I knew you'd be heading out."

He points a finger at me.

"Don't think you're off the hook over this FBI boyfriend thing. That conversation is paused—not over."

I groan, and he smirks as he holds his arm out for me to take.

He looks all classy in his suit. With the way I'm dressed, I look like his high-paid hooker.

"You look good, by the way," he whispers as he guides me down the sidewalk.

"High praise coming from a man who's supposed to be blind," I say with a sweet smile.

He restrains a smile as we walk inside. "Reservation for Demarco," I tell the hostess. "We requested the terrace, since it's so beautiful outside today."

Just like Tyler requested.

She beams at me, treating me like I don't resemble a call girl with her John. "Of course. Right this way," she says, refraining from calling me Mrs. Demarco in case it's the name of my *date.*

So I guess they're used to this sort of thing.

"You're making me look like a hooker," I hiss under my breath.

Jake covers a laugh with a forced cough, and I stop myself from kicking him with my stiletto heel.

"Pretty sure you did that all by yourself. Trying to stand out?"

"Trying to look the opposite of me," I whisper.

"Good job."

"Ha," I grumble as the sweet hostess seats us.

She flashes all of her beautifully white teeth at us in the best genuine smile I've seen. Maybe she's just a friendly little perky thing.

"Your waiter will be with you momentarily. Enjoy your lunch," she says, still not using names.

As she glides away, I turn my attention on Jake. His glasses have tinted sides that cover his eyes completely, allowing him to look wherever he wants without people noticing where his eyes are directed from the side.

"Clever," I note in a mock, deep southern drawl, and he grins.

"Thought you'd appreciate it," he says, adjusting his glasses for emphasis.

Our table is private enough to speak without anyone overhearing, but I look around for any cameras that might overhear.

"Two above us," Jake says, not having to guess about why I'm looking around. "I can hear those birds like I can hear an alarm going off."

So talk in code or type a text. Got it.

They must have audio if he's hinting for me to be silent.

"You're right. Two birds are up there. I'll never understand how you do that," I tell him, keeping with the southern accent I've accidentally committed to.

"I still love your accent," he tells me, grinning.

Asshole.

I look over just as Tyler walks in, and my stomach hits my toes when I see Lawrence with him. They get seated two tables over, and Jake hands me something under the table. I feel it and know exactly what it is.

With subtlety, I pretend as though my earring is loose, and lift my hand to pretend to fix it under the long mane of blonde hair that hides my ears perfectly. Instead of touching the earring, I put in the small ear piece that Jake just gave me.

I pet Jake's hand like an affectionate little hooker, and pretend to devote all my attention to him. "I assume you'll tell me all about your day after we eat?" he asks, sticking with code-speak.

"You know it, darlin'."

He barely stops himself from laughing, but my smile falls away when I hear Tyler and Lawrence speaking quietly to each other.

The earpiece amplifies their words as long as it's facing what I want to hear, so I keep my head angled toward Jake like I'm staring at him affectionately.

"It has to be Dev, man. There's no one else who'd want to do something to us for that night," Tyler is saying.

So they *are* meeting about me. I guess the cat's out of the bag.

"There's no way," Lawrence scoffs dismissively.

"He had a breakdown two nights later and said we took it too far. He fucking cried, dude. Cried like a little bitch. Said we were sick for what we did to them. It's him. That fucker has finally cracked and now he's doing this. He thinks he's innocent since he didn't get his dick dirty that night, and now he's picking us off one by one."

From the corner of my eye, I notice Lawrence shaking his head. I run my hand up and down Jake's arm, pretending to be lost in thought as I read the menu aloud to him, but really all my attention is caught up in the conversation across from us.

"No. It's not him. I talked to his sister, and she said he's been in Mexico for the past two months on a church mission thing."

Dev is the only one I'm not sure what to do with, to be honest. He's the only one who showed remorse, and they did essentially force him to be there that night. He wasn't a victim, by any means. He could have spoken up and said something…anything.

Currently, he's not on my kill list. But he is in the ten fingers column.

Jake gets tired of not hearing, so he discreetly lifts his hand and places another sound amplifier in his ear. It's small enough to not be seen as long as no one stares directly into his ear. Even then, they might assume it's a hearing aid instead of a listening device.

"I'm telling you it's not him. Trust me. I doubt he's even heard anything about this, and Melissa sent me pictures of him from the church mission he's on. He's been texting her daily with updates and such," Lawrence argues.

"Think Melissa is just covering for him? She is his fucking sister."

"She's had a crush on me since we were kids. Trust me, she'd be over that crush if she had any idea what we did, unless she's into that sort of thing. In which case she'd be outing her brother to us if it was him. Either way, she's not covering for him."

“I think it’s him. There’s no one else it could be.”

Lawrence looks around, letting his gaze linger on our table for a fleeting second, and then his gaze moves on, taking in the few people out on the terrace before settling his attention back on Tyler.

“It’s not him. The night he freaked out, who do you think got him back in line?”

Tyler looks confused.

Our waitress has dropped off some bread, and Jake is ordering for us, so it’s harder to hear with so many people so close speaking at once. I strain, making sure I don’t miss anything as I force myself to chew on a piece of bread, finding my appetite to be sorely lacking.

“What’d you do?” I hear Tyler ask.

“I told him the same thing that happened to Victoria would happen to Melissa if he ever said a word. After that, they left town, and he started preaching the gospel. That’s how he sought penance. He’s not out killing people, for fuck’s sake,” Lawrence hisses.

He may have just saved Dev ten fingers.

And a tongue. His tongue was going to be gone too. It was a special column I was going to draw up just for him.

“Then who else is there?”

“I think that’s pretty obvious, don’t you?”

“No.”

Lawrence slaps his head like he’s exasperated. They’re acting like this is normal terrace conversation for a late lunch. I assume it’s why they picked a restaurant that doesn’t have a lot of terrace traffic.

Lawrence has a roommate. Tyler has a wife. I get why they didn’t meet up at their homes to discuss this, but why not do it over the phone?

“The entire town hated them after what their father did. Think of the one person who didn’t hate them. Here’s a hint: his father was their father’s lawyer.”

Tyler shakes his head immediately.

“No. I saw Jacob two years ago. Ran into him at a company thing, and he fist bumped me. Even told me to call and hang out some time. If he’d known, he would have at least taken a swing. I’m sure they both died before he ever heard the truth. And he left town after that, so it’s not like he was around for the rumors.”

Lawrence sits back, now looking confused. Jake squeezes my hand a little too hard.

I remember that run-in. Jake does freelance computer work, and Tyler was working closer to where Jake lives now at that time. It was all Jake could do not to kill him, but he knew we had a plan, and he knew this revenge was mine. He knew he had a part to play, but his part was to be the brains. My part was to be their worst nightmare.

“Besides,” Tyler goes on, “he’s in a wheelchair these days. Some motorcycle wreck put him in the chair a few years ago.”

Jake nudges my foot with his, a calculated grin on his lips. We’ve thought of everything.

“Then I don’t know anyone else who would be enraged over a rapist’s whore daughter and fag son,” Lawrence says coldly.

My stomach churns hearing the way he refers to my brother. My good, honest, strong, loving, incredible brother who never deserved to be mutilated and… So much happened that he never deserved.

Because of them, I was left without anyone. Because of them, the best man who has ever walked the face of the earth died before he could light the world with his smile.

And they think it’s okay because he was gay. They think it’s okay because I’d had sex with two guys before that night.

They think it makes it alright to punish us so brutally for loving our father…

Jake clears his throat, and I realize that it’s my grip that is too tight now. My nails are cutting into his hand.

Loosening my grip, I continue to listen, wondering how much more I can take before I slice both of their throats right now.

Lawrence may die sooner than I planned. I may tie him up with Tyler and let them cry to each other while I cut them both to pieces.

“Maybe it’s not even related,” Lawrence says with a shrug. “Just don’t let anyone in your house for a while, and tell your wife to do the same. I’m getting a security system installed in my apartment. You should too. Not that it matters. According to Dad, they’re being let in, because there’s no sign of a break in.”

“Fuck,” Tyler hisses. “Fine. I’ll get something installed.”

Keyless entry locks are my best friends. It’s easy to catch the code being punched in on camera. It’s also easy to grab a set of

keys and have a copy made if they use traditional locks. It just looks like I'm being invited in.

One more thing to keep them off a dead girl's trail.

He grabs a bite of his bread, and I find myself dizzy. It's the first time I haven't heard them begging for forgiveness when this subject gets brought up. Usually it's not brought up until I have a knife pressed to their skin.

They don't have the balls to say this kind of shit when I'm the one making them cry for mercy, beg for forgiveness, and plead for their lives. I've never been more eager to get to the fun part.

Their conversation shifts to the best security systems to get, and I try to calm myself down before I slit both their throats and dicks in the middle of a restaurant.

"I think we should probably consider getting two birds for the new house. What do you think?" Jake asks, apparently thinking the same damn thing I am.

"Think we could do it on such short notice?" I ask him, smiling sweetly even though the taste of vengeance is potent on my tongue.

"I think so. Maybe an extra week at most. Could probably find a better place for them too, just to be safe."

There's a storm shelter behind Tyler's old house that is still up for sale. I could put them both in there, and Jake could do something to keep any realtors from walking in on me while I'm busy killing two boys at once.

"I'm not as hungry as I thought I was, dearest," Jake tells me when the waitress drops off our food.

"Me neither," I say, stabbing my steak much harder than necessary.

Tyler and Lawrence never say anything else worth hearing again. Mostly I hear a few people around them taking bets on if I'm really a hooker or not.

Just as Tyler starts to leave, Lawrence stops him.

"Get a burner phone like I did. Anything else comes up, call me from that phone. No more personal phone calls. Got it?"

So he got a burner phone? How'd we miss that?

Tyler nods, and Jake and I exchange a look.

“If we find out who it is, we don’t need anything linking it back to us when we take matters into our own hands. Understood?” Lawrence asks.

“I’d love to see them fucking try,” Jake whispers.

My lips twitch. I’ve never been this excited to kill someone.

We let Tyler be gone for a while before we stand. As we walk past Lawrence’s table, his hand shoots up, grabbing my wrist. My stomach roils and my heart hammers in my chest as I fight all my instincts not to rip his throat out here and now.

I look down, glaring at him.

The bastard winks up at me and hands me a card that I take, trying to get away from him.

“Call me sometime, sweetheart. A girl who looks like you needs someone to appreciate all those sights.”

I give him a dazzling smile, wink at him, and start walking again, gently brushing his hand away. Oh, I’ll give him something to look at. I’ll paint the walls with his and Tyler’s blood, and I’ll let them bleed out as they watch.

It’ll be so pretty.

Just as we reach the sidewalk, I stumble over my own feet, watching in disbelief as a SUV rolls up to the curb. Hissing out a breath, I step closer to Jake, practically crawling against his side as Logan hops out.

New York City is way too freaking big for this to be happening.

There’s food truck on the curb, and he and the Mr. Arrogant guy get out to go over there, both smiling like it’s a great day. They’re in street clothes—jeans and t-shirts. Not their typical suits or anything else. Did I miss something?

“What?” Jake whispers, looking at them then me.

“Boyfriend,” I whisper back.

He wheezes out a breath before cursing, and he tugs me along to my car (which is not registered in my name or anything) that is parked way too close to them. It’s one of my many ‘burner’ cars.

The universe is trying to send me mixed signals. First it saves Dev’s fingers and tongue. Then it condemns two men to a more brutal death after I discover more than I thought possible from one

late lunch. Now it's tossing me directly in front of the man of my dreams?

"You're going to end up running the FBI. That was absolutely amazing," Mr. Arrogant says, genuine awe in his tone as he speaks to Logan.

"That's not what I'm after. I'm just glad we provoked a damn confession. Makes getting home happen that much quicker."

Mr. Arrogant groans while Jake continues to try and draw me toward the car. My ear piece is still in, making their conversation very easy to follow despite the noises on the street. Well, as long as I keep it directed solely at them, which has me walking with my head cocked.

"Back home to the Ice Queen?" the guy says, a touch of snark in his tone.

I bet that's Carter. Or was it Chris? Craig? I can't remember.

Logan's smile is so damn beautiful. "Yeah. Don't be jealous."

C-Name guy rolls his eyes, and I watch like a swooning girl on the sidewalk as I drag my feet in my stilettos. My heart was ripped out moments ago, but just seeing Logan is soothing the burn.

"When are you going back?" C-Name guy asks.

"As soon as we know for sure the evidence has followed proper chains of command and is being sealed tight. I don't want this one to ever get away."

"Fucking da Vinci. The shit in your head is scary."

I have no idea what that means.

"You haven't seen half the shit in my head, Craig. I need to call my girl, so order me a burger."

Shit!

I push my phone to silent, hating that I have to let it go to voicemail as Jake opens the door to my car. I get in, remove the earpiece, and let my heart sink when Logan calls. Sighing, I toss my phone aside as I stare up at Jake, who is glaring down at me.

"We'll talk about this later. My place as soon as you can make it."

Nodding, I let him shut my door, and I crank my car. I have two kills to plan, a boyfriend to see, and a best friend to un-piss off. And not in that order.

I’m just the typical American woman.
Or is it the typical American Psycho?

Chapter 11

The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once.
—Albert Einstein

LOGAN

"So your girl is like totally loaded," Hadley says, plopping down beside me.

"You're looking into her financials?" I ask incredulously. "That's an invasion of privacy!"

"Meh, I just peeked. She's not a suspect or anything, so I'm not breaking any big rules."

"Just the law," I state dryly.

She grins. "I was recruited for my mad skills with computers and shutting down websites that shouldn't be open. I was placed up here for my forensics expertise. Never once was I wanted for my pristine moral compass. And it was just a little peek. Honestly. But seriously, she's like majorly rich. What's her house like?"

Groaning, I shake my head. Hadley definitely isn't FBI because she's a saint with a badge. She's FBI because it was prison or work with us.

"Don't tell anyone else you did this," I mumble, finishing up the last of the case file that is now ready for the DA.

"Duh," she says, smirking. "So what's her house like? I really want to know."

"Nothing flashy. It's a two story white home that looks nice enough. She hasn't lived there long, so there's no art or anything on the walls. Floors are hardwood throughout, but no marble statues or gold banisters, if that's what you're asking. And her driveway looks like something out of Sleepy Hollow that doesn't at all match the sweet house at the end."

She frowns like she's disappointed. "I wanted mansions and swans in a lake. Damn. Why have all that money if you don't have a nice home?"

“Some people are humble, Hadley. I wouldn’t have even known she was rich.”

Talking about Lana gets me thinking about her again after I’ve just stopped. I’m worried I’m demonstrating obsessive behaviors. Which I don’t know if I like or not.

She hasn’t answered my calls all day, and my texts haven’t been responded to either. So I’m surprised when I finally get an answer.

LANA: SORRY!!! My work got in the way this time. Been crazy busy and only had my business phone with me. Just got back into town a few minutes ago.

I didn’t know she had a business phone or that she went on a business meeting. But I’m relieved to know I haven’t been blown off.

“Is that her?” Hadley asks, reminding me she’s still lurking.

“Go away, Hadley. She doesn’t have swans in a lake.”

She mutters something about a waste before sulking and walking off.

I start to text her, but decide I’d rather hear her voice instead, so I call as I head out to my car.

“Hey!” she answers, sounding a little out of breath. “Again, I’m sorry. I was really busy earlier, and like I said, I didn’t have my phone, and—”

“Don’t apologize. Just wondering when I can see you again. I’m back home. A case is closed, so I’ll have a couple of days off as a reward. Why do you sound out of breath?”

“Just finished a necessary workout. And I happen to have exactly two days off as well. My business partner is reworking some things so that we can squeeze in a little extra business this month.”

She never talks about her business, and now Hadley has put it into my mind. If she’s so wealthy, why does she do so much legwork herself? Why not hire people?

“So we have two days with each other?” I muse, putting a few of the unsolved files in my bag.

“Yes. And I still have your boxers. In fact, as soon as I finish showering, I’m going to put them on.”

“Any chance I can come over?”

“That was me inviting you over,” she says dryly. “I really suck at this subtlety thing, huh?”

Grinning, I get in my car and start backing out, ready to have some time to unwind. I’d like to get some fresh clothes from my house, but that would take longer.

“Wait! I just thought of something. What if I come to your house? You’ve seen mine. Show me yours.”

Well, that solves that problem.

“It’s nothing special, but I’d love for you to see my bedroom.”

She laughs under her breath. “I might leave my panties behind as a reason to return.”

“I’m not wearing them and eating ice cream,” I say, loving the way that makes her laugh.

“Good to know. If you’ll give me the address, I’ll shower and meet you there. Are you home now?”

“I’m just leaving the office.”

“Okay. Then I’ll hurry and get ready. Send me the address, Agent Bennett.

“Back to Agent Bennett?”

“I’ll call you Logan later on tonight,” she quips, causing an immediate reaction from the wayward appendage that has forgotten I’m closer to thirty than eighteen.

“See you soon.”

I hang up and shoot her a text with the address. I probably need a shower too, so at least I’ll have time. I also decide to stop and pick up something to cook so that we don’t have to leave to go anywhere. We have two solid days, and all I want to do is spend every second getting this addiction under control.

I hurry through the motions of buying groceries, load down my back hatch, and rush home. My phone is ringing as soon as I step through the door of my house. I groan when I see it’s Craig.

“Please don’t tell me we already have to come back in.”

“Well, hello to you, SSA Logan Bennett. I guess that pussy is golden if the company man himself doesn’t want to come back to work.”

“Craig, if you want to remain pretty in front of the cameras, I’d suggest refraining from speaking about Lana’s pussy anymore.”

“Right. Got it. Anyway, you told me to call if any new leads came in. Hadley finally figured out the type of knife used by the Boogeyman in his kills. I’m forwarding you a picture.”

“Thanks,” I grumble, not feeling as appreciative as I should.

“No worries, Logan. No one expects you to come back in tonight or even tomorrow. You closed a major case and just in time to save a girl’s life. And hell, you pretty much did it on your own today. No one else would have fucking pieced together a da Vinci fixation from finding clay.”

“There were other factors,” I point out.

“Yes. Symmetry,” he says flatly.

“And more.”

“I’ll let you get back to your two days of peace.”

He hangs up just as a text comes through from Lana.

LANA: My GPS says I should be there in thirty minutes. I’m going to see if I can shave a few minutes off that.

A smile spreads as I text her back.

ME: No texting while driving.
LANA: Threatening to arrest me?

Laughing, I put my phone away. Lana is not the girl I first pegged as detached. Lonely, perhaps. But not detached. I’ve come to realize she’s just like me. Solitary but not devoid of possibilities.

After putting all my groceries where they belong, I start removing my shirt, then grimace when I smell the exhaust fumes from the chopper all over me. How did I not realize how bad I reek?

I start to head to the shower, but my phone chimes with a message. Craig has delivered the picture he promised, and the knife is nothing special. But at least we know the model and type to tell the police to search for if the time ever comes.

Not if. *When*. I will catch this bastard.

Studying the photo of the supposed murder weapon has me restudying the case for so long that I don’t even realize how much time has passed until there’s a knock on my door.

Fuck me.

It’s already been thirty minutes, and I’ve been staring at a case instead of showering off the day’s stench.

I jog to the door, internally cursing myself the whole time. When I swing open the door, a flurry of dark hair is all I glimpse before Lana is on me, her lips crashing against mine.

I sure as hell don’t protest as I drink her in, tasting her, smelling how incredible… Ah hell.

Reluctantly, I break the kiss, and she steps back, grinning at me. I love that smile and how freely she gives it.

“I smell like shit.”

She laughs while shaking her head. “You smell like… I don’t know what that smell is to be honest.”

“Helicopter. I’ll run through the shower, and we will pick this back up where we left off. Make yourself comfortable. I won’t take long.”

“I don’t mind the smell,” she says, biting that damn lower lip that has my cock protesting my hygienic needs.

“Five minutes. That’s all I’ll take.”

She bats those long lashes, her grin spreading as she looks around my house, taking in all the sights. My gun is on top of the living room table, and she sidesteps it like it makes her uncomfortable.

“Safety is on,” I tell her, winking before I jog to my bathroom and hurry through the motions of showering.

I toss on a pair of boxers after I finish drying off, and I head back out to find Lana at the kitchen island, looking over the Boogeyman case.

“This is brutal,” she says, looking up at me with a frown. “Is this the guy you caught?”

“That’s my fault. I shouldn’t have left that out. You’re not supposed to see that.”

She frowns.

“Closed case files aren’t as classified. Or at least that’s what I’ve read.”

“Old closed cases aren’t classified. Recent ones are. But this isn’t even a closed case. It’s an active investigation that I should handle with more care than just leaving haphazardly lying around.”

Her lips tense as she takes a long step away.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I just saw it and…I shouldn’t have just started reading it. Sorry.”

I shrug, pulling her to me by the waist, just needing to touch her. I had no idea how much I needed to touch her until she got here.

“Like I said, that’s my fault. *But* since you’ve seen it, how about giving me your opinion.”

Her eyebrows go up.

“*My* opinion? My opinion is that guy is sick. Women being raped and left to bleed out slowly by multiple stab wounds is vicious and… Anyway. That’s my opinion.”

“I meant your opinion about the type of suspect we might be looking for.”

She purses her lips.

“I barely glimpsed it.”

I pull her over to the file, and I spread out the sheets, including the new picture on my phone that I show her.

“You noted that he let them bleed out instead of saying he stabbed them to death. That’s actually important to the profile. Now tell me your opinion.”

“I don’t want to get you into trouble, Logan. Don’t show me things you’re not supposed to, and stop telling me things you shouldn’t.”

She eyes me, scowling a little.

“Right now, there’s not a lot they’d do to me if they found out I was sharing details with my girl. I’m a badass. Just read it and give me your thoughts.”

A smile spreads over her lips for some reason, but she tucks her hair behind her ear and ducks her head before she begins reading over the files.

“That excites you?” I muse, remembering she said this stuff makes her stomach churn.

“You called me your girl,” she says quietly.

My grin spreads as I lean over, brushing a kiss over her bare shoulder since she’s wearing a camisole.

“As far as I’m concerned, you are.”

She clears her throat, and I lean back, enjoying the hell out of the way she blushes.

Her face turns serious as she studies the file, taking in the details, and reading over it pretty damn quickly.

“At first glance, it looks like overkill because of all the stab wounds. But they’re all shallow and not lethal on their own. He most likely does it while he rapes them, pushing the tip of the blade in just enough to draw blood. They get deeper as he goes, because it’s part of the high he gets. Rape is usually about power.”

“It’s almost always about power,” I amend. “Contrary to popular belief, there are very few sexual assault cases that have anything to do with sexual desires.”

She nods absently, but I notice a distant look in her eyes. “He’s a sadist. Relative to the case, he’s most likely unable to orgasm without the life threatening pain he inflicts. Impotence was probably a factor in his psychotic break. Maybe he stumbled upon this feeling of euphoria by mistake, and he’s escalated now to actually killing women. He gets high on the power, and gets off on the pain.”

She blows out a breath as her hands tremble, and I start to apologize. She really can’t handle seeing this shit, and it was stupid of me to even involve a civilian who hasn’t been desensitized to the point of seeing them as dead bodies and facts instead of people and merciless assaults.

But she speaks before I can.

“He’d be unnoticeable to the world. Probably a blue-collared worker who doesn’t draw any outward attention. He’d likely be unsocial, given the struggle he’s had with impotence. It would have left him withdrawn because he’d have felt like he was lacking, emasculated even. Now he enjoys the shadows where he’s dwelled because it allows him to hunt without being noticed.”

Damn, she’s good.

She flips another page. “In the beginning, there was a lot of rage—again, that stems from the impotence. Now there’s a controlled method to his psychosis. He’ll develop an immortal complex where he feels as though he’s untouchable. I’d say a white male between the ages of twenty-five and forty. He’s right handed, and he has the ability to blend in with the unremarkable. Possibly in the custodial field.”

My eyebrows pinch together.

“You were dead on until the custodial field. We guessed someone in law enforcement or security, due to the fact he has been able to gain access to homes with no effort, and the cameras to the apartment buildings have been disabled each time.”

She shakes her head. “He may have an understanding of security measures, but most custodial workers do. They come in after hours, spend long amounts of time talking with night shift guards or behind the scenes issues that no one else sees.”

I narrow my eyes at her, studying her features as she looks up to meet my gaze.

“What makes you so sure you’re right?”

She smirks before sliding a page in front of me. “How he cleaned up after himself. He shined the murder rooms up.”

“Forensic countermeasure,” I point out. “Most seasoned killers always clean up after themselves.”

She nods. “I said *how* he cleaned up after himself. He didn’t just clean. The room was spotless, and each surface was cleaned with an appropriate cleaner.”

She points to a line. “Window cleaner for windows. No streaks left behind either, whereas it’s noted the rest of the windows were dingy.” She points to another line. “Hardwood floors were cleaned with hardwood cleaner. No streaks.” She points to another line. “The tables were all shined with wood-safe cleanser. No streaks…”

As my head wraps around the facts I should have already caught, she goes on.

“My father was…um…friends with a janitor when I was younger. It’s a habit, almost a compulsion, to use the appropriate cleaners for surfaces after so many years of training the mind to use those. If I were you, I’d look for custodial services in the area and check to see if these apartment buildings ever outsourced to individual cleaning companies.”

I slide the paper closer, my eyes moving over all the facts. “We interviewed all employees and did background checks,” I say absently. “And we considered the cleaning so thoroughly bit to be a case of OCD but ruled it out based on the fact there were different amounts of stab wounds, and they didn’t clean anything other than the kill room.”

“A lot of custodial services pay cash under the table because it’s hard to keep workers. Some of them have a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy because they have to hire whatever walks in needing a job. The company keeps the majority of the money. Workers make crumbs in comparison. So cash under the table that isn’t taxed is a big way to draw in more workers, and also keep from having to supply benefits to said employees. It’s likely they never mentioned them because they didn’t want to have to tell you that.”

“You’re a fucking genius,” I groan.

I grab her face in both my hands and kiss her hard, even though I also want to throttle her at the same time.

“But now I have a call to make,” I grumble, feeling her smile against my lips.

“Make your call. Catch a bad guy. Maybe the lead is solid and you can catch him before he kills again.”

Reluctantly, I pull up my phone, and dial Hadley. She’s going to fucking kill me.

Chapter 12

We have to do the best we can. This is our sacred human responsibility.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

I won't lie and say it's not hypocritical to hope he catches the sicko who raped and killed all these women. It's hypocritical because I'm also hoping he never catches me for torturing and killing a string of men.

But it also feels good to listen to him animatedly tell someone this amazing new lead. I'm worried and shocked when he tells Hadley it's me who inspired this new lead. He shouldn't tell them he let his *girl* give him that info on a case I was never supposed to see.

Maybe the fact he called me *his* anything has the butterflies stirring. It's definitely something. The fact he sounds proud of me also makes me feel…*good*. That word again.

My phone rings as he continues to talk to someone else, and I head outside to answer it when I see it's Jake. My eyes stay on the window, keeping up with Logan.

"Hey. Any luck?"

"Lots of luck. I hate rushing this date the way we're going to, but I'm going to help you on these."

My eyebrows go up in surprise.

"Like in person? You're going to do this too?"

"Just this once, and only for the securing part."

"No. You can't. You threw up when I tried to give you details, Jake."

"You have no idea how much I wish I had your ability to kill without hesitance," he says quietly, an edge to his tone.

"But you don't," I remind him, still watching to make sure Logan can't overhear me.

"Doesn't matter. I can't risk you taking on something like this alone."

“I can’t talk about this right now,” I say on almost a whisper when I see Logan hanging up his phone and running a hand through his hair.

“Shit. You’re with him? That’s still a discussion we need to have.”

“I moved my murder room in that secret room you built me years ago.”

“You think that’s enough to keep a profiler from figuring out you’re slowly killing off a list of people?” he asks dryly.

I heave out a heavy breath as I continue to watch Logan through the window. He looks around, then moves to grab a glass.

“You know how it’s easy for me to do what I do?”

“Because of what they did to you two,” he says, his voice barely above a broken whisper.

“No, Jake. It’s because there’s nothing but hatred inside of me that’s been driving me since I was able to do something other than curl in a corner in fear of them finding me again. I never thought anything else would drive me. I thought after this was over…I had nothing to look forward to after I killed them all. Now… Now there’s hope. I never realized the power of hope until he suddenly appeared in my life as though the universe was giving me a gift at the wrong time.”

He exhales harshly, and I sag backwards a little.

“I’m glad to hear you have hope, Lana. Really. I am. Just… Just couldn’t you have found it with someone who couldn’t toss your ass in prison?”

His tone ends on a joking note, but the seriousness of the situation is still present.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we have to. Trust me to be cautious.”

“If anything ever feels off… If he *ever* asks you questions… Just listen to the questions he asks you. You know what to look for. Promise me you’ll get the hell out of there if that ever happens.”

“Promise,” I tell him, grinning.

“You’re going to make me go bald with worry,” he groans, as I start walking back inside.

“I’ll call you later.”

As I hang up and make it back to where Logan is in just a pair of boxers and working diligently on making some type of drink in the blender, I lean against the island, soaking in the sight of him.

He turns and catches me ogling him, and he waggles his eyebrows.

“Do you have to leave?” I ask him, desperately trying to keep any neediness out of my tone.

“Not tonight. Possibly tomorrow, but not tonight.”

I smile, even though it’s masking a certain level of disappointment. I wanted at least two days, but I’ll take what I can get, since it’s more than I thought this cruel life would ever allow me to have.

“You’re incredible, you know?” he asks, coming closer.

The blender gets forgotten as he reaches me, and I tilt my head back, giving him access just as he bends forward and kisses me long and hard and deep and… There aren’t enough words to explain how each kiss gets closer to touching my soul.

I almost think it can knock away some of the blackness there, maybe even spread around some light.

His arms come around me, pinning me to him as he lifts me, giving him a better angle on my mouth instead of having to bend over so far.

The guy is just too tall and I’m just too short.

I grin against his lips as my legs come up to wrap around his waist. The only reason I break the kiss is to absorb some of the normalcy of the situation, revel in each second of it.

“So we’ve made it to the level where you just walk around in your boxers in front of me?”

He winks while sliding me onto a countertop, and I frown as I release him with my legs as he backs away. When he turns around to put his back to me, I take notice of some scars I never noticed the last time I had him naked.

“What are these?” I ask before I think about it.

My fingers immediately dart out to touch one semi-circular scar near his shoulder, and I grimace. I hate for people to touch my scars, and here I am touching his.

He doesn’t flinch away the way I do as my finger skims over the marred surface.

“Bullet did that two years ago. Just barely missed the damn vest. Half an inch over, and I’d have had a bruise instead of having a bullet removed. A rookie cleared the scene and missed a guy who had a gun, hiding in a closet. He shot through the door, and I was one of the ones hit.”

Another scar is jagged and long, moving from his other shoulder blade to his spine. When my fingers skate across it, he backs into my touch. I wish I could let him touch mine. Maybe he could pull away the painful memories laced inside the scar tissue.

“That one is from a knife.” That answer has me swallowing down a painful knot. “It was when I was fresh in the field and the guy I was arresting had a friend that came out of nowhere. He caught me off guard.”

“They only get you when you can’t see them coming,” I say quietly, feeling a twinge of pride. “Because you’re too strong for them.”

He chuckles while turning back around. My breath hitches when he grabs my hips and jerks me against him, standing firmly between my legs as all our best parts line up.

“I like that you think that way,” he says, grinning as he toys with the hem of my shorts.

I run my hands over the muscles in his arms. He flexes on purpose, and I roll my eyes playfully while looking back into his eyes. “You are strong. You’re intimidating. People don’t see you as weak, so they strike when you’re most vulnerable.”

“The guy shooting from the closet was shooting blindly,” he points out.

“So you’re not big and strong?” I ask, then burst out laughing when he lifts me up and starts walking with me.

“Strong enough to handle you,” he quips, then slaps my ass with one hand.

“I bet I could take you,” I say jokingly, but wondering if I really could or not.

“I’ll let you show me your fighting skills later,” he says before kissing me again and moving toward a room.

I decide I don't want to know if I can take him or not. I just want to pretend like I'm a normal girl with a normal guy in our normal relationship for one normal night.

***

The sun is creeping up, and I've laughed so much my sides hurt. Neither of us has slept. We've eaten a couple of times, had a lot of sex, and laughed more than I've ever laughed, but sleep hasn't been high on the list of priorities.

I think we're both afraid to close our eyes and lose this fleeting moment of perfection.

Now I'm sprawled across the couch as he tells me about his very happy childhood that isn't filled with dark memories.

My eyes flit around the room, taking in all the pictures of this alleged family he only speaks about in the past tense.

"So what happened? Or is that none of my business?" I ask him, lifting my head up to peer at him.

His smile slowly falls, and I hate myself for asking.

"Never mind. I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay, Lana. Stop apologizing for trying to get to know me," he says, grinning again. He brushes my hair away from my face before resting his hand on my shoulder. "I like you wanting to know more about me than my condom preference."

I snort. Actually *snort.* Kill me now.

It just makes him laugh again.

Shaking my head, I shrug. "I know I can't seem to tell you much about my past, so it's not fair for me to ask about yours," I say on a sad sigh, killing the light moment again.

His face grows serious, and his hand starts running up and down my back as I lay my head down on his chest.

"Tell me what you want to when you're ready," he finally says, kissing the top of my head. "I get that not all pasts are as easy as mine was. As for my parents… My mom got a little wild in her mid-thirties, and she divorced a good man in pursuit of wild sex and rich men. Things were fine until then. I never actually knew my real dad, other than knowing he was in the military. He sent a few pictures to

me with letters, as though I wanted to see his face. My stepdad was always my true father, in my opinion. He came into the picture when I was two and raised me like his own."

I run my fingers along his chest.

"Any exes I should be worried about?"

He strangles on air before laughing. "No. Not at all. All the relationships have ended on really bad terms. I sort of suck at being a boyfriend since I'm married to my job."

He groans while running his hand through my hair, and I lift my head, staring into his eyes.

"Just don't let me fuck this up, because I kinda like you," he says, smirking at me.

Gah. All I do is grin like an idiot no matter what he says. "I kinda like you too."

He thumbs my lower lip, settling in more comfortably while pulling me over on top of him completely. Despite the firm body, he's surprisingly comfortable.

"What about you? Any exes I should worry about?" he asks, studying my face.

He studies all my expressions. Fortunately I've trained against them. But this is one question I can answer honestly.

"I've only ever had one truly serious relationship, and I would rather set him on fire than speak to him ever again. Other than that, nothing serious since then, and that was over ten years ago. The rest have been…experiments?"

Okay, I need to shut my mouth because I'm talking too much.

"Experiments?" he asks, reminding me to learn when to stop.

"Wrong word. Um… Hopeless and pointless attempts at having something, then learning no spark was there."

Good recovery, Lana.

"There's a spark here," he says reverently, still running his hands over my bare back.

Smiling, I nod. "There's definitely a spark."

He pulls me forward, running his lips along mine. Just as I decide to deepen the kiss, he gets a call.

Cursing, he snatches his phone from the floor. It's stayed in whatever room we've been in all night.

“Bennett here.”

The phone is so loud that I hear the woman on the other end.

“Hey, we have a list of people to look into, but a couple of guys popped. There was one custodial service outsourced to all the apartment buildings. While we looked into them, we dismissed them quickly. When I called them and asked for a list of *all* payroll employees, I reminded them they were impeding a federal investigation if they didn’t also include the occasional under-the-table gigs. The list miraculously got a lot longer. Two names have priors that make these guys look good for it.”

So I might have been right?

“We’ll meet up in two hours and make a trip out to Boston. Bring all the names on that list, and we’ll go through them on the flight over.”

And that’s all the time we have.

I can see by the look in his eyes that he hates this too.

He covers the mouth of the phone as the girl curses him for being too good at his job.

“If I get him, we’ll have more time together for a little while,” he says, frowning as he studies my face.

Apparently I’m wearing some disappointment, so I mask my expressions and curl into him, kissing his jaw.

“Go catch more bad guys.”

The girl on the other end goes silent.

Logan presses his lips to my forehead, and I soak in his scent one last time before he’s gone. Last time was a brief trip. Maybe I’ll get lucky and things will go that smoothly again.

“You with your profiling girlfriend who helped bring up this lead?” the girl on the line asks.

I really hope she isn’t secretly in love with him, because I detect an edge to her tone that I hope I’m overanalyzing.

“Yeah. I’ll see you guys in a couple of hours. Don’t forget to keep that between us.”

“You know it, boss man. I just hope it helps us get this bastard before another woman is hurt.”

I breathe out in relief, because that edge is gone. Apparently I was definitely reading into it.

He hangs up, and his arms come around me in one of those awesome hugs I love so much.

“As *soon* as I get back, I swear to take you on that damn date I promised so long ago. You’re better than a sex-a-thon with whatever food I burn.”

He totally burns pizza. But it was sweet for him to attempt to cook. It might have gone better if we hadn’t forgotten it was in the oven and ended up in the bedroom.

“I’ll eat burned food every single day that I get to have you to myself. I’d rather not waste time having to go out in public and lose all our privacy.”

He chuckles, but I’m not kidding.

I’m greedy. I want him all to myself.

He hurries through the motions of getting ready, and I kiss him much longer than necessary before he leaves.

Since he’s going to be gone, there’s no time like the present to get back to work and skip the second day of the break.

As I climb into my car, I pull out my phone and call Jake.

“You still with him?”

“I’m on my way to grab Lawrence. You can handle Tyler.”

He’s cursing as I hang up, and I smirk as I start the long drive to New York. I haven’t studied him in his daily life. But fuck it. I’m stronger than all of them.

Chapter 13

We cannot despair of humanity, since we ourselves are human beings.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

New York isn't prepared for me when I arrive. It's dark when I finally set about the task of planning my ambush. My sweatshirt is on, my head is covered, and I prop up in an alleyway.

This place gets dangerous in dark alleyways, but after slamming a guy's face into the brick wall hard enough to knock him out, most of the regular thugs give me a wide berth for the rest of the time that I wait.

"Hey, sweetheart," says another stupid thug who is holding a knife at me as he grins a rotten-tooth grin.

I say nothing.

I guess he missed my earlier demonstrations, unfortunately for him.

He takes a step closer, and that's when I smirk at him. He looks confused for a split second before my hand darts out, colliding with his throat. A pained wheeze escapes him, and he swings the knife.

Midair, I catch his wrist, spin under his arm, and listen with pleasure as a satisfying cry pierces the night. The knife falls to the ground, and I slam my foot into his spine, still wrenching his arm behind him so tightly that I feel it when the bone crunches in my hand.

A shudder of pleasure ripples through me, listening to the way he screams and begs for mercy. It's not as satisfying as it is to hear as the ones I want dead, but it's still a high to punish someone like him who preys on the weak—or who he thinks is weak.

With a hard thrust, the knife slices through his back, the skin tearing, and his screams grow louder. People scatter by us, pretending they don't see anything in typical city-alley fashion.

As he starts gurgling on blood, I release the knife with my gloved hand, and let him sink to the ground with a hard *thud.* Right

beside the dumpster, all that's visible from the streets are his feet. The city is too loud for the sidewalk dwellers to overhear him.

Even if they did hear, they'd keep walking. That's what people do. They tell themselves they'll just die too. They tell themselves their life is more precious than the person dying close to their feet.

They just don't give a fuck, in short.

A dark smile curves my lips as he stares up at me in surprised horror.

He came into this alley as the predator.

He'll die as the prey.

I tug the sweatshirt over my head, careful not to disturb my blonde wig from its careful placement on my head. I toss it into the dumpster, then shrug out of my sweatpants, revealing the dress I had concealed, and tug on my heels.

It's time to do what I came to do and quit fucking with the scum in the dark that people try to run from. The monsters in here can't compare to the monster I am.

A few eyes swing toward me, but I'm not concerned as I strut by them.

No one will talk about the blonde hooker that just killed a man with very little effort. They'll pretend they never saw a thing.

Even the groups of guys scatter away, stumbling over their feet in their haste. A gun is tucked into the backs of most of their jeans, but they just saw me gut a guy with his own knife. I'm sure they're not feeling too confident the same won't happen to them.

True story: Most people are more terrified when they see a knife than when they see a gun. It's a psychological thing, but it works out in my favor at the moment.

I turn the corner, emerging from the long alleyway onto the busy sidewalk. No one even bats an eye or notices me through the hustle and bustle as I toss the bloody gloves into my purse.

The darkness helps.

I smirk as I see Lawrence stepping out of the building, and I cross the street and slow my pace, letting him get behind me.

Lawrence is predictable.

He's also a pervert.

A sick feeling and the taste of bile rises in my throat when the predictable happens. A warm hand is suddenly on my ass, and I whip my head around, trying to act surprised.

“You,” he says, grinning. “Thought that was you. No *blind* date tonight?” He grins like his joke is hilarious.

I bat my lashes at him, and start tugging on his tie, even though my stomach is ready to explode with disgust.

“No date tonight. You trying to pick me up, pretty boy?” I ask with that fake southern drawl I used the last time I was dressed like this.

“I think you must have wanted me to pick you up. New York is too big to run into each other by chance twice,” he says smugly, smirking down at me.

“Maybe it’s just fate.”

His smirk bleeds into a leering grin.

“Your place or mine?”

“Well, that was easy enough.” I arch an eyebrow, leading him by his tie as I start guiding him to a parking garage.

“Where are we going?”

“My car is just around the block,” I say sweetly.

Parked in a parking garage with no cameras. I leave that juicy morsel out of the conversation.

“You’re the kind of girl that makes a guy do something dangerous like get into a car with a stranger,” he says, though there’s a hint of teasing in his tone, as though he finds me too weak to be of any danger to him.

“You can back out,” I say, moving to the right. I release his tie, but he speeds up his steps, still following me into the parking garage.

“I’m not worried. I think I can handle you.”

I hold back the snort of derision.

“Baby, I can promise you that you won’t survive a girl like me.”

Chapter 14

I do not believe in the immorality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern without any superhuman authority behind it.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word. Momma’s gonna buy you a mocking bird. And if that mocking bird don’t sing, Momma’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.”

The song flows through the underground cellar, and I walk toward the side as Lawrence slowly rouses from his unconscious state. I watch with rapt fascination from the shadows as a myriad of emotions flicker across his face in sequence.

Confusion. Surprise. Recognition. And my favorite—panic.

He struggles against the chains that are holding his hands and arms out wide, keeping him bound and suspended midair. It’s a lovely position to die in. It also leaves you feeling weak and defenseless to be spread out and immobile.

I should know.

The song changes, and “Ring Around the Rosy” starts playing in that creepy kid voice it’s in. I love fucking with their heads.

“Who the fuck are you!?” he shouts, struggling as I remain tucked in the dark corner. The light overhead casts a circular glow beneath it, illuminating him and the chains dangling loosely in front of him as I await our second prisoner’s arrival.

As soon as I got him to my car, I slammed his head into the side door twice, making sure he was out cold before tossing his heavy ass into my car. He’s solid muscle, and I didn’t plan on him being quite so heavy as dead weight.

The struggle was worth it.

The bruises are forming nicely around his eyes and forehead. I’m sure the concussion kept him out longer than a usual cold-cock.

“Where are you? Where the fuck am I?” he barks, struggling in vain, making the chains rattle their unrelenting warning.

He jerks his head from side to side, trying to see something other than the light above him. It's just four stone walls in a semi-large square of a cellar. It's every creepy nightmare there is.

I should have started finding creepier places to kill them long ago, because I love the way his body is seizing in terror just from the surroundings.

I'm dressed in all black now. The red lipstick is gone, along with the blonde wig I was donning. The heels have been traded in for boots—the men's boots I wear with the special toe-piece Jake designed for me to leave behind heel-to-toe impressions.

My backpack isn't on, but it's not necessary for this part, since there's no dirt around. The stone floor under my feet will soon be painted with two shades of red. Then I'll paint all four walls.

"Someone fucking answer me! Help!" he roars, only to be met with silence. Tyler's old home is in the middle of nowhere. These are the easy kills. Lawrence would have been difficult to kill in his apartment that he shares with a roommate.

Tyler's wife is out of town right now, after having a fight over the text messages I helped her stumble upon—anonymously of course. Tyler thinks Denise got jealous and sabotaged him. His wife thinks he's a dick weasel—her words—and left in a fit of rage.

I'm currently tracking her cell phone with the clone phone I had made of Tyler's.

Lawrence continues to scream and shout as "The Wheels on the Bus" plays now, drowning out most of his pleads.

His voice is almost hoarse a few hours later when he finally pisses on himself, losing his bladder. It's step one of humiliation. It's step one of stripping their dignity. They always piss and shit themselves.

A smile curves my lips.

He curses as the first tear falls from his eye. He's trussed up and strung out, unable to wipe it away. I want all his tears. I want all his misery and terror.

I want him degraded to the point he has nothing but indignation and humiliation left. Then I want his screams.

Just an hour after that, he breaks, sobbing fiercely as he loses control of his bladder again. His jeans darken, and the smell wafts

over me. It's the smell of revenge. Well, it's the smell of piss, but you get the idea.

He's shirtless, and I can see the goosebumps that have pebbled on his skin from the cold. The colder the room, the worse the pain is when the strikes are received.

"The bitch is crying," Morgan says, laughing under his breath as one solitary tear rolls down my cheek.

I'm restrained, unable to wipe it away, as I try to retreat into my mind and block out all the pain.

"Those tears won't save you, whore," Lawrence says close to my ear. "Beg me to stop."

"Please…please stop," I hear my brother crying.

"We have one begging!" I hear Tyler announce, laughing like a hyena.

My arms wiggle free from Tyler's loosened grip, and I scream out as I slam my fist into the side of Lawrence's face.

"You fucking cunt!"

He continues to straddle me as he shoves my hands back down into place.

"Hold this fucking bitch down, or I'll let her claw your eyes out when it's your turn!"

Tyler spits out a curse, and slams my hands back into the pavement. I cry out as my hands find the unforgiving surface, and feel the blood trickling. I focus on it and not on what Lawrence is doing to the rest of me.

"Those tears won't save you, whore," I say, causing Lawrence to jerk his head over to my corner as he squints into the darkness, trying to find me.

"Who the fuck are you?"

I take three steps, slowly letting the light filter across me until his brow pinches in confusion. Fury sweeps across his face, but the chains hold him steady.

"What the fucking hell do you want, bitch?"

"Beg me to stop."

He starts to speak, but the door above us opens, and Tyler comes rolling down the stairs, crying out in agony as Jake takes the

steps one at a time. Jake moves with grace, enjoying the fact revenge is finally finding these sons of bitches after the conversation we witnessed.

Tyler already looks half beaten to death. Did I forget to mention that Jake has been taking all the same classes I have? Our mixed martial arts list only grows, as does our black belt count.

Obviously we took the classes in another town with another name, but that part isn't important right now.

"You!" Lawrence shouts, glaring at Jake.

Jake taps his legs. "They work just fine, by the way."

Tyler is a tangle of limbs, still lying on the ground. "Did you leave anything for me?" I ask Jake as he grabs Tyler's wrist, dragging him to the chains.

"Who the fuck are you?" Lawrence demands again, as though he has any control.

"There's plenty left. It'll just hurt worse when you extract the debt."

Smirking as Lawrence continues to berate us from his vulnerable position, I help Jake lock Tyler into place. We spread him out like Lawrence, suspending him with the chains. They're right across from each other now.

"You want to know who I am?" I ask Lawrence as Tyler shakes with fear, his eyes wide and his body trembling.

Tears are feverishly pouring from Tyler's eyes, causing me to give a quick appraisal to the state of his body.

His legs are definitely broken. Jake must have gotten out a lot of aggression. Good for him. He needed it.

"You're a crazy bitch!" Lawrence shouts.

I grin, facing him now.

"No. I'm a pissed off crazy bitch. You knew me when I was younger. You knew my brother too."

A smirk graces my lips as the color starts draining from his eyes. "Those tears won't save you, whore," I repeat, though this time I can see him realizing why I'm saying those words. "Beg me to stop."

He turns as white as the ghost he thinks I am, and I face Tyler again as he tries to piece it all together.

“Play nice, Victoria. It’ll hurt a lot less if you just play nice.”

Don’t cry, Victoria. Don’t let them see they’ve broken you.

But I do break. I break hard. I break to the sounds of my brother’s screams from behind me as he begs and begs and begs… And they just laugh.

As though the sounds are music to their ears.

I want those ears to bleed.

“Play nice, Tyler. It’ll hurt a lot less if you just play nice,” I taunt, watching as the same wave of realization washes over him.

His eyes widen to the point of being painful, and Jake grins as he takes it all in. He always has to miss this part. I may have a new kind of partner if he can stomach the rest. I’d like for him to be a part of it. It’s just as much his revenge as it is mine. We both loved Marcus.

And they took him away.

I move in front of Lawrence, and Jake hands me my favorite knife. It’s dull. It’s brutal. And it hurts like hell when I finally get the skin to tear apart.

“You’re dead,” the prick wheezes, watching me in disbelief. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

I stare up at him, moving the blade over his thigh, feeling his tremble.

“You should have killed me deader,” I say just as the blade digs into the yielding flesh.

He cries out in pain when the flesh finally splits, and I take my time. “I’ll need a sharp one for his ears,” I tell Jake as Tyler vomits to the sounds of Lawrence’s screams.

Then I continue, shifting to Tyler, letting them watch each other slowly be killed.

“Hope you boys aren’t sleepy. I changed my mind about your debt days. It’s going to be a long week.”

Chapter 15

You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war.
—Albert Einstein

LOGAN

I glance down at my phone, reading the latest text from Lana.

LANA: I'll call you tonight if you're free. Sorry I missed your call earlier. It's been a crazy few days. <3

"Oh, heart emoji! Shit's getting real," Craig says over my shoulder, earning an elbow to his gut.

Rolling my eyes as he grunts and coughs, I text her back.

ME: Tonight should work, as long as no one calls in with any leads. We know who the killer is, and we've been blasting his face all over the news. You were right. It's definitely one of the paid-under-the-table custodial workers. He managed to escape though, so there's a city-wide manhunt underway.

LANA: Be careful. He's always been overlooked, and with the new bout of attention, he's likely to enjoy the thrill of notoriety. He may crave more attention and come after you if the buzz wears off too soon. Killing the lead FBI agent who ran the hunt against him would give him even more attention.

I've never wanted to date a profiler, simply because work and sex don't mix well together in my experience. Lisa, for example, is a thorn in my side since things ended years ago, and now she's under my command.

It's awkward. It's frustrating. And she uses our past against me every chance she gets.

Lana, however, is the perfect woman. Someone who understands what I do without being right at my side while I'm doing it. It's literally the best of both worlds.

Which is why I'm still worried she's too good to be true.

ME: It's a slim chance he'll come after me. And if he does, it'll save me the trouble of trying to track him down.

LANA: I'm serious, Logan. Guys like him could fixate on someone like you.

ME: He's a rapist. A serial rapist. He needs a female to relieve his urges. He's more than just a serial killer, which makes the likelihood of him coming after me very slim.

LANA: Anyone who has always lived in the shadows and suddenly gets brought into the light is going to get the high. Especially someone like him. Sexual sadists thrive on the power. It gets them off. Power over you could become an easy surrogate for the power he holds over his female victims.

ME: I like that you care so much.

LANA: I like my orgasms. I want more.

That has me laughing, and I put my phone away as Craig comes up, filling me in on the latest information.

It was supposed to be an easy bust, but someone tipped him off. Had to. Or else he has tabs on the police station somehow. But the guy reads like an open book of our profile.

Now finding him is getting harder. He got paid in cash and never had a checking account. His apartment was a cash-weekly sort of arrangement. His entire life is paperless, tied to no electronics or trails. Even his power bill was included in his rent, furthermore concealing any trails he might have.

He left his phone behind.

He took his clothes.

He's in the wind, and it could be months before he resurfaces if we don't find him now.

***

Four days later, there are still no leads, and I groan as I load up with my team to come back home. Gerald Plemmons. That's the name of the Boogeyman. Putting a face on him has helped alleviate the fears of some of the city, but he's still out there.

One day, he'll kill again. Unfortunately, until he does, we may not be able to find him.

As soon as I step off the jet, I haul ass to my SUV and drive like hell to Lana's house. She's not expecting me, and I can't reach her on her phone. It keeps going straight to voicemail, so I hope I don't piss her off by just showing up.

It seems to take forever to get there, but when I finally do, I pound on the door with purpose.

The sound of hurried footsteps puts me at ease. I don't see her Mustang here, so I'm happy to hear her talking through the door. I'm not so happy to hear what she's saying.

"You have a key! Use it, Jake! Stop making me walk all through the house—"

Her words die when she swings open the door.

In a towel.

Still mostly wet.

"Logan!" she says, shocked as her eyes widen.

I don't give her time to think before I'm kissing her, pushing the door shut behind me with my foot. Her hands go to my hair, and I lift her, groaning when I feel her bare ass against my hands.

The towel falls loose and gets stuck between our bodies as I continue to kiss her and carry her back to her room. She kisses me just as fiercely, letting me know she doesn't mind the fact I've shown up unannounced.

It's been a week. A solid week since I've seen her.

My hand slides down the curve of her ass, moving until I find what I really want. My fingers skate across her slick pussy, feeling her wet and ready for me. As much as I love foreplay, it'll be skipped tonight. Maybe after I get a little bit of this addiction tempered, we can slow things down, and I can give her body the attention it truly deserves.

"I take it you missed me?" she asks against my lips, tightening her legs on my waist as I finally make it to her room.

"Very much."

I don't even give her time to think before I drop her to the bed, and start undressing. She watches me, scooting her naked body up on the bed as she tosses the towel away.

When she bites down on that bottom lip, I finish stripping and grab her ankles, jerking her down the bed. A small squeal of surprise

escapes her, but I roll on the condom, adjusting myself between her legs on her very high bed.

As soon as I'm lined up, I thrust in, feeling her walls squeeze against the abrupt intrusion. She moans and arches her back, looking like every fantasy I've ever had.

Gripping her hips, I set a harsh rhythm, fucking her with abandon, letting her moans and gasps fuel me and guide me. When she goes stiff and her pussy clamps down on me, heat spreads through my spine, and an electric current rolls over me in the form of pleasure.

Her mouth parts as she grips the sheet beneath her, her fists twisting in the soft fabric on the messy bed.

My pumps grow lazy until my hips still completely, and she pants while grinning up at me.

"Hi," she says, laughing lightly.

I laugh too before dropping to her.

"Hi."

Rolling over, I toss the condom into the trashcan beside the bed, then face her again, running my finger along her cheek.

She forces me to move up more comfortably on the bed when she moves, making sure she can lie down.

"Who's Jake? And why does he have a key?"

Her smile spreads like she's enjoying a private joke.

"Jealous much?"

I narrow my eyes, and she snickers while tossing a leg over my hip and pillowing her head on my bicep.

"He's my business partner. He just left a few minutes ago, and I thought he might have forgotten something. He thinks it's funny to make me jog through the house instead of using his key. He acts like I'm going to confuse him for a robber and accidentally stab him or something."

I don't like Jake having a key to her house, especially since I don't know him.

"What's his last name?" I ask, fully prepared to do a complete background check on this guy—and see what he looks like.

I really am jealous.

Fuck.

“He’s a silent partner, and it’s in our agreement that I don’t give out his surname. Sorry, but that’s how it is. Our latest business thing took a few days longer than expected, but we decided to be thorough. Besides, we’ve known each other forever. He’s like a brother to me. Don’t worry. I can assure you nothing sexual is going on.”

“Is he gay?” I ask hopefully.

She grins broadly. “He’s bisexual, but he tends to lean toward men more than women.”

“It’d be better if he was gay.”

When she laughs, it’s a cute sound, so carefree again. I swear she seems lighter and happier every time I see her.

I frown when my fingers come back red from the side of her head.

“Are you bleeding?” I ask, worried as I try to inspect her hair. How fucking rough was I?

Her eyes widen as she stares at my fingers. “Um…no. That’s from some painting I was doing with Jake. I guess I missed some.”

I rub the red substance between my fingers. It’s definitely blood.

“Don’t lie to me,” I say, trying to look, but she angles her head away and jumps out of bed.

“Fine. It’s blood,” she groans. “Jake’s blood. Not mine. He cut his finger, and I guess it got on me. I thought I got it all out in the shower.”

She goes to the bathroom, and I follow her in, watching as she starts washing out her hair.

A little stream of red flows out, but to my relief, it stops, which means she’s really not bleeding.

“Why wouldn’t you just say that?”

She shrugs, not looking at me. “You’re all freaked out about Jake. I thought not mentioning him anymore would be a good idea.”

I blow out a breath, and her eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to sound like a jealous ass.”

She gives me a tight smile.

“I have no right to lie to you and make you feel guilty about it. Sorry,” she says, sighing as she looks down at the ground.

Tilting her face up, I bend down, brushing my lips over hers.

“Looks like we’re both still figuring out how to do this thing. It’s a learning experience,” I tell her, smiling when she groans and presses her head into my chest.

“You’re so good,” she says quietly. “I’m afraid I’m going ruin all the best parts about you.”

“Not possible. You’re good too, Lana.”

She tenses against me, and I get worried when her grip tightens around my waist. I’m not sure what happened in the past five minutes, and she’s become impossible to read.

Instead of probing her with questions, I just hold her until she finally sighs against my chest.

“I’ve missed you too,” she finally says after a long spell of silence.

“Then let me take you out on that date.”

She peers up, arching an eyebrow. “Lobster and wine?”

I nod.

She grins. “Then orgasms.”

I laugh as she skips out of the bathroom, her good mood back. She’s an enigma, and I think that’s half of her appeal.

Chapter 16

Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.
—Albert Einstein

LANA

Dinner? Perfect. Lobster? Loved it. Wine? Amazing. Logan? Too good for me.

I lied to him. Then I lied to recover from my lie because I couldn't tell him I was wearing my latest two victims' blood in my hair. The guilt he had on his face made me hate myself.

He apologized.

I realized in that moment how wrong this all is.

Logan is incredible. He's everything I never even hoped to dream about, because someone so good couldn't exist.

Yet he's here.

Well, not at this exact moment. He's currently at his house getting more clothes. He's taking a few days off, since their cases have gone cold. Which means they haven't found my latest bodies yet. Or it could mean that he's not on that case…

Yesterday was a damn close call. Ten minutes earlier and he'd have found me covered in blood as I tossed all my clothes into the burn pile behind my house. I burned those clothes as soon as he left earlier. My floors are so dark that he didn't notice the drips of blood on them. I could have lied my way out of that too, but I couldn't have lied my way around my murder shoes or murder bag.

Fortunately all that was upstairs.

I'll never let my phone die again. He tried calling me numerous times, but I was finally at the end game with Tyler and Lawrence, and didn't pause to put my phone on the charger.

The smart thing to do would have been to charge it on my way home, but it was tucked inside my murder bag…that I threw into the closet…and couldn't find until it finally dawned on me.

Jake spent forever puking in a bucket inside his car during the really gory stuff. It's not like he could risk puking inside the cellar and

leaving behind all that yummy DNA.

Being a monster doesn't agree with his stomach.

As I sift through the next file on my next victim, looking through the notes of his life, my phone rings. I answer immediately when I see it's Jake.

"You find him?"

"His name is Gerald Plemmons, at least according to the news. The manhunt is still coming up short. And by the way…Boogeyman? Really?"

I snort out a laugh.

"I hope they come up with something cleverer for you."

I shudder just thinking about the names they may don me with. Then Logan will only know me by that name if he ever discovers the truth.

He'll hate the woman he cares for because he'll see the monster lurking within.

"Have you found him, though? I already knew his name" I go on, refusing to go down that road just yet.

"He's in DC."

My heart thumps in my chest.

"You're sure?"

"Dropped a body a few minutes ago," he answers. "He's off grid as far as any paper trails go. However, he made one hell of a statement announcing his current whereabouts. This time, instead of finding the body in an apartment, he hung her out a window for all to see. And instead of it being a low profile girl, he killed a judge's wife. Raped her brutally, and there was a lot of overkill."

"Normally overkill means rage," I say quietly, trying to process it all.

"I think the overkill was more of a statement than rage. I think he wanted to make a fuck-you statement to the FBI. You're right about him enjoying the attention. He's going to want more of it, since he's becoming an exhibitionist."

"And he's going to go after Logan."

"Yes and no."

"What does that mean?" I ask, moving toward the back of my kitchen to look out the window, paranoid that I've just heard a car.

“There’s more. The body he hung out the window was naked. She also had Boogeyman carved into her chest. And one other name…Logan Bennett.”

My chest tries to collapse, and I sink to my chair. I knew he’d do this. I knew he’d target Logan.

“They’re sure it’s him? Not a copycat?”

“Some of the things not released to the public have been verified. This time he even left his DNA behind just to let them know for sure it was him, and now he’s laying claim to his work.”

“And now he’s targeting Logan. We have to find him before he can.”

“That’s the part I’m getting to. He’ll go after your agent, but he’ll use a proxy to do it. He’ll want to taunt and torment Logan. A few more bodies will drop with that calling card before he makes his big move. What would a sexual sadist go after to really hurt a man?”

It takes me a second to catch up to his train of thought, but when I do, a dark smile plays with my lips.

“His girlfriend.”

“Exactly. You sure you can handle a guy like this? He’s not like the guys you’ve been going after, Lana. This guy is the real deal with zero mercy. If he—”

“The guys I kill weren’t angels—*aren’t* angels, Jake. You know that. They’d kill me if they knew I was still alive, or if they got half a chance when I’m there for them. And yeah. I can handle the Boogeyman. Even a monster has nightmares. I’ll be his.”

He exhales heavily, weighing the gravity of the situation.

“His MO is breaking into a home. He immediately attacks the woman, using brute force to establish dominance. He’ll hit them, then he chokes them until they’re on the verge of passing out.”

“I’m aware,” I tell him.

“He blindsides them, Lana. Your guard will need to be up at all times.”

“I want him to get a couple of hits in,” I say as I pour some fruits into my juicer. “Gotta make it believable.”

“This is too fucking risky. I think I should probably set up surveillance on your house.”

“No. Don’t you dare. If anyone ever tapped into that—”

“Right. Fuck! Then let me come stay with you?”

“And how would I explain you if Logan shows up unexpectedly again? You know what’s eventually coming, right? There’s a reason you’ve been riding in a wheelchair for three years—riding it in and out of your home and in your town.”

He groans, and I turn on the juicer, peering out my window again. As if Logan hears me talking about him, a text comes through as Jake speaks.

“Right. Then I’ll come up with something else.”

LOGAN: Boogeyman problem. I’ll call later.
ME: Okay. Please be careful.
LOGAN: Always, pretty girl.

“Are you texting while I’m on the phone?” Jake asks, annoyed.

“Maybe a little.”

I look out the window again, and this time I catch sight of a car and a flicker of red before I lose sight of whoever is here.

“Gotta go,” I whisper to Jake, hanging up before he can say anything.

I cut my phone off and toss it to the counter before pulling out one of my guns, clicking the safety off as I slowly make my way to the door.

Someone knocks, and I blow out a breath. I doubt the Boogeyman would politely knock before barging in to slit my throat.

I check the peephole, confused when I see a pretty redhead on my steps. Tossing on a pair of jeans that I grab from the back of my couch, I check the mirror. Then I tuck the gun into the back of my jeans and open the door, leaning against it to impede any thoughts of her coming in.

“If you’re here to witness, then you have your work cut out for you. If you’re here to sell me something, go ahead and leave. I shop online. If you’re here to—”

“I’m Hadley Grace,” she says, interrupting me. 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."

End of Book 1

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